

Scripture: Matthew 10:24-42

²⁴“A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; ²⁵it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! ²⁶“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³²“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. ³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. ³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

⁴⁰“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;

⁴²and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Proclamation of the Word

I must admit when I read these passages from our Lectionary readings, I immediately looked for an out. Then I read the Genesis passage and it was the sacrifice of Isaac. I decided we should wrestle with Jesus’ words, even if they are difficult. This is an unfinished sermon. It will likely take me a lifetime to understand this passage fully.

As a former Youth Minister working with teenagers stepping forward to be confirmed and professing their faith, I always wondered if they full understood what they are getting into. But I suppose when we stand up and profess Jesus Christ as Lord, none of us knows what we are in for. We don’t want to scare the kids, I suppose. And when parents come to present their children for baptism, we do not always realize the whole truth. When Jesus calls us to follow him, he bids us come and die, die to self and be raised in new life.

Professing faith in Jesus Christ is serious business. Even Paul in his letter to the Romans reading speaks of death and new life. This passage usually read at funerals speaks of Baptism this way:

³*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*

⁴*Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.* ⁵*For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.* (Romans 6:3-5)

In baptism we usually dress the baby in white, a symbol of both death and resurrection. I witnessed the baptism of Baby Carson. My New Testament professor, Stan Saunders and his wife, Brenda, presented their son, Carson, for Baptism at the Open Door Community Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. The Open Door community is called to serve the homeless poor. For several years Chuck and I were a part of this community although we did not live in the house with those who had dedicated their lives and substance to this way of discipleship. Each Sunday night the community gathers to worship and have communion. A church committed to feeding the hungry finds its strength in feeding together at the Lord's Table. 30 or 40 gathering in the dining room where lunch of soup and sandwiches was served most days of the week to over 100 people living on the streets of Ponce de Leon neighborhood in Atlanta. But this Sunday night was different. There would be a baptism.

My mother was visiting from York, SC. Let me just say, being there was a stretch for my mother, a strange, foreign experience. She grew up going to balls at the Poinsett hotel in a still-segregated Greenville in the early 50s. Also this church was a far cry from First Presbyterian church back home. Here we were in a group of mixed race, formerly homeless, rich, and poor, ragtag band of believers who gathered to worship our common Lord. It came time for the baptism. Carson was presented in his beautiful white dress and on the table was a large tub from the kitchen. The tub was used in feeding the hungry breakfast 5 days a week. I had hauled that tub full of dirty dishes many a Monday morning to and from Butler Street church which faces Grady hospital where many homeless friends lived on the streets.

The words were familiar. Jesus said "Welcome the little children...and ...go into all the world baptizing in my name..." But the scene was strange, particularly to my mother sitting in the dining room of a soup kitchen. It was time to baptize Carson in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then he was fully immersed in a dish bin of warm water, symbolizing death, and pulled up, catching his sweet little breath, to be stripped naked, wrapped in a warm towel and re-dressed in a new outfit, a colorful new outfit made by hand in Guatemala. Stan and Brenda chose this outfit to show forth the new relationship we have in Christ with God and with all people that Jesus came to love and serve.

My mother was disturbed by the baptism. She thought it was horrible that Carson was fully immersed under water and came up struggling for breath. He seemed like he was drowning. I knew Stan and Brenda. I knew that for them, this was not a rite of passage, a simple family celebration. This community of brave saints were claiming Carson's role in the family of faith and putting him on the costly path of being a

disciple of Jesus. My mom and I had a great conversation then about the meaning of baptism. I heard an echo of Colossians 3, "Clothe yourselves therefore in Christ." Carson had his Christ clothes on.

Baptism is serious business. Sometimes being a baptized child of God can knock the breath out of you. Following Jesus as a disciple can lead you into some strange and scary places. When God claims us and seals us by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are saved to serve. Our primary identity is that of being a new creation in Jesus Christ and a child of God.

