

Learning to Grow: Part Two of “The Path of the Disciple”

Having accepted the call to become a disciple and to help others become disciples, we now begin to understand what we don’t know. Or rather we embrace what we have to learn. Sometimes we get the impression that the end of faith is that initial yes to Jesus. As important as that confession is, it is only the beginning of the path to becoming a disciple. Paul, in the twelfth chapter of his wonderful letter to the Romans, invites us to embrace transformation so that we can know the will of God for our lives and for the world. He tells us that this takes place, at least in part, through the “renewing of your minds.” (Romans 12:2 NRSV)

So, let us consider together what it means to be a disciple. Let’s embrace the truth, even when it is difficult and takes effort, even when we learn of the commitment that is involved in following Jesus. Because we also discover the joy in serving and loving and working for justice. It may be hard, and we may mess up at times, or lose focus, but we’re learning and we’re growing. Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ isn’t an instantaneous event, but a lifelong process. Wesley called it sanctification, this process of becoming more like Christ, and acknowledged that it is a journey. But we’re on the way, or as Wesley claimed, moving on to perfection in love. There’s a lot to learn as we grow.

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - Tell in the Light

June 25, 2023

[Gen 21:8-21](#); [Matt 10:24-39](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

“What you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops” (Matthew 10:27). This week, we’ve got whispers and we’ve got shouts. That seems like a common human experience, doesn’t it? Some things we are willing to shout; other things we prefer to whisper. Except, pay attention here: we aren’t whispering; we are the shouters. God whispers; we shout. God speaks in the dark; we tell in the light. How does that work, exactly? Whispers in the dark sound a lot like uncertainty—like maybe we heard, but we aren’t sure. So, are we supposed to shout our uncertainty?

Worship is, in part, learning to listen to God. How do we create space for hearing that voice, for leaning into that presence? What are we doing when we gather to tune our hearts to the quiet spaces within as well as the proclaimed spaces without? Pay attention to silence. It is something that is rare in our world these days. Sure, minds wander, but a little guidance can help worshipers find their way through the silence as they listen to the still small voice of God.

But then proclaim. Our question here is, “Who proclaims during worship?” The preacher, certainly; the worship leaders or liturgists, scripture readers, musicians. But who else? How are

you training and helping to grow those who live in the world and are invited to offer their witness or testimony? What examples do you give? What space do you provide to help everyone learn how and what and when to shout from the rooftops?

Part of the whispering and proclaiming in worship has to do with confession. Hagar's story calls for the church to confess sins both individually and corporately. The nudge of the Spirit to rid oneself of sin needs an outlet, an opportunity to proclaim, confess, and receive forgiveness. This isn't, most likely, a public airing of personal sinfulness. But there are opportunities through corporate prayers of confession to admit our failings and to ask for redemption and to invite the church to stand on the side of justice and of mercy in a broken world.

Among the silence and the speaking, the confession and the forgiveness, there is also grace and there is praise. We celebrate the God with us, who speaks to us, if only in whispers. We give thanks that we are not alone as we proclaim with grace and hospitality that the kin-dom of God is near, indeed is among us in whispers.

PREACHING NOTES

My dad was the pastor of Wheatland Avenue United Methodist Church in Logansport, Indiana. As an aside, I sometimes wonder about the choice to name a church after a place rather than a statement of faith or history. I noticed when I was in Anderson, Indiana, that the Church of God always names their churches after a place. You will never see Faith Church of God or Trinity Church of God. It is always a place. Here we are! This is us. We are located here.

Well, Wheatland Avenue United Methodist Church was on Wheatland Avenue, duh. But I remember that church more for the trauma it induced in me than almost anything else. Every now and then, Dad would send me to the church for something, late at night, in the dark. Creepy dark. Old churches are spooky places in the dark. Did you ever notice that? There are all sorts of creaky sounds that might be someone sneaking up behind you. There are all sorts of wheezy sounds that might be the hot breath of some creature looking for a meal. All sorts of shadows, no matter how many lights you turn on, might be demonic presences or rats scurrying out of the glare into the darkness. It was a troubling place for someone with an overactive imagination, like me.

