

Discipleship Time Is All The Time

Luke 9:51-62

July 1, 2007

I.

There's a lot to talk about today, isn't there? This is the Sunday nearest the fourth of July. Next Wednesday people all across America will celebrate our heritage of freedom. The flag will wave, bands will play, and we will gather with ice cream, fried chicken, watermelon, and fireworks. People from different cultures and national origins will come together to recognize what makes America great.

We also will recall that many of our ancestors came to America so they could live out today's Gospel message. They wanted freedom to respond to Christ's call to discipleship, and to follow him according to their own beliefs.

And many men and women since that time have given their lives to preserve that freedom. Our history as a nation confirms that we are the land of the free because we also are the home of the brave. The Eucharist we celebrate today, which always is devoted to the glory of our Lord and Savior, also will be observed with special intention for the memory of those brave Americans.

By the looks of Johnson Hall we're also going to celebrate something else. For Susan and me this is our first anniversary at St. Thomas. I preached my first sermon right here a year ago today, and between then and now we have become even more convinced that this is where we are supposed to be.

We thought St. Thomas was going to be a special place when we came, and that certainly has proven to be the case. And we look forward to serving with all of you to continue the church's work as a vibrant and faithful Christian community.

II.

For both of us today's Gospel is a very appropriate reading as we reflect on our time and work here. One of the basic teachings of this reading, which I will get into in a few moments, is that when we are called to discipleship we cannot look back, or hesitate, or put other things first.

In a way, I did that for a long time. I started having thoughts and feelings about becoming a priest more than ten years before I finally decided to go to seminary. And at first I tried to push those thoughts out of my mind. I was a partner in a Washington law firm, had children in college, and the priesthood as I understood it just did not seem to fit my plans. The key words at the time were "my plans."

But as I would push these thoughts away for a while, they would later return without any prompting or encouragement from me. This happened several times over the years. To make a long story short, I finally realized that I no longer could ignore the call, and so here we are.

Another basic teaching of today's Gospel is that we cannot put conditions on our discipleship. The answer to the call to discipleship is "yes." It is not "yes, but." And here I can tell a story about Susan.

And as background, my senior year of seminary was the time when my classmates and I were focused on where we were going to work after graduation. The Diocese of Virginia from which I came, unlike some dioceses, did not place its graduates in positions. It merely helped us in our own efforts. I recall the diocesan placement officer telling us that the most important person in finding a position would be the person we see in the mirror each morning.

So, Susan and I prayed about our future, and we discussed a lot of ideas and possibilities. And during this time she was very accommodating and willing to do just about anything, except for one thing. She said she didn't want to go anyplace where it was hot. But here she is.

III.

With that, let's give some thought to the reading we just heard. Today's reading marked an important turning point in Jesus' ministry. Before this time he and the disciples had been traveling around Galilee preaching, teaching, and healing the sick.

Today Jesus began to turn away from all that and, in the words of the Gospel, he "set his face to go to Jerusalem." The emphasis shifted from the crowds to his disciples, and to his own destiny. This was the beginning of his fateful journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

And just as the Gospel shows Jesus' determination and commitment as he embarked on this last part of his earthly ministry, it also shows the determination and commitment that he expected from his disciples as they accompanied him.

We heard his expectations in the way he responded to three people who wanted to follow him. In effect, they did the first century equivalent of putting in an application. They told Jesus they wanted the job, and he said some hard things.

Jesus did not respond like employers might do today, did he? If all we knew about Jesus was what we read in today's Gospel we probably would not want him to be our Vice President for Human Resources. For example, when Susan and I first came to Diamondhead to talk about serving here, you rolled out the red carpet and made us feel welcome. Jesus did not do that. Instead he emphasized the disadvantages rather than the opportunities of following him.

This is progressively apparent in the accounts of how Jesus interacted with the three men. Jesus told the first that while even birds and animals had homes, the Son of Man had no place to rest his head. He pointed out the reality of his journey to Jerusalem, and that anyone who followed him basically would be homeless.

The second man's story can cause a lot of difficulty, and I will go into this in more detail. When Jesus told this man to follow him, he replied that he first wanted to go and bury his father. Jesus was not at all sympathetic, and said to let the dead bury their own dead. Then he told the fellow to go and proclaim the coming of the kingdom.

