

“The Meaning of Discipleship”
A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Matthew 8:14-22
February 5, 2023
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Scripture: Matthew 8:14-22, translated by Dr. Wilda C. Gafney

When Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw his mother-in-law laid out and fevered, and Jesus touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him. That evening they brought Jesus many who were demon-possessed and he cast out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick in order to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.”

But when Jesus saw the crowd around him, he commanded that they go over to the other side. A religious scholar then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have dens and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Woman has not where to lay his head.” another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” but Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead.”

Friends, if you heard this passage and you immediately thought, “what is she gonna preach on from this text?”, you are not alone. There is a lot that happens in this passage—sickness and healing, Jesus’ presence at a bedside and people coming to him, service, questions from disciples, Jesus issuing challenges to people, and through it all—the question of discipleship. What does it actually mean to follow Jesus?

Last week we heard about the calling of disciples Peter and Andrew and James and John, fisherfolk who left their nets at the seashore and followed Jesus, seemingly without question. From this pericope, together we considered what we are called to as individuals and as a community. We heard Frederick Buechner’s famous definition of vocation as “where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.” I heard from some of you afterwards that you were pondering what you are called to do in a different way, and I am grateful for that.

As I touched on last week, and as we considered a bit in the Thursday Zoom Bible study, it seemed like there was something charismatic about Jesus that caused the disciples to immediately follow. Either that, or the gospel author was leaving out a lot. I mean, wouldn’t you have questions for Jesus if he showed up at your workplace and said, “I’ll make you fishers of people”? Wouldn’t you want to know what would become of your family, if you’d get vacations, where your next meal would be coming from and where you would sleep at night?

Well, in the scripture this week, we read that some people did have questions for Jesus—and really good and practical ones. Behind the statements of a dedicated follower and a person wanting to bury their loved one, there is the big question about the meaning of discipleship. I love the glimpse we get through this text into the lives and hearts of people close to Jesus because this makes them seem more real to me.

First, we read that a scribe was in the crowd surrounding Jesus and proclaimed boldly, “I’ll follow you anywhere!” That is a dramatic statement, and one that perhaps points to Jesus’ charisma and power by showing us that people were reacting to him and his ministry in this way. This is also a great statement of faith—follow Jesus *anywhere*?! Wow. I am not sure I could say that, even in my best days.

And Jesus responds by letting the scribe know what he’s getting into. He responds with some realism: following Jesus does not promise stability and ease; even though the God of Creation provides for the small animals, Jesus himself, the Son of Woman, did not have a place to call home. The zealotry of the person who wants to follow him feels infectious and inspiring—and yet, Jesus cares about them enough to say, “Hey, this life and work isn’t easy.”

Another disciple comes on the scene next. By the description of “disciple,” we know that this is someone who has already signed on and committed to following Jesus. And yet—this person has questions. He says, “I’ll go with you, but let me bury my father first.” Remember that in Jewish tradition, it is important to bury a person soon after their death, usually within 24 hours. So this disciple wasn’t asking Jesus to wait long for him—just a short amount of time so that he could fulfill one of the most important practices of their faith tradition, and honor his father. But even to this seemingly reasonable and practical question, Jesus pushes back.

“Let the dead bury the dead.” Wow. Our Bible study conversation really struggled with this, as many scholars and Christians have over the years.

However, when we read this in light of our question of discipleship, an interpretation arises that is worth some thought: Jesus is hearing this question as asking to delay discipleship. And Jesus essentially says, “there can be no delay.”

Discipleship is about an all-encompassing commitment. It cannot be put off, or done halfway. It cannot be scheduled for a time that is convenient. It must be one’s priority. Jesus doesn’t want us to wait until our lives are in order for us to be disciples, he invites us and welcomes us as we are. We have what we need now to follow in the Way of Jesus.

I wonder if you have ever felt the inclination to say, “I’ll do XYZ thing when I change THIS about myself” or “when I am THIS CERTAIN WAY, I will be ready to INSERT DREAM ACTIVITY HERE.”

I know I have. As someone who struggles with body image, I have often thought, “Oh, when I lose X amount of pounds,” or “when I can fit into those jeans,” or “when I look like PERSON A,” then I will be my best self/be attractive enough to date/be worthy of love and respect. And friends, let me be clear on what the right response is to this kind of statement: it is not the right response to say “Oh, but you ARE pretty” or “you look skinny OR good OR like a model.”

The right response to this is to say, “You are worthy of love just as you are. You are worthy of respect just as you are.” And let me remind y’all, regarding body image, all bodies are good bodies. You can be healthy at any size. And how you feel in your body is much more important than if you look like a movie star, or even if you look like how that one nagging family member thinks you should look.

I see this drive to future-fulfillment when people say, “I’ll get my house clean and organized and then I will host the family reunion.” Meanwhile, life is going on and people are changing and moving and maybe losing touch with each other. Or, “let me get all the details and then I will commit to taking action.” Meanwhile, movements for justice struggle and stall because people are not getting involved. Or, “I cannot be perfect at combatting racism/sexism/homophobia/transphobia, and so I won’t do anything until I’m perfect.” Meanwhile, people who are being oppressed by racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and much more are being targeted and harmed, burning out, and dying. We cannot put the responsibility of learning or improvement or growth or individual or social change on Time.

