

“A TOUGH ASSIGNMENT”
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Matthew 16:21-28

Later on this afternoon, I’m going to be officiating a wedding down at the beach – at a golf club near Rehoboth. Standing in front of me will be this wonderful young couple with love in their hearts and stars in their eyes! I’ve been doing weddings since 1985, and it’s always special, but it’s particularly special when I’ve known the bride or groom, or both of them, for a long time – which is the case today. I’ve known Erin Rogers and her family – particularly her grandmother Fay Farley – for many, many years.

At any rate, Erin and Mark will stand there, as all couples do, and say vows to each other and exchange rings. When it comes time for the vows, they will say things like, “for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health” and, to be completely honest with you (and those of you who have been married for any length of time can attest to this) they have no earthly idea what those vows will really mean. When they’re standing there gazing into each other’s eyes and saying them, everything is all sweetness and light, and they just know it’s going to be that way til the day they die.

But, life being what it is, some day they, like every other married couple, will know what “worse” means, or “poorer” or “sickness.” They will realize that marriage is not always all sweetness and light, that sometimes it’s difficult – but it’s hanging in there during those times that matters – and knowing that the good times will come again.

Well, in some ways, the partnership between Jesus and his disciples is like that. In this morning’s Gospel lesson, Peter and the others are waking up to the fact that this journey with Jesus is not going to be all sweetness and light.

Oh, it was exciting when he first called them from their workaday world into this adventure of discipleship. It was exciting to be by his side as he walked the dusty roads and touched people’s lives. It was inspiring to watch him heal people. It was amazing to see more and more people flock to be by his side. And, truth be told, it had to be a rush for the twelve of them to be known as his “inner circle.” They were the chosen, and people knew it. In the beginning, like young couples starting out in marriage with stars in their eyes, the disciples were probably loving life – and wanting this journey of love, joy and healing to never end.

But now, in today's lesson, reality sets in. Now those words – “worse,” “poorer,” “sickness” – show up. The party's over – well, not exactly over – but Jesus lets them know that it's coming to an end, and it will be a brutal, terrible, terrible end. And they can't handle it.

You heard Peter's reaction. The scripture passage puts it strongly – he rebuked Jesus. None of the disciples wanted to believe it. As one person put it, “Taking up their crosses and following Jesus falls far from their original vision of earthly success, in which they join Jesus in a triumphal dance of joy.” (On-line, “Living with the Word,” Amy Zietlow, *The Christian Century*, 8/16/17)

It was supposed to be good. He was doing good things – great things. He was changing lives, healing people, teaching about life, real life, abundant life. It was good – all good. And they were loving it – but now, Jesus, well, throws a bucket of cold water in their faces, and says, “Hold on fellas, here's the reality of the situation. To follow me is going to be tough, it's going to cost me, and it's going to cost you.”

Now, bring it up to modern day, to you and to me. When you joined the church, whether that was when you were confirmed as a youth, or when you joined as an adult, you stood before God and a congregation and made some vows as well. I wonder if all of us were not somewhat like starry-eyed brides and grooms when we said yes to the vows.

We love the Lord and wanted to be part of the church, the community of disciples. It was exciting and joyful to be a part of such a wonderful thing.

But, if you happened to join in a United Methodist Church, do you remember what you said yes to doing in the vows you made? Things like rejecting the evil powers of this world, resisting evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they presented themselves, and serving Jesus with people of all ages, nations and races. I wonder, in the midst of being overwhelmed with love for Jesus and joy of joining the church, did you really think about the cost would be of doing the things I just mentioned ?

Probably not. Actually, United Methodist Bishop William Willimon has always maintained that if people took those membership vows really literally, they would be afraid to join – because it really can mean taking up your cross, it can be really costly.

Following Christ, and living as he calls us to live, has always been counter-cultural, but perhaps never more so than in these days. In a world that in so many ways tells us to get more and be more and do more for ourselves, Christ calls us to live for others. In a world shouting “keep people out,” Christ calls us to welcome them in. In a world shouting “war,” Christ calls us to be peacemakers. In a world

filled with cynicism, Christ calls us to share optimism, because the future is in God's hands.

If we do those things, we will be noticed, and truth be told, sometimes it will cost us. We'll make some people uncomfortable – and they won't like it. We might even get labeled – Bible bangers, goodie-two-shoes, and some these days, might even call us “weak” because we believe in something, someone bigger than ourselves, we're not self-sufficient, on our own.

Discipleship is a tough assignment, there is no doubt about it. If we truly follow Christ and his will for our lives, it will cost us. It will mean taking up our crosses. And only you know what that means for your life.

It might mean walking away from others who are engaged in gossip or telling off-color or racial jokes – or harder still, confronting them about it.

It might mean taking an hour a week out of your already over-scheduled life, to mentor an elementary school student.

It might mean not buying that something special you were looking forward to getting, in order to give money for hurricane relief.

It might mean giving up vacation time, to go on a mission trip.

It might mean having the courage to witness about Jesus to someone else.

It might mean - well, you fill in the blank – you know what matters to you, and what might call you out of your comfort zone.

Discipleship is a tough assignment, but oh friends, to accept it is to walk the way of real life, abundant life, eternal life. To walk the way of discipleship is to partner with God in bringing the kingdom on earth. To walk the way of discipleship is to help make lives whole and the future bright. To walk the way of discipleship is what we were created to do.

I don't know about you, but I saw a whole lot of people this week taking up their crosses to walk with Jesus. Where? In the midst of, and in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. I was actually kind of surprised that the media showed so many people who spoke of doing what they did – reaching out and helping others during the hurricane – because of Jesus.

They were people like you and me, maybe who happened to have a small fishing boat, who risked their lives to rescue people they didn't know from flooding. They were people who were out of harm's way in their own homes, who left them to

go and give food and supplies to people living in shelters. They were people all over the country suddenly carting cases of water and boxes of diapers to local centers to be shipped to the Houston area. And I daresay that there are millions and millions of people in churches all over this country this morning who will give of their hard-earned money (some of whom probably have barely enough money to keep themselves going) so that organizations like the United Methodist Committee on Relief can provide help right now to those whose lives have been devastated by Harvey.

Discipleship is a tough assignment indeed, but it is also a wonderful gift to us all. Because to live as Jesus lived, to love as he loved, to care as he cared – however difficult it is - is the pathway to real, true, abundant life – a life, in spite of the cost, of joy and peace.

So today, come to the table of our Lord and receive strength and nourishment to take up your cross and follow Christ, no matter where he leads. May it be so.

Amen.