Today's passage from Matthew's gospel is a troubling and complicated text about the cost of discipleship. And if you know anything about Presbyterians, we do not shy away from hard things and difficult conversations. Today's passage seems timely amid the challenges of following Jesus when it puts us at odds with one another. While I was tempted to read ahead to Matthew 12 where Jesus tells us "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." we must read Scripture in context. It was written in part to encourage members of synagogue who followed Jesus that the risk would cause rifts with family and friends. The gospel was not only countercultural; it was dangerous.ⁱ Jesus has been pushing the envelope of current religious mores by touching unclean lepers, giving sight to the blind, and reframing the practice of Sabbath, saying God created the Sabbath for man, not man for the Sabbath. Jesus' disciples do not fast as was the practice, and Jesus is challenged on that. It is no wonder that Jesus got himself in trouble with the authorities and was convicted as a criminal.

Jesus is talking to his disciples and by virtue of the Holy Spirit to you and to me as he is teaching and living out the Kingdom of God. Jesus sends his disciples out on a mission of mercy. Earlier in Chapter 10 he sends the 12 out to heal diseases and to drive out demons in his name. He is sending Jews to do this for other Jews. In other words, this is a mission to the lost sheep of Israel, not a mission to the Gentiles like most of us. This is a family matter for those who are part of the covenant people of God. And this new, radical, Jesus is calling the way things are into question. They are going without much provision relying fully on God. Over and over Jesus tells them "Do not be afraid" because he knows what they will face. He reminds them that they will be like sheep among wolves. They will be called names and hated. Jesus knows this all too well for he is called Beelzebub or Satan by the Pharisees in the previous chapter after he has healed the sick, raised the dead, and made a mute man, talk. He knows we will be called names when we serve the will of God. And he knows that seeking to be agents of God's mercy and grace, will divide people, even families. Parents and children, brother and sister will be at odds and in conflict. After all, Jesus is speaking to men who have left home and family to follow him. The coming of the kingdom of God will be like a sword that divides. In other words, there will be costs to being a disciple who lives out the mission of mercy to which we are called.

But our most important identity is that we belong first and foremost to God in Jesus Christ. Our first allegiance is to the will of Christ. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "I am a daughter, a wife, a sister, an aunt, and each of those identities has shaped my life, but none of them contains me. I am Barbara. I am Christian.

I am a child of God. That is my true identity, and all the others grow out of it...you are God's child first. That is no role. That is who you most truly are..."ⁱ

Taylor says that "Jesus' demand remains the same. We are to love him above all other loves, and if that means losing those we love, we are not to fear, because buried in the demand is a promise: that what we lose for his sake we shall find again, returned to us more alive than ever before."

It is on the difficult path to discipleship that we have a sure promise from God.ⁱⁱⁱ First, the Holy Spirit will be present and never abandon us. Secondly, suffering for the sake of the gospel, bears the fruit of witness. Next, God will watch over the faithful, always has, always will. And finally, while family disruption happens as Jesus said it would, Jesus is not against the family; yet, the call to faithful following of Jesus shakes things up. Even with the pain of suffering or loss, there is blessing in giving your life away in Jesus name. We are most fully alive in God when we do. It is in the yoke of discipleship where we are bound to each other in his name that we receive that gift. A yoke both binds us and sets us free!

Mary Lang Olsen used to say that getting old wasn't for wimps. And neither is discipleship. Like I said, sometimes following Jesus can knock the breath out of you and lead you into some hard places.

Jesus was on a mission of mercy. His mission was to live out the Kingdom of God even in the face of opposition and threat of death. And then he gave his disciples the authority to do the same in his name. He sent them out to heal and free people reminding them in the end when you offer even a cup of cold water in my name you will see the kingdom come near. His first and last words to them are word of encouragement because radical welcome and mercy did and will always upset the status quo. But when we open our hearts to the extravagant mercy of God and open our doors to others while offering a small act of kindness, we will be rewarded.

Famous missionary and theologian Lesslie Newbigin once said that if you do not see the kingdom it's because you are facing the wrong direction.

Jesus begins and ends with mercy. Let us seek first the Kingdom of God and follow in faith and trust.

Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

ⁱ David Bartlett in *New Proclamation Commentary on the Gospels*

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Learning to Hate Your Family," *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 30-31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 120-122.