

“The Call to Discipleship”

Luke 9:51-62

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It's always hard to decompress from summer camp. It's hard for campers and it's hard for directors. Jeanne Jarecki and I led a Jr. High camp at Pilgrim Center this past week and it was a week of fun, games, study and drama. As always, certain kids stand out, each of them for very different reasons. Some are extraordinarily bright and stand out because they honestly know all the answers to all the questions. A girl named Brea from DeForest, Wisconsin knew more about the Gospel story than any other kid. She wasn't showing off; she just knew.

When we went through the story of Jesus meeting the disciples on the road to Emmaus I asked the group, “Where else in the Gospel do we hear the sentence, ‘he took the bread, he blessed it and broke it and gave it to the disciples...?’” About a quarter of the 23 kids in this camp said, “The last supper.” I said, “right” pleased that so many kids got the connection right away. Four verbs: took, blessed, broke and gave. Maybe it was that movement of Jesus' arms that caused the disciples to recognize him in the breaking of the bread. Or the words. Or the eyes.

Then I said, “What other story contains these four verbs?” And Brea said, “Aren't those words in the story about the 5000...the feeding of the 5000?” I was stunned.

I asked Brea later how she makes these connections and she said that she just listens and she has a good memory; and she does it humbly, without calling undue attention to herself. Jeanne gave Brea the first participation award. A piece of candy. She quietly and gratefully accepted it.

Then there's Joey, who got no participation awards last week. Joey is a dead ringer for my current sports hero, Sammy Sosa, the Cubs' right fielder, who is from the Dominican Republic. Joey likes to wear his baseball cap cocked on an angle and when I tried to take his picture, he would put two fingers up in front of his face. I would say, “No gang signs, Joey,” and he would put his hand down and let me take his picture.

I asked Joey where he lived and he paused and said with a weak smile, “The Ghetto.” I said, “I'm also from Milwaukee. Where do you live?” He mumbled, “14th Street.” I said, “Around, what? North Avenue?” He said “Yeah.” We left it at that.

It was hard for him to participate seriously in most of our conversations. He'd laugh and engage in side conversations. I was always saying, “Joey. Be quiet.” He'd be

quiet for a time. Then I'd have to say, "Joey, put some more space between you and Rachel," and he'd reluctantly scootch over on the log.

Joey was a good public reader, though, and would volunteer to read pieces of the Gospel stories that the group was dramatizing. But then he would sit with the rest of the boys and engage in side conversations again. He is a good kid, just not altogether interested in the theme of the camp, which was "Jesus is: Son of God, Savior, Healer, Friend, Teacher." He was more interested in joking with his buddies and flirting with the girls.

On the last night, we shared in an Agape meal and when it came time to share the bread and wine, which we remembered as having been taken, blessed, broken and given by Jesus, I turned to the kid next to me in the circle to distribute the grape juice. It was Joey. I said, "Joey, would you take the cup around and give it to each camper and say the words, 'This is the blood of the Lord'?"

He did it without hesitation.

While everyone was silent, he went from camper to camper without giggling, even when he came to his cabin mates, and he said to each one, "This is the blood of the Lord." A soft voice in the silence, "*This is the blood of the Lord.*" Didn't miss a one. The simplicity of this ceremony just stunned me. It's one of those quiet, moving and barely discernible moments that make camp all worth while.

The church needs disciples like Brea who remembers the story and proclaims it with an honest and wondrous enthusiasm. But it also needs the reluctant ones like Joey, who takes a risk in facing each of his friends, handing the grape juice to them and saying, "This is the blood of the Lord."

This very difficult gospel lesson this morning teaches us something of what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus Christ. We see three different men, confronted with the challenge of discipleship, and each of them fails that challenge. Luke tells us their stories, it seems, as if to say, "Discipleship isn't like this." But these negative examples are important, for they show us very starkly what it means to follow Jesus.

