

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from June 22, 2008

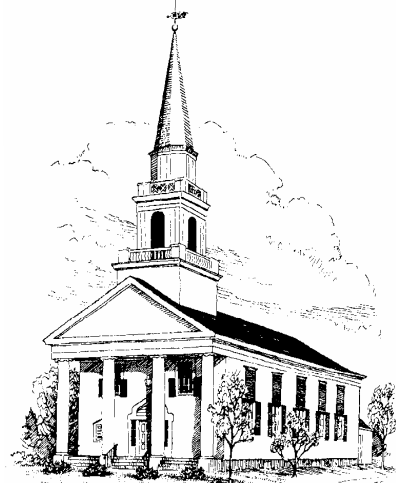
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“Discipleship”

Scriptures:

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

Matthew 10:24-39



In recent weeks, much of our focus has been on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Today's text from Matthew's Gospel gives us lots more to chew on. I could probably preach on these 15 verses for a 6-week sermon series. There's so much going on here! What we seem to have here is a collection of sayings of Jesus, sayings that had been collected and told over and over again until Matthew and other Gospel writers wrote them down, many years after Jesus' death.

Jesus is remembered as one who always seemed to be teaching, to be trying to figure out how to reach people wherever they were, to be helping to move them along on their faith journeys. Jesus wanted folks to grow and develop their relationship with God. Jesus tries a variety of different ways to help folks understand—he told stories, used object lessons, tried to make being a disciple an accessible task, anecdotal stuff.

Our text for today shows Jesus addressing at a very practical level what it means to go out into the world and be an active disciple, sharing and spreading the good news. Jesus understood that being a disciple is all about courage and trust and that being his disciple would not be easy or simple, that folks might have to take some abuse and some anger from folks who weren't ready to hear his message. Jesus never suggested that discipleship work would be easy. He knew that the world would distrust and even resist hearing about God's love and care for them. Jesus understood the realities of the world, a world and culture that even in the first century was based on power, money, and fear. First-century folks weren't that different from twenty-first-century folks, really.

Jesus is remembered as having left reassuring words for those who would face hard times and Matthew wrote his Gospel in a time period in the end of the late first century that was filled with hard times for those who followed "the way". Matthew makes it sound as if Jesus was sending folks out on a dangerous mission. Matthew reflects his own culture and the hard times he was living in and maybe it's good for us to hear and be reminded how counter-cultural Jesus' words really are. Jesus knew that he was asking a lot. He knew that this discipleship business would not be child's play. Over and over again, Jesus suggested that disciples would have to "buck the system". Disciples will have to rise up and "counter the norms". We have to be willing to be quite uncomfortable sometimes, as his disciples.

The good news for us who are learning to be disciples is that God's providence and God's care over-arches and under-girds all things. God never wearies. God's Holy Spirit is with us always. God's Holy Spirit shares our lives and seeks to bless our strengths, to forgive our sins, and even turns disasters into spiritual development. That is good news!

Jesus did not want us as his disciples to live lives dominated by fear. He did not want us living

lives dominated by power. He even suggest that it won't be helpful to live lives dominated by money. Jesus wanted us to live lives filled with a sense of daring in the face of all that life would deal us. He wanted us to live lives devoted to trust—trust in a God who, by grace, will provide us with all that we need when we need it. That does demand a certain amount of courage, doesn't it? And talk about trust!

Peterson's translation suggests that Jesus put it this way:

If you don't go all the way with me, through thick and thin, you don't deserve me. If your first concern is to look after yourself, you'll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you'll find both yourself and me.

Perhaps, at the core, what Jesus was trying to touch on was the most basic, the most heart-connected part of human life and he focused a lot on family life. Jesus knew how important and vital the sense of family values was for the people of the first century. Jesus wanted us to consider that even deeper than family, even more important and even more powerful than our family ties, was the love of God and the demands of faith. Jesus was saying that the love of God and the demands of our faith are more fundamental than anything else and that, when we get that right, we come to understand that God's grace and God's love is offered freely to each of us. We don't have to deserve it. We don't have to earn it. God's grace doesn't come to us because of how good or how bad we've been or how "correctly" we live our lives. Jesus wanted us to get that God's love and God's grace is freely offered to each of us and if we can really "get" that, then everything else falls into place.

The pastor and preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor (who I quote often from this pulpit) writes:

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.

But claiming that identity and living faithfully into it can have consequences in a world of power and fear, in the first century and in the twenty-first century as well. Taylor continues:

We live in a different world with different consequences for believing in God, but one thing that has not changed is our deep desire for kinship. Some of us find that in our families and some of us do not. Whether we do or don't, however, 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. (Learning to Hate Your Family, God in Pain: teaching sermons on suffering)

Jesus invites us to a daring discipleship—not an easy one, not Discipleship 101 or the beginner course. Jesus suggests that we aim for the advanced degree in discipleship, the top level and when we go "all the way" in that study we will both find God and ourselves. Now that's quite a promise! It may not be easy, it may not be simple, it is difficult to do, and it may sometimes get us into trouble with those around us—family and friends, neighbors and co-workers, partners and children. Yes, it all comes down to just what sort of Christian we intend to be. If we can make being a disciple of Jesus Christ truly the very center of our being, the rewards are eternal!

Let us go out this week to continue to work on that advanced degree program. Amen.