

Discipleship is difficult – Pentecost 5C

Life is difficult.

How many of you have read *The Road Less Traveled*, by M. Scott Peck?

This classic self-help book was recommended to me when I first started psychotherapy in my early twenties. I duly bought it, took it home, and opened it to the first page, where I read the first sentence, “Life is difficult.”

NO! I said, and wanted to hurl the book across the room. I did not want life to be difficult. I was tired of difficulties. I was in therapy so I would learn how to make things life, right? I did not want to face decades more years of hard work.

And I still feel this way sometimes. Things are going along relatively smoothly, and then something unforeseen goes wrong. Someone loses their job, or is injured, or some government makes another insane decision, and I feel once again that shock. Oh yeah, life is difficult.

This morning I would like to modify Peck’s statement a bit.

Discipleship is difficult.

In our gospel reading today, Luke collects three sayings:

Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head

Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God

No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

Discipleship is difficult.

As Christians, as disciples of Jesus, we are called to live in a place of tension.

A few weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost. We heard stories of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the first disciples so that the whole world could call on the name of the Lord and be saved. A glorious vision of the Reign of God on earth, the Babel story overturned, and all of humanity united.

In the weeks since we've celebrated Indigenous Sunday and Pride Sunday. And they have been celebrations, but these Sundays also highlight the reality of Not Yet.

Humanity is not united. Justice and peace are not here yet for Indigenous peoples or LGBTQ2+ folk. The Reign of God is here, but not yet here. We are called to share the glorious vision of God's reign, but we are also called to repentance for our failure as a church and as a society to live according to this vision.

In Luke Jesus tells us if we are doing our discipleship correctly, if we are going to live in that Not Yet tension, we have to be focused and committed. Keeping our hand to the plow and not looking back.

We have to be prepared to offend. We might have to break some social rules, or even be impolite. We might struggle to pay the bills; we might even, one day, find ourselves without a place to lay our head.

Discipleship is difficult.

It has always been hard, but in the 21st century we experience some particular problems:

After centuries of Christendom, Christianity is no longer a dominant cultural influence. The church has been sidelined, no longer part of the establishment. This is probably a good thing, but for those of us that grew up in "Christian" countries with "Christian" values, this can be a difficult adjustment.

And those “Christian” values are changing. The younger generation is constantly pushing older folks like me to examine our thinking on gender, race, accessibility, and much more. This is a good thing, but not easy.

And all of this is happening in the context of the looming global disaster of climate change. Yes, generations before us have thought the end of the world was nigh, but this is first time that scientific evidence is suggesting that the end may have already begun.

Discipleship is difficult.

But here’s the good news: you’re not in it alone.

Pentecost has happened. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on us and made us one in this community which we call the Body of Christ.

Paul tells us, as disciples, we have been set free in Christ from the sins of the flesh. Paul is not saying that our bodies are evil or all physical pleasure is evil. He’s speaking of the system of sin, the culture of self-centeredness that seeks self-pleasure over all things, at any cost.

But as a community, as the Body of Christ, we have the Spirit that leads to love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. With the Spirit we can be disciples.

Here’s more good news: God understands that this is difficult.

In the beginning of our Gospel reading we get this odd little story of Jesus, heading to Jerusalem, determined, his face set. He knows he is heading to his death.

Now to get to Jerusalem from Galilee you have to go through Samaria. The Samaritans are the descendants of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and they don’t accept the temple in Jerusalem as the true tabernacle. So of course they aren’t interested in putting up pilgrims on their way to this false worship. The disciples are practically ready to go to war over this slight.

But Jesus doesn't have time for this. Jesus has a task, to proclaim the reign of God, knowing this task will lead to deadly conflict with the reign of Caesar. So debating liturgical theology with the Samaritans is not a priority. His course is set and he doesn't look back.

Like the disciples, we often get caught up in ultimately pointless churchy arguments about who is allowed in, who can worship how and where. Like the disciples, we often use our faith to divide ourselves from others. But the Spirit of God is ready to guide us back to our task, to put our hand back on the plow.

Our society, our planet, is at a crisis moment. Announcing God's loving reign, seeking her justice in the world, showing the fruits of the spirit: this is our call, this is discipleship, and it is difficult.

Let me read a bit more from Peck:

"Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult - once we truly understand and accept it - then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."

Discipleship is difficult, but we have each other, and together we can accept and transcend this difficulty. We have this community where we can learn to live by the Spirit. We have this table that we gather around, and we have this meal that we share, the sacrament of God's love and forgiveness for us and for the whole world.

Anne Evers
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