

## Authentic Discipleship

**Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:60)**

Today’s readings teach us what Jesus expects of his disciples -- single-minded commitment to living the gospel faithfully. If that sounds easy to do, you’re not paying attention.

*A local newspaper reporter was interviewing a business woman. He asked her: “What’s your occupation?” “I’m a Christian.” she replied, “Yes, but what’s your job,” asked the reporter. The reply was the same; “I’m a Christian.” “You don’t understand,” pressed the reporter, “What do you do for a living?” “No, you don’t understand,” said the woman, “my full-time job is to be a Christian, I sell furniture to pay the bills.” That’s the kind of commitment Jesus asks of his disciples.*

Being an authentic Christian isn’t something you do when you feel like it or have the time; it’s something you do all the time. As the furniture storeowner understood quite well, it requires total dedication and focus, even when you’d rather be doing something else. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century St. Augustine explained the concept this way: *“Christ is not valued at all, unless he is valued above all.”* To put it another way, God is of no importance, unless God is of supreme importance.

In today’s gospel from **Luke** Jesus begins his fateful journey toward Jerusalem and the cross. He knows his mission to bring about the kingdom on earth can’t be accomplished in his lifetime, nor by himself alone. Therefore, he’ll need lots and lots of dedicated, hard working *kingdom builders*, aka disciples.

On the road to Jerusalem, after his request for hospitality is rejected by Samaritan villagers, Jesus encounters three potential disciples. Speaking with each of them frankly, purposely choosing for emphasis figures of speech with exaggerated language, he tells them and us the type of kingdom builders he's looking for. Serious people who understand the high cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price; informed people who know what they're getting into and want to plunge ahead anyway.

To the first potential disciple Jesus explains that following him will be demanding. Forget about a life of comfort or leisure, discipleship requires sacrifice. *"Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head."*

To the second, whose father has died, Jesus explains that discipleship involves ministry to the living, a challenging and all-encompassing activity, requiring immediate response which can't be postponed to a more convenient time: *"Let the dead bury their dead. But you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God."*

And to the third, once again mincing no words, Jesus proclaims that discipleship requires, First, a change of heart (theologians call it "conversion") and Second, a clean break from the past: *"No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the Kingdom of God."* Scripture, incidentally, doesn't tell us whether any of the three chose to become disciples.

The reading from **1Kings** demonstrates that embracing God's call wholeheartedly and at great sacrifice is part of Judaism's prophetic tradition. Elijah, guided by God, chooses Elisha to succeed him as prophet of Israel. Elijah literally throws his cloak over Elisha, as the latter is plowing a field, to symbolize the succession of prophetic authority.

Elisha, we're told, responds immediately in trust, pausing only to notify his parents. That Elisha, a prosperous landowner, was plowing with *twelve* yoke of oxen conveys how much material wealth he would have to give up to accept God's call. That he slaughtered the oxen and used the plow for fuel to prepare a feast for his tenants demonstrates symbolically the finality of his break with the past.

*Two people are discussing religion, one says to the other: "Sometimes I'd like to ask God why he allows poverty, famine and injustice when he could do something about it." "What's stopping you?" asks the second. And the first replies: "I'm afraid God might ask me the same question."*

God, you see, can't make a peaceful world unless you and I root out hatred from our hearts, prejudice from our minds and injustice from our society. The same principle applies to other common prayer requests. God heals the sick but not without the doctor's medicine, the surgeon's hands, the nurse's vigilance, and the encouragement of loved ones and friends. God helps the poor with the charity *we* give, cheers the lonely with the visits *we* make, comforts the bereaved with the words *we* speak, guides our children with the examples *we* set, and ennobles our lives with the acts of kindness *we* perform.

Authentic disciples aren't spectators on the sidelines; they're players in the arena. (They're the ones kicking a soccer ball on the field competing in the World Cup, for example, not the fans in the stands blowing those infernal horns making that annoying noise!) A simple way to define "ministry" is – *"the work of God by the people of God."* Discipleship in a nutshell is selflessly serving others, particularly the poor and disadvantaged, using the gifts, resources, and strength God gives us. We demonstrate our love of God when we love our neighbor. Ministry, as Vatican Council II reiterated in

1965, is the calling and responsibility of *every* member of the body of Christ, not just the ordained or those in religious life. Baptism, in effect, like Elijah throwing his cloak over Elisha, ordains all believers into ministry.

Being a disciple, at times, can certainly be as challenging as it was in the early days of the Church. Time and time again, as in today's gospel, Jesus reminds us that building God's kingdom, brick by brick, can ask a heavy price of builders, perhaps even martyrdom. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Protestant minister, who wrote a book, entitled "Cost of Discipleship," for example, and other Christians, like Saint Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, died for the faith in Nazi concentration camps, less than 70 years ago. And there are still parts of the world today, where Christians risk a great deal, including their lives, to practice the faith.

Clearly, however, you and I aren't expected to witness like martyrs or saints. All people can't witness in the same way, but all people can witness in some way, their own way. God doesn't ask us to do extraordinary things, he asks us to do *ordinary* things extraordinarily well. And he gives us the tools and, just as importantly, the grace to do just that.

Driving along a country road one day, I saw this notice on an outdoor church message board – "*Work for the Lord. The pay isn't much but the retirement plan is out of this world.*" You know, on second thought, taking everything into account, doing a cost benefit analysis, authentic discipleship really doesn't seem to be that hard after all.

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1Kings 19:16b, 19-21; Galatians 5:1, 13-18; Luke 9:51-62.

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time. June 27, 2010. (Cycle C)