

Luke 14:25-33

"Discipleship Ain't for Sissies?"

The Session at Nazareth has been spending the summer reading a book entitled Shift by Mark E. Tidsworth. Truth be told, if they are like me, they just started reading it a couple of weeks ago, although we have had all summer to prepare for our upcoming Session retreat. The premise of the book is that if the church is going to continue to exist, we 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians cannot "do church" the way we have been doing it. Membership is down in mainline denominations and so is giving.

Now I would like to say that this does not negate the elements of church that we learned during our walk through the book of Acts this summer. We are still called to share, to set priorities, to listen for the call of God, to have empathy and pray and witness and seek the presence of the Holy Spirit. And we are always called to seek and share hope. We just may have to do these things in a different way than the ways we have done them before.

A main emphasis in the book we are reading is on becoming disciples rather than members – something that you will all be hearing more about as we experience a shift here too. Did you know that the word *member* is mentioned 45 times in the New Testament – usually in the context of being a member of a body or of a household. That is where we get the image of calling the church the body of Christ on earth.

On the other hand, the word *disciple* is mentioned 263 times in the New Testament. And this week's lectionary passage is a challenging description of what true discipleship really is. Jan Ellis and I attended a workshop conducted by the author of the book and he told a story that really helped me understand the difference between being a member and being a disciple and why it is important to us.

It seems there was a family that had never attended church, indeed had not grown up in the culture of church at all. Nevertheless, through an invitation from some neighbors they began attending a church, got very involved and ultimately joined. They filled out a pledge card, started working with the youth, attended all the social functions that the church sponsored. It seemed as if every time the church doors were opened, someone from this particular family was there.

Then they just disappeared. The first couple of weeks, people just assumed that they were out of town or someone was sick. But after a few more weeks went by, folks became concerned and someone from the church went to visit. It turns out that one of the parents had lost their job and money was really being stretched at the time. The husband told their visitor, "Since we couldn't meet our financial obligations, we didn't feel right about participating or using any of the facilities.

This is a true story! Sad but true. This previously unchurched family had no idea that being a disciple of Jesus was forever, and not just when you could afford to pay your dues to the club. And at the time when they needed support and encouragement more than they ever had, they stepped back from their church life because they felt bad about receiving benefits without contributing to the cause.

Perhaps if the congregation had understood Jesus' definition of disciple and what this passage in Luke really means, they would have done a better job of *being* disciples and of *cultivating* them.

The word disciple today simply means learner, as it did in the original Greek. Certainly we all want to continue to learn as long as we can, no matter our age, our status or our vocation. But Jesus implies that there is a lot more to being a disciple than our modern day definitions

make us believe. He is not just talking about BEING a disciple but about the COST of discipleship. And that brings this text to a whole new level. Because the cost of discipleship, to use Jesus' words, is to hate your family and even your life; to carry the cross as we follow him; and to give up all your possessions. And at first glance, none of those things are very enticing. If the cost is that great, why would any of us want to be disciples?

Well first of all, Jesus did not mean that you should go to your father or sister and say, "I hate you!" What Jesus means is that when life forces us to make choices that are emotionally costly – when loyalties between family and Jesus are competing – that Jesus must ALWAYS come first. So in the network of those whom we love and with whom we interact, the claim of Christ and the gospels not only takes first place in our lives but actually redefines our living.

Maybe a more meaningful way to say this would be that becoming a disciple of Jesus' means entering into an intimate relationship with God in Christ. And that is so much more than simply being a member of something. Discipleship is thought provoking and deliberate. Discipleship means obedience.

Another thing that makes this text problematic for many of us is Jesus' decree that, if we are to be his disciples, we are to give up all our possessions. Again, Jesus doesn't mean that he wants us to take a vow of poverty and live in a Commune. But he just may be asking us to give up our need to acquire more stuff. To let go things that take up too much space in our hearts like petty jealousies or our human tendency to criticize others unfairly. Perhaps Jesus is suggesting that we give away our prejudices and hatreds and other behaviors that keep us from a Christlike walk with God. Discipleship means actually living differently than we did before. Discipleship means sacrifice.

