

Sermon for September 4, 2005

"What it means to be a Disciple"

Matthew 16:24

In the Two Towers there is a moving scene in which the King of Rohan, a man named Theodin is delivered from the powerful influence of the evil Saruman. It is through Saruman's beguiling servant Worm Tongue that King Theodin is seduced into believing the lies of Saruman. The more King Theodin listens to Wormtongue, following his council the more lifeless the king becomes.

I would like to show you the scene from the movie where Theodin is delivered from Saruman's influence and Worm Tongue's grip and is restored to sound mind.

If you have the DVD of the Two Towers, please go to disc 1, scene 20. The time reading where I am picking up the scene is 1:17.50.

I like this scene because I think it says something to us about what it means to be a disciple. The noun "disciple" refers to a person who is following the precepts and instructions of another. When Theodin was following the instructions of Saruman, it resulted in Spiritual death. However, once Gandalf the true white Wizard breaks Saruman's hold on

Theodin there is this transformation that allows Theodin to see Saruman's and Worm Tongue's deception for what it is. There is a transformation that happens, thus enabling Theodin to now be a disciple of Gandalf's.

Throughout the autumn we are going to be thinking about what it means to be disciples of Jesus as we delve deeply into what it means to be people who are following his precepts and teachings. As we do this it is my prayer that the Holy Spirit will teach us to listen carefully to Jesus' instructions that the we can know more fully the life that is available to those who follow him.

But this is not easy. Attentiveness to the instruction of Jesus is easily neglected because there are many voices like Worm Tongues' and Saruman's ever present to deceive us. Two week ago we considered how the *Da Vinci Code* is but one example of a popular book that has so distorted the truth about Jesus and seduced many into accepting the author, Dan Brown's, reading of the Christian story as exemplary.

If were are going to resist these false voices it is helpful for us to think about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus'. Jesus gives us a clear understanding of what it means to be a disciple in 16:24 where he says:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

In Luke's rendering of this verse one word is added.

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

As we consider this verse Luke's version points out that discipleship is a daily affair. Loving and following Jesus is a lifestyle that builds on past lessons and decisions, but it also depends on our dedication day by day. We cannot live off yesterday's successes, last week's prayers, or the Bible stories we heard when we were children. Each new day is both a challenge and an opportunity. Our faith will be challenged, and we can use that challenge as an opportunity to grow in our relationship with God.

Let us focus our attention now on these simple but very crucial words of Jesus, whereby he gives us the process of discipleship. There are three steps.

First, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself..." Notice that he does not say, "Let him hate himself." He is not asking us to deny our basic humanity, our personhood. If you take it that way, you have missed the point. And he is not telling us that we are to abandon ourselves. We cannot get outside of ourselves in any way. So we must understand what he does mean by this phrase, "deny himself," which is the first step of discipleship.

The word "deny" means to affirm that one has no acquaintance or connection with someone or to forget one's self, lose sight of one's self and one's own interests. Interestingly enough, it is the very word used to refer to Peter's denial of Jesus a little later on. As he was standing in the

courtyard of the high priest, warming himself at a fire, a woman asked him, "Do you know this man?" Peter denied that he had any connection with Jesus, said he did not know him, and affirmed his disavowal with oaths and curses. Thus he denied his Lord. This is exactly the word Jesus chooses when he tells us that, if we are going to come after him, we must first deny ourselves.

It is important also to understand that he does not mean what we usually mean by "self-denial." By this we usually mean that we are giving up something. Many people feel it is only right to deny themselves something during Lent, to give up various bad habits. But Jesus is not talking about this kind of "self-denial." Denying self means that we repudiate our natural feelings about ourselves, i.e., our right to ourselves, our right to run our own lives. We are to deny that we own ourselves. When it is stated in those terms, people sense immediately that Jesus is saying something very fundamental. It strikes right at the heart of our very existence, because the one thing that we, as human beings, value and covet and protect above anything else is the right to make ultimate decisions for ourselves. This is what Jesus is talking about. He is not talking about giving up this or that, but about giving up our selves.

Peter was able to see Jesus as the Messiah but he wanted Jesus to be the Messiah on his own terms. When Peter says "'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'" this was the most emphatic form of rebuke Peter could express. He didn't want Jesus on the terms Jesus was laying out before them.

One of the early church fathers, a man named Origen, suggested that when Jesus then said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan," what he actually meant was, "Peter, your place is behind me, not in front of me. It's your job to follow me in the way I choose, not to try to lead me in the way YOU would like me to go."

In His book *Beyond Personality* C. S. Lewis describes the exchange between self-will and God's will like this:

Christ says, 'Give me all. I don't want so much of your money and so much of your work--I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole

The reason Jesus calls us to live this way is because there is no other way we can be open to God. Jesus is looking for obedient disciples who have hearts that are sensitive enough to hear God and to respond to his guidance. The disciple has no higher preference than to live his or her life each day asking God to order our path, as we trust in his providential care.