So, I did what any self-respecting Christian boy would do in that situation. I came into the church singing hymns at the top of my lungs and didn't stop until I was back outside again. "Amazing Grace" has a power that the creatures of the night can't defeat! I know this. "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" is just the antidote to feeling alone and vulnerable. "Up from the Grave He Arose" strikes fear in the legions of undead looking for throats to bite. So, I knew I was safe as long as I could sing the hymns of the faith. And upon the completion of my mission, I would pause before entering the house to catch my breath and make sure no one knew either of my fear or my singing!

We call it whistling in the dark. It is that activity that keeps the fears from overwhelming you and enables you to continue to function, to complete the mission at hand. Some complain that it is a process whereby we ignore just how serious the problems really are – “you’re just whistling in the dark!” But I submit that it is something more than that. It is calling on a power that helps you face those fears. It is acknowledging the severity of the problems but choosing to live in hope anyway.

At least I think that is what Jesus is trying to help us do in our Gospel passage for this week. Jesus is never one to say, “Oh, this will be easy! Don’t worry.” He is almost frighteningly honest about the kind of opposition we might be facing. But he gives us our mission anyway. And a simple mission it is - be like him.

This passage begins and ends with that missional call to be Christ in the world. “It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher,” he tells us, and “whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Like he did. *Be like me*, he says. And then he proceeds to tell us how difficult it is. “They’ll call you names,” he says. This refers back and forward to an encounter with the religious establishment who tried to claim that Jesus had power over demons because he was a demon himself! Even when you are doing good, you get attacked! Thanks for that, Jesus. And the other end of the conversation here is even more serious. Not just name-calling, but a willingness to give our whole lives away – just like him.

And then, to compound the call, he tells us that even those closest to us are likely to think we’ve gone crazy. Just like him. Remember when his family showed up to take him away because they thought he was nuts? Well, it might happen to us too. There is no guarantee that when you decide to live your life for Christ that everyone around you is going to cheer you on. He’s asking us to choose sides, even if it means choosing against parents or children. Wow, tough stuff.

Throw us a bone here, Jesus. It can’t all be loneliness and fear. It can’t be us against the world; we aren’t strong enough. Are you ready? Here is the word of comfort: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (verse 28). Um, OK, thanks, Jesus. But wait; keep listening. He tells us that this power, this ultimate power beyond the universe, is leaning in our direction. “You are of more value than many sparrows!” (10:31). What a blessing! Seriously. If God, this God who has the power of life and death and eternity, cares about sparrows, for heaven’s sake, then we truly have nothing to fear.

This is the point that Jesus wants us to hear. It is not about the shadows that make us jump; it is about the light that brings us comfort. It is not about the enemies that lurk; it is about the friend who stands with us. It is not about the unknown that causes our knees to tremble; it is about the faith in the one who shores us up. God is on our side - not in an “I’m-right-and-you-are-wrong” kind of way. God is on our side in a “there-is-nothing-we cannot-do-for-the-kingdom-if-we-try” kind of way. God is on our side in “a”life-is-deeper-and-richer-and-more-

satisfying-despite-the-risks” kind of way. God is on our side in a “whistling-in-the-dark, shouting-from-the-rooftops” kind of way.

So, start shouting. “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops” (verse 27). Jesus tells us that even though we feel that we don’t have all the answers, we can go on as though we do—because we know where the answers are. Even though we don’t know how it will all work out, we know it will work out in God’s time. Even though we have only glimpses of truth, we can proclaim what we have heard with confidence. We live in the dark, but we proclaim the light. We hear only whispers, but we shout with our whole lives our faith in the one who loves us with a love beyond description. Those old hymns do have power. They have the power to remind us of our faith in God through Jesus the Christ. Keep singing.

But if there is a story you want to sing your way past, it is the story from Genesis assigned to this Sunday. Many preachers will gladly give it a miss and focus on the gospel. Matthew might be cryptic, but at least it isn’t offensive. Or painful. Or even shameful the way the Genesis story is. The treatment of Hagar is beyond excusing, and we shouldn’t try. Certainly, we can talk about the consequences of sin, of trying to take the promises of God and make them into what we want them to be. We can talk about how we are interwoven and one person’s bad choices, one person’s jealousies, one person’s manipulations have an impact on the lives of others. But please don’t explain it away as a part of God’s plan.

Yet, we can listen to the call and get back on track, even when we think we’ve messed it up so badly that we’ve hurt innocents; we’ve hurt those we love. Hagar was driven out to the desert to die because she and her child became inconvenient and a constant reminder of a failure of faith and an inability to follow the call of God.