So maybe this means that each day we are to engage in a shift toward the ethics of Jesus. Do you remember the fad that swept the country in the 1990's where people wore bracelets with the letters WWJD stamped on them? Of course, this stood for What Would Jesus Do? Now first let me say that there are a lot of positive things that came out of that trend. Because I think it really did cause people to stop and think. How would Jesus treat this person? What words would Jesus use?

But discipleship is not just about acquiring knowledge or putting this into practice for a season. It is not about studying the word once a week or listening to spiritual music and then going about the rest of your days in whatever fashion you would like. It means studying the word and then welcoming someone in an openly homosexual relationship into our church. It means listening to heart rending songs about God's love and learning to love someone with AIDS or to have a Muslim neighbor over for dinner. Discipleship is a process – not just something that we decide to do overnight and sign up for the next day. It takes soul searching and practice. Discipleship means to act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with our God EVERY MINUTE. Discipleship means unconditional love.

All of this obedience, sacrifice and love is really called into question though when Jesus tells the crowd in Luke that they must be willing to carry the cross. A close look at this text reminds us that folks around had begun to follow Jesus wherever he went. He did not call them to come hear a sermon or engage in a lesson or a night of fellowship. Like most rabbis of his day, he taught as he walked from one place to another. And the people in this passage didn't know where Jesus was going. They just followed and listened.

But Jesus knew exactly where he was going. Jesus was headed to Jerusalem and so he knew that he was headed to the cross. The one he just told people that would have to help him

carry. His message is clear. Each of us that hears his words needs to think about what we are doing and decide if we are willing to stay with Jesus all the way.

Now as modern day Christians, we have an even deeper appreciation of what this meant. Even today, we gather around the table. The table of obedience, sacrifice and love is plain for all of us to see. Unlike those in Luke's Gospel, we KNOW that the cross means a broken body and spilled blood so that our sins can be forgiven. And if we are to pick up THAT cross we just might have to experience a little brokenness and lose some blood along the way. So are we willing to love obediently and sacrificially?

One of my favorite stories of loving sacrificially is told by author Ann Lamott. She wrote of an eight year old boy whose younger sister who had leukemia. He was told that without a blood transfusion she would die. His parents asked if they could test his blood to see if it was compatible with hers. He said sure. They tested the blood, and it was a match. Then they asked if he would give his sister some of own blood, that it could be her only chance of living. He said he would have to think about it overnight.

The next day he told his parents he was willing to donate the blood. They took him to the hospital; he was put on a gurney beside his six-year-old sister. Both were hooked up to IVs. A nurse took blood from the boy, which was to be given to the sister. The boy lay in silence as the blood that would save his sister dripped from his arm, until the doctor came over to see how he was doing. Then the boy opened his eyes and asked, "How soon until I start to die?" The little boy loved his sister so much that he would give her his life's blood, even though he thought it would kill him.

So being a member might be easier and safer and less costly than being a disciple. And when you think about it, there are a lot of people who follow Christ without ever really becoming

disciples. Many of us come to church but never really spend time with God. Many of us give to God's causes but don't give sacrificially. Many of us go to Sunday School or Circle and hear and read the word and respond by saying, "wasn't that a NICE lesson" but we don't do what Jesus would do. We are following God – we are members of the body. But we are not disciples who obey and sacrifice and love unconditionally and are willing to take up the cross no matter the cross.

So this text really gives us a choice. We can follow Jesus and get along just fine. Or we can become disciples, pick up the cross and help Jesus carry it by bringing more disciples to the Table. Because, unlike those in the crowd that day with the living Christ, you and I know what is on the other side of the cross and Table and that is the RISEN Christ. Eternal life. Clearly Jesus says to them AND to us that being a true disciple basically asks us if we are willing to go all the way. So how about you? Member or disciple? Which one will you choose? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.