The second step immediately follows: "Let him deny himself, and take up his cross..." What does "take up his cross" mean? Well, I am sure these words, falling on the disciples' ears, were almost totally incomprehensible to them. They did not know what he meant. To them, the cross was but a very vague,

hazy blur on the horizon of their minds. They did not understand where Jesus was heading. But he knew. And he knew that after the awful events which were to come in Jerusalem, after the terrible, searing pain of those days was answered by the joy and the glory of resurrection, they would think these words through again and begin to understand what he meant. We who live on this side of the cross find it easier to know what he meant.

But many people think that a cross is any kind of trial or hardship you are going through, or any kind of handicap you must endure -- like a mother-in-law, or a ding-a-ling neighbor or a physical handicap. "That's my cross," we say. But that is not what Jesus means. He himself had many handicaps, many difficulties and trials he endured before he came to his cross. So it is not merely handicap or difficulty or trial. The cross was something different. The cross stood for something in the life of Jesus connected with shame and humiliation. It was a criminal's cross on which he was hung. It was a place of degradation, where he was demeaned and debased.

And so the cross stands forever as a symbol of those circumstances and events in our experience which humble us, expose us, offend our pride, shame us, and reveal our basic evil -- that evil which Jesus described earlier: "Out of the heart of people come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness," (Mark 7:22 RSV). It is the cross which brings this out. Any circumstance, any incident which does this to us, Jesus says, if we are a disciple, we are to welcome. That is his meaning. "Take up your cross, accept it, glory in it, cling to it, because it is something good for you. It will reduce

you to the place where you will be ready to receive the gift of the grace of God." That is why the cross is so valuable to us.

This does not mean only the big things in our life; it is the little things as well. Do you feel hurt when someone forgets your name? Are you prone to the same areas of irritability, defensiveness, and the harbouring of a critical heart? Are you able to name these sins honestly for what they are? Does criticism hurt, even when you know it is justified? Are you rankled when you lose at tennis or golf? All these are minor forms of the cross at work in our lives. The Lord's word is that if we are going to be a disciple, we are not to be offended by these things, we are not to get upset about them; we are to welcome them. As we do this we can bring them to Jesus and in humility ask them to be crucified.

You can see how radical this approach to life is, how different it is from the way the world around would tell us to act. The world says, "Escape. Avoid the situation. Or, if you can't avoid it, then strike back. Get angry, get even, offend in turn. Get upset about it." But the word of Jesus is, "If you're going to be my disciple, deny yourself, and take up your cross."

Then the third step is, "Follow me." This really means, "Obey me." Is it not remarkable that it takes us so long to understand that if disobedience is the name of the game before we are Christians, then certainly obedience is the name of the game after we become Christians? It must be. I am amazed at people who say that they are Christians, but then blatantly, and even pridefully, acknowledge that they do not follow the Lord, do not do what he

says. Now, we all struggle with this. I myself fail at this many times. Our Lord is not talking about perfection as a disciple; he is simply telling us what discipleship means, what it involves. It involves following him. It means choosing to do or say what Jesus commands us to do or say, and what he himself did, and looking to him for the power to carry it through. This is what following him means. It is what it meant to the disciples. They obeyed him, and they were taught to look to him for whatever it took to make it possible. In the feeding of the multitude, he told them to feed the crowd, and they did. But he had to supply what it took.

This is what Christianity is all about. The Christian life is following Jesus, doing what he says -- like, "Love your enemy," (Matthew 5:44). "Pray for those who hurt you," (Matthew 5:44). "Forgive those who offend you," (Matthew 6:14-15). Those are not merely wise and helpful words; they represent a way of life our Lord is setting out before us, to which we are expected to conform in the moment when we least feel like it.

When we do not feel like obeying or forgiving or praying, he tells us to do it anyway. "Be kind to the ungrateful and the selfish," (Luke 6:35). I struggle with that one. I do not want to be kind to people who are ungrateful or selfish, but that is what the Lord says to do. "Bear one another's burdens," (Galatians 6:2). "Freely you have received, freely give," (Matthew 10:8). "Follow me" means obeying these and all the many, many other exhortations of Scripture.

In the original Greek, these steps are stated in the present, continuous tense. That means, "Keep on denying yourself, keep on taking up your cross,

keep on following me." This is not the decision of a moment, but a program for a lifetime, to be repeated again and again, whenever we fall into circumstances which make these choices necessary. This is what it means to be a disciple.

Discipleship is denying your right to yourself, and taking up the cross, accepting these incidents and circumstances which expose our pride and conceit, welcoming them, and then following him, doing what he says to do, looking to him for the power.

This is not always a very appealing course, is it? I am sure that it must have struck these disciples and the multitude with very solemn and serious impact. In fact, John tells us that at this point many turned and went back, and followed him no more, because these words seemed to them harsh and demanding.

We can always be grateful that our Lord never has invited any to come after him without letting them know what would be involved. And he does this with us. He is not interested in anybody becoming a Christian, or attempting to live as a Christian, on false terms. He wants us to understand that this is going to shatter us, change us, make us into a different kind of people. It is bound to. If it has any meaning in our lives at all, it is going to revolutionize us utterly, right to the very basic core of our being. He makes this very clear, right from the start.

To be a disciple of Jesus' means we are men and women who are under his instruction, listening to his voice and being changed into his likeness. This happens as we surrender our will for our lives, take up the cross, which is the accepting of God's will for us and putting his will into practice as we follow Jesus.