That’s something Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. talked about in his 1967 speech at Stanford University entitled, “The Other America:”

He says that it is a myth “that only time can solve the problem of racial injustice. I’m sure you’ve heard this idea. It is the notion almost that there is something in the very flow of time that will miraculously cure all evils. And I’ve heard this over and over again. There are those, and they are often sincere people, who say to Negroes and their allies in the white community, that we should slow up and just be nice and patient and continue to pray, and in a hundred or two hundred years the problem will work itself out because only time can solve the problem. I think there is an answer to that myth. And it is that time is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. And I’m absolutely convinced that the forces of ill-will in our nation, the extreme rightists in our nation, have often used time much more effectively than the forces of good will. And it may well be that we will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words of the bad people and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say wait on time. Somewhere we must come to see that social progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated Individuals. And without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. And so we must help time, and we must realize that the time is always right to do right.”¹

These historic words are a call to action, and a call to discipleship. There is no delaying doing good, doing justice in the world. People need healing *now*. People need support *now*. People need housing and education and food security and healthcare and a welcoming and inclusive community *now*. Beloved church, we do not need to be the best version of ourselves and we don't need to be perfect and we don't need to do everything right and we don't need to be beyond reproach in order to do justice and treat people well in our small corner of the world.

Jesus wants us as we are, Jesus welcomes us as we are...and in the process of being disciples and doing discipleship every day and choosing to follow in the Way of Jesus, we will grow and change and become our best selves.

But some of us aren't ready to hear that. And some of the people in Jesus' day, in his community, in the crowds of people that surrounded him—they weren't ready to hear that either. And so they paused. The scribe paused. The grieving disciple paused. Perhaps Peter and Andrew and James and John paused to think, “what does it mean that I've said “yes” to following Jesus?” And so we pause, today.

And pausing is good. And it is real. Because we don't need to be surface-level disciples. We don't need to be fake revolutionaries. We don't need to be social media heroes. For the white folk in the room, we don't need to be weak, superficial allies to our Black, Indigenous and People of Color siblings.

So let's be real, let's be honest, let's put it all out on the table: following the Way of Jesus, doing justice in this world, being people of resurrection who are not looking to Time to heal wounds but who are driven to doing what we can right NOW...saying “yes” to this call to discipleship requires sacrifice. It requires examining ourselves. It requires looking honestly at how we behave in the world and confronting ourselves with the truth that none of us are perfect, that we can improve, that we don't know everything, that we have something to learn.

Ok, so I just said the word “sacrifice.” And I am SUPER careful about when I use that word, because it has A LOT of baggage for a lot of people. As many theologians, particularly Black, womanist scholars have written, “sacrifice” is one of those tools of oppression wielded in a particularly damaging way by White, USAmerican Christians against Black people, historically enslaved peoples, immigrants, poor people. “Sacrifice” has been wielded by capitalists against lower classes who are tricked into believing that institutions and corporations will not exist without their labor that gives up family time and personal fulfillment just so the boss can make a buck. Or several million bucks. “Sacrifice” has been wielded against women, and particularly Women of Color, by White Christian complementarians who say that “a woman's place is in the home” and that “women exist to raise children,” and by the racist white systems that have historically subjected Black and Brown women to raising white children, while their own reproductive capacities have been limited by white medical systems. “Sacrifice” has been glorified by reading Jesus as a “Suffering Servant” and then pushing women, LGBTQIA+

people, Black and Indigenous people and people of color, to sacrifice for the lie that sacrifice makes them more holy.

And so let me be clear: when I am talking about sacrifice, I am not talking about placing the burden of sacrifice on people who are already under the thumb of oppressive powers and principalities. I am talking about people who have privileges, people who have a positionality in society that they can use to make other people's lives better. People who can stand to step back, to listen more than they speak, to hand the microphone to someone who isn't given chances to be heard, to give some of their material resources to folks who have less. That's the kind of sacrifice I'm talking about.

These stories have power. These stories have shaped empires. These stories have seen institutions rise and fall—and contributed to those rises and falls. These stories shape our lives. For if we read that Jesus had no place to lay his head, how can we turn our backs on those who are houseless? And if we read that the birds have nests and foxes have dens, how can we contribute to habitat degradation through human-escalated climate change? And if we read that Jesus healed people, how can we stand by while people do not have access to healthcare? For if we read that Jesus calls to us just as we are, not waiting for us to clean house or fix ourselves, but that Jesus welcomes disciples who don't have it all together—then who are we to say “no,” “I'm not wise/good/patient/pretty/smart enough,” “I'm not ready”?

As I wind down my sermon today, I am thinking again about the eager scribe, speaking boldly his commitment to follow. I am thinking again about the grieving disciple, basically told he cannot bury his father. The text says they were both already disciples, already had said “yes” to following Jesus,” and still had questions. Still had room to learn and grow. Still were pushed by that drive to fix themselves and their situations before truly giving all to Jesus' ministry. They are hopelessly human, relatable in their excitement and in their mourning, and we, today, are much like them.

Friends, in this time and place, I wonder how you will boldly follow the Way of Jesus. How will you listen to the call from the Holy to follow, to do justice, just as you are, knowing you have much to learn? How will you work on accepting yourself so that you can grow even more into the person you were meant to be? How will you embrace the “fierce urgency of now,” as Dr. King said, and everyday make choices to improve the lives of those who have been pushed to the margins of society?

Dear ones, let us say “yes” today. Let us follow, today. Let us do the work of justice, ministering to and with each other, today and everyday.
May it ever be so. Amen.