

## The Way of Discipleship

Yesterday was the fiftieth anniversary of the Bloody Sunday, the civil rights march across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma Alabama that ignited new phase of the civil rights movement and led, eight days later, to the introduction by President Johnson of the Civil Rights Act. Looking back, we recognize the quiet courage, the deep commitment and the great faith of those who quietly, nonviolently crossed that bridge that day only to be pushed back by the violence of the powers that were. Yesterday, President Obama, our first African American president, stood on that bridge next to John Lewis, who as a young man helped lead that march honoring those who were part not only of that march, but of the whole nonviolent civil rights movement in the United States. In a masterful speech He said in part, “The Americans who crossed this bridge were not physically imposing. But they gave courage to millions. They held no elected office. But they led a nation. They marched as Americans who had endured hundreds of years of brutal violence, and countless daily indignities — but they didn’t seek special treatment, just the equal treatment promised to them almost a century before. What they did here will reverberate through the ages. Not because the change they won was preordained; not because their victory was complete; but because they proved that nonviolent change is possible; that love and hope can conquer hate.” He held them up with other Americans who have also stood for justice and freedom. Then he went on to ask , how do we repay the debt we owe those who have gone before us? And he issued a call to action to us to stand for justice and freedom in our time as well.

Yesterday, we had