Well, this sounds harsh doesn't it? Is this like one of those inexpensive cuts of meat that requires us to put tenderizer on it before we can eat it? Do we have to tenderize Jesus' words? Perhaps not. Some theologians and scholars of first century history have tried to put this in some sort of context.

They correctly focus on the early Jewish tradition where sons were followed their fathers into the family business and worked there until the fathers died. Then the sons were free to continue the business or sell it and do something else. And, according to these scholars, the tradition sometimes was referred to as "burying my father."

As a result, these scholars speculate that this young man's father was not yet dead but was living, and the man was telling Jesus that he still needed to work in the family business as long as his father was alive. Then, apparently, after the father died he would become a disciple.

This theory is given some credibility by Jewish law at the time that required people to be buried by the first sundown after they died. So if this man's father actually was dead it could have been likely that the man would have been busy with making burial arrangements rather than being around Jesus and thinking about discipleship.

I don't know if this theory is true, but there is plausibility to the idea that the man's father was not yet dead, and Jesus was aware of that. In any event, however, the significance of the story is in Jesus' response. He basically told the man that responsibilities of discipleship would not wait for him, and they cannot be limited by other things that he might want to do.

The story of the third man who wanted to follow Jesus after he went home and said farewell to his family also is a difficult teaching. Jesus did not respond directly but rather with a metaphor about how the man could not put a hand to the plow and then look back. Jesus did not specifically tell him he could not first go home, but warned him that once he became a disciple there could be no turning back.

IV.

So, how do we understand this Gospel? How do we apply it to our daily lives? Can we live up to the standards Jesus expects, or are those standards just for some people but not for everyone?

It's important to look at today's reading from two perspectives. First, Jesus no longer is physically with us, and with his death and resurrection the circumstances of humanity have been changed. Certainly, we still are called to faith and belief just as were those who lived in Jesus' time on earth. And some people are called to the priesthood or even a monastic life of seclusion and contemplation.

But most people are not asked to give up their jobs, or leave their families, or sell their homes in the name of Christianity. Our Lord and Savior wants us to live full, happy, and productive lives in society. But he wants our commitment to him to be our first priority, all the time and not just when convenient.

It's not like we can be scheduled play golf in the morning, have lunch at noon, and then follow Jesus from 2:00 to 4:00 pm before we meet friends for dinner at 6:00 pm. It doesn't work that way. Jesus wants us to be his disciples every day, all day. That means we are Christians and witnesses to Jesus on the golf course, in the restaurant at lunch, and in the homes of others. There is no "off-on" switch for being a disciple. And there is no timer you can set to alert you to "discipleship time." Discipleship time is all the time.

The second important thing to think about in understanding today's Gospel is staring us in the face right now. What do we have now that people of Jesus' time did not have? The answer is, the Church. Certainly, people in early first century prayed and worshipped, but the Church, as the Body of Christ, did not arise until later. And Jesus left the Church behind for the very purpose of enabling us to be his disciples.

Certainly, we are called to live Christian lives as individuals, and we each are called to individual piety and holiness as God's creatures. But discipleship now is something we are called to do through the Church, through our work here at St. Thomas, and through our efforts to reach out to the community and to bring the community in here. And as today's gospel tells us we cannot be half-hearted about it, we cannot put it off until later, and we cannot just fit it into a convenient place in our own agendas.

V.

Deciding to become a disciple is not like applying for a worldly job. You don't ask about vacation time, or working hours, or the health insurance plan. To draw an example from a popular TV commercial, being a disciple is not something that's so easy a caveman could do it.

Being a disciple can be hard. We can be taken out of our comfort zones. We can be asked to do things that might not be a lot of fun in an entertainment sense. Jesus asks us to do what does

not come naturally. He does not ask us to do things we would do anyway. He tells us that through faith we are to put things at the top of our lists that, without faith, probably would be closer to the bottom.

So, we are called to discipleship, knowing there are costs in this world, but eternal rewards in the world to come. And the church is here to help us. Here, in the church, in community with others, we can find the way to a holy life no matter what our lives have been like in the past. And together, as we follow him, we can find peace, comfort, and support. *Amen.*