"As they were going along the road, someone said to Jesus, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' " Perhaps the first thing to notice here is that this would-be disciple approaches Jesus with an offer. He's willing to follow. This is one of only two times in the Gospels where somebody comes up to Jesus on their own initiative and offers to follow him; most of the time, Jesus makes the first move. "Follow me," he says to Simon and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee. Now if Jesus were like us, he'd probably have the disciple membership application right there, ready to have this

prospect sign on the dotted line! But what does he do instead? He talks about how difficult it is to be a disciple!

I suspect that Jesus is telling us here that Christian discipleship isn't something that we decide to do, but something to which we are called, often against our will. It happens at the initiative of Jesus Christ, not ourselves. It is often thrust upon us in unusual times.

Now this is important. If I come to Christ at my own initiative, making my own offer to follow, then I'm the one in control. If I decide later that this discipleship stuff is too difficult for me, or not fulfilling, then I am reserving the option to back out, to stop following Christ. But if Christ is the initiator, then he is the one in control! If I understand up front that I have been called to follow, then when the following gets difficult and the road weary I cannot be so quick to turn back. I understand that discipleship means not just that I am committed to Christ, but that Christ is committed to me.

There is a second man in the story. This one is called by Jesus. "Follow me," Jesus said. "But [the man] said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'" This man hears the call to discipleship, but he feels the tug of other obligations. We can understand those as the obligation of family, or the obligation of fulfilling the law; but the point here is that when you follow Christ, that supersedes all other obligations or responsibilities. Our commitment to Christ isn't one of a number of other commitments in life; no, it is *the* commitment in life. *Nothing* is more important. Christ demands all.

Clarence Jordan was the founder of Koinonia Farm near Americus, Georgia. Way back in the 1950's, when the South was still legally segregated, Koinonia Farm was set up by Jordan, who was white, to be an interracial community. By its very nature it was controversial, and from time to time it got into trouble with the law. Clarence Jordan approached his brother Robert, who was a successful lawyer, and asked him to defend Koinonia Farm. "Clarence," he replied, "I can't do that. You know my political position. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got." "We might lose everything, too, Bob," Clarence replied. "Well, it's different for you." "Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' And I said, 'Yes.' What did you say?" "I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point." "Could that point by any chance be—the cross?" "That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I'm not getting myself crucified." "Then I don't believe you're a disciple. You're an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you're an admirer, not a disciple." "Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn't have a church, would we?" "The question," Clarence said, "is, 'Do you have a church?'"

Do we have a church? Are we disciples, or are we admirers? Are we committed to following Christ, or are we only willing to do so when it is convenient, when other things don't get in the way?

There is a third man who comes to Jesus in this story. "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." In his reflection on this man, Bonhoeffer focuses on three words that the man says: "Let me first . . ." He is ready to follow, ready to be a disciple, but something comes first—and for this man, as for most of us, I'm afraid, what comes first is me. *Me*. The man in the Gospel story has his own priorities, his own desires and wants, and they come first. The problem is that when *me* comes first, usually that's about as far as we get. Because there's *always me*! If that *me* comes first today, it will come first tomorrow and the next day and the next. To follow Jesus Christ is to place that *me* under his control and direction. It is to put aside my own wants and desires, and to follow him on the road to Jerusalem, the road to the cross.

There is a wonderful prayer written by John Wesley which expresses this better than most anything I know:

"I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine."

To yield all things to his pleasure. You know, the tendency that we have when we read a passage like this is to soft pedal it somehow, to say that Jesus doesn't really mean it, to convince ourselves that he is saying these outrageous things in order to get our attention. Maybe he is. But I suspect that unless this passage leaves us feeling like there is some substantial growth still needed in our discipleship, then we haven't taken it seriously enough.

Still, he calls us, gently and insistently. He spreads a table before us, and invites us to follow. He bids us to leave that *me* with him. It's too heavy for this journey, he says. But come along, he says, come eat and drink and be refreshed, and then follow thou me.

*Lord Jesus, for thee we live,
For thee we suffer
For thee we die.
Thine we will be in life and death.
Grant us your salvation.*

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