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost - Quenching a Thirst

July 2, 2023

[Gen 22:1-14](#); [Matt 10:40-42](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

We're about hospitality this week. That sounds like a casual, or maybe even an extra kind of thing. "It's not something essential," we might think. It's part of the social niceties that make us look good. But, in fact, we would be wrong, if that was our position. Jesus sees hospitality as central to our discipleship. Here we consider how we receive hospitality and how we offer it. We are wrestling with grace. For some, it is easier to be purveyors of grace than recipients. Others find accepting a gift easier than giving one. Either way, we are called to pay attention to how we welcome, how we include, and how we help others feel a part of all that we do and are.

The worship team might start by considering whether there is "insider language" in the worship liturgy. Do we assume knowledge of practices and understandings, or do we go out of our way to use words that include others, even the stranger or seeker, skeptic, and doubter? Do our words open up the images of God at work in the world, or do we unnecessarily limit the depictions of our Lord? Words matter; pay attention to the language that we use in worship.

But what else can we do? How do we make folks feel welcomed into our worship experience and into the community that we are? This is about more than the order of worship, that is true. But what we do during worship can help or hinder our hospitality. We start by paying attention to the performance of worship: what instructions can we give to help folks feel at ease with what is going on? How do we identify our guests? Not by making them feel uncomfortable by being the center of attention in an unfamiliar setting, surely. But we do want to identify them so that we can be good hosts.

Hospitality is outward-focused. But is not exclusive to guests or visitors. The worship team could spend some time considering who else is feeling excluded by how we do worship. Do those with disabilities in hearing or seeing feel welcomed and included? What about those with mobility issues? How do we make worship intergenerational so that everyone feels heard and seen in the midst of the community during worship each week? How wide is our definition of family so that we can give space to non-traditional families of various kinds?

Implied in our theme for this week is the idea that everyone is thirsty and that we are in the thirst-quenching business. The world is indeed our parish, but the world begins in our sanctuaries and fellowship halls. The world begins at our front door.

PREACHING NOTES

You don't have to be a sports fan to know that a common celebratory act by the winning team of an important game or championship is to pour cold water on the coach. My point is there are occasions when cold water is an act of celebration and congratulations. And it fits in nicely with Jesus' reference to cold water as an act of hospitality.

Our Gospel text is short and sweet, straightforward and to the point. Except that we've got to take another look and figure out just what is going on here. But you knew that, right? You knew it couldn't be as easy as it looked on the surface.

Let's take a look at what is in here. First, we need to remember the context. It follows on the Gospel reading from last Sunday when we read the previous verses about shouting and whispering, about peace and swords, about sparrows and the number of hairs on our heads. Remember all that? Well, this is the conclusion of that speech.

Jesus is preparing his disciples to go out and tell the good news. It is their first mission trip. But instead of driving nails and cleaning up disaster areas, they are to knock on doors and ask if it would be all right to talk about Jesus. The particular instructions on how to conduct themselves on this mission are scanty at best. I guess they had to figure out that part on their own. Instead, Jesus wants to set the context, to give them the framework within which the mission is to take place. The "how to's" are left up to us.

But he concludes with these words about welcoming. Now they read as though they are the responsibility of the others. "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me" (10:40). It is up to them to get that. This is, it appears, an escape clause for the disciples. If it doesn't work then, that is their problem. No one can force anyone to listen and all of that. It is up to the recipient to get the response right. It is up to the convert or the potential convert to figure out how to respond. And if they miss it, too bad for them. We'll just move on. They don't want what we're selling, well, tough luck.

It is true that we can't force positive responses to Christ. In the end, free will means the freedom to say no as well as the freedom to say yes. And individuals have to bear the ultimate responsibility for their own souls. But there is too much in what Jesus says and does to allow us to get away with the "take it or leave it" approach to evangelism. There are too many examples of the responsibility of the community to care for one another; too many times when Jesus points out that our salvation is wrapped up in the salvation of our neighbor.

We need to read the passage again to see what Jesus is really telling the disciples (and us) about this sharing of the faith thing, this spreading of the gospel challenge that is before us. "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (10:40). What if the burden is not really on the one who responds (the one who "welcomes you") but on the one who seeks to present Christ to the world? What if Jesus is not giving the disciples a free pass on this hospitality thing, but is, in fact, significantly raising the

bar? Your task, he says, is not just to go out and mumble some sort of invitation – like “You don’t really want to come to church with me, do you? Didn’t think so. I’m leaving now.” But instead, your task is to be Christ, to represent God as you meet and greet and engage in conversations with all and sundry.

“Well,” we think, “that isn’t my job; it is the job of the professional Christians – the pastors and evangelists. They are the ones charged with representing Christ. Isn’t that right?” Nope. That is why Jesus goes on to itemize in this passage: whoever welcomes a prophet...whoever welcomes a righteous one... whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones... Scholars have debated the differentiation in this passage, some concluding one thing and others another. But it seems to me that Jesus is trying to get us to forget this idea that there are those who are charged with being Christ all the time and the rest of us only have to worry about it for an hour or so once a week! Prophets could be the called-out ones, the pastors and teachers set aside by the community for a task. For Paul, the prophet was a traveling preacher who didn’t settle in an area but came through to stir things up and then move on. Righteous ones could be the leaders in the life of the church, the ones whose lives were examples of the faith and whose wisdom was sought out before any decision was made.

But the little ones? That was everyone else. Everyone. New Christians and lifelong saints. Young people and elders. We are to be the means by which those outside come to know who Christ is. We are to be the face of Christ to the stranger, to our neighbor, to our family.

Now there are two different responses to this passage, it seems to me. One is to become bearers of cold water. Because Jesus raises hospitality to eternal significance, we now take the task of hospitality more seriously. We re-examine our structures at church and ask how we are doing; we enlist more and more people in the task of welcoming until the church understands that it is everyone’s responsibility. We take hospitality as seriously as Jesus did.

The other response is to receive hospitality as Jesus tells us to do. The scripture literally is about receiving hospitality. So, how do we accept the cups of cold water that are given to us? Can Christ be seen in our gratitude as well as our generosity? “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” says Jesus.

But then what do we say about this story in Genesis? The inclination is to just skip over it. There is too much to unpack, too much to face, too much trauma to unleash. And maybe that is best. Focus on the cup of cold water and let that powerful message hold the day. The sacrifice – or near sacrifice – of Isaac is too stark to be taken lightly. There should be no glib presentation of “all’s well that ends well” or “no harm, no foul” for this story. Certainly, we can live with the implication that the idea that God requires the sacrifice of our young is now ended. Until the atonement theories cause us to rethink this truth. And the final verse telling us that God will provide the sacrifice gives us pause or should.

Is there a way to fold this story into the whole idea of hospitality? Whom do we include and what do we surrender to make that inclusion happen? Perhaps that is a stretch. Certainly, there

is much to ponder as we regard this tale. Perhaps it is best left for a Bible study setting where conversation and exploration can take place with all participants.

The God behind this story is elusive and somewhat incomprehensible, unlike the God we know in Jesus. We aren't second-guessing this God, but simply declaring that there is something obscure here that is out of our experience. That is to be expected when we acknowledge that God's ways are not our ways, as the psalmist declares. So, declare that we need to grow and to learn and to learn to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost - Taking the Yoke

July 9, 2023

[Gen 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Matt 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

There are many directions the worship team could take the theme this week. It starts with how you want to visualize the yoke that Jesus describes in our text. Do you see it as an opportunity or as a burden? As a fulfillment of a calling or a duty to be performed? How do we present the idea that “Jesus calls us” as the hymn states, “o’er the tumult of our life’s wild restless sea”?

Do you see the yoke as a symbol of the calling to a life of service? If so, then worship should be a celebration of ministry in the church and in the community. We can present service, not as a burden or a duty, but as a joy. We can tell the stories of those who have been blessed by serving – not being served, though those can be told too. But tell the stories of how someone found God or his/her life’s purpose in serving. Worship can lift up service as a fulfillment of the easy yoke, the one that fits us, that satisfies a deep longing in our soul to be at work in the fields of the Lord. Let worship be a time to thank God for the opportunity to serve.

Perhaps you see the yoke as a symbol of the partnership with Christ. It is not so much about what we might do, but about the one with whom we will do all things. The yoke that Christ speaks of in our text is a symbol of relationship. When we come together to worship, we come together. We are not alone, but part of a community. Added to that, of course, is the intimate and personal relationship that we have with Christ. We are yoked, meaning everything we do we do in the presence of Christ. We are blessed beyond measure. We are known and we are loved. That is certainly something worthy of giving thanks and praise to God. Let our worship be a reminder of the relationship with Christ and with one another. Let our songs be songs of community and of fellowship. And let our service be done, not with a lone-ranger mentality, but in terms of the unity of the body of which we are a part.

On the path of a disciple, we are learning to grow in our relationships with Christ and with the community. It begins when we take the yoke.

PREACHING NOTES

Rest. That's what sounds wonderful right now. Not just sleep, though that would be good too. With all that we've been through lately, with all the aches and pains of living in this complicated world, with the worries and struggles that make it hard to relax completely, sleep would be a good thing.

But I have never thought that Jesus was inviting us to come and take a nap on His couch. As great as that would be, I don't think that is the offer. "Come unto me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). There's more to it than pulling a comforter over your head and dozing off. Especially since the next line is "Take my yoke" (11:29).

Wait a minute. That's rest? Being yoked to something or someone? That sounds like work. It sounds like labor. Well, it is. Jesus wasn't offering us time off for good behavior. This isn't like earning enough vacation time by working really hard and then getting a few extra days because we've earned them. When it comes to Jesus, you'd better lay off the earning language. Or you might be on the wrong end of that scale.

The offer has to be for something other than a good night's sleep. It must have something to do with working alongside of or being guided by Jesus. But *working. Moving. Being.* All that stuff, all those action words. It is, yet again, not about checking out, but about diving in. It's about going deeper. About living. Jesus invites us to restful living. Restful working.

Sabbath was never about being lazy. It was always about being centered on God and on the life that God intends for us. It was about obedience. It was about working in the fields of the Lord. What does that mean, exactly? Well, I don't know for sure. But I think John Greenleaf Whittier caught a glimpse of it in the part of a poem that we sing called "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind." He talked of the Sabbath rest in one verse. But it is the fifth verse that speaks most clearly of what that Sabbath rest might be:

Drop thy still dews of quietness / Till all our strivings cease; / Take from our souls the strain and stress, / And let our ordered lives confess / The beauty of Thy peace.

That's what I really want, the end of strain and stress, the striving after that which never satisfies - never dancing when it is time to dance or mourning when it is time to mourn. Being out of step with where Christ wants us to be. What I want is an easy yoke. Not one that isn't hard work, but one that fits me and fits the time. One that is right for me. Then I can rest easy, trusting I am where God wants me to be.

How do we understand the phrase "right for me," however? The yoke that is fit for me in Matthew, on the one hand. But what about in the twenty-fourth chapter of Genesis? What does that convoluted and somewhat culturally obscure courtship story between Isaac and Rebekah have to do with Jesus' call to take his yoke?

There might be many approaches we could take to twining these stories, but one direction might be for us to acknowledge that despite our cultural proclivity to turn everything into an individual enterprise, the life of faith and/or being a disciple by design involves other people. And these other people are not just objects to act upon, but subjects with whom we are to develop relationships. Making disciples is about being in relationship. We may want it to be about leaving tracts or making good arguments or convincing folks and then leaving them to find their way on their own. But that's not how it works. It is about commitment and relationship and partnership.

Of course, not every relationship is about marriage, like the story of Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 24. But every relationship is about investing time, energy, and attention. And if Isaac's story is any guide, it also takes multiple members of the community to establish the connections and to foster relationships. We might need to move away from the marriage metaphor into a community-building one to acknowledge that relationships are worth the time and effort it takes to invite and to cultivate and to accompany. The message to those of us in the disciple-making business is that we need to shepherd the process, as the servant in the Genesis text shepherded Rebekah into the fold of the family of Abraham.

But what about the yoke? And the use of "servant" in the text? Do we perpetuate unhealthy ideas of the life of faith – loss of power to choose, maintaining social hierarchies and structures, oppression in its many forms? There is certainly that danger, so we tread carefully. This servanthood is not forced labor, not a stealing of our will or an abduction of self in order to be yoked to a harsh taskmaster. Instead, this is a surrender of self to that which will make us whole. This is the willing act of commitment to enter into this relationship to both offer service and discover fulfillment, activation of giftedness, and a center from which we can love more because we know we are loved.

Another way to understand this invitation would be that we surrender to love in order to learn what it is to be a disciple. Taking a yoke means that we are willing to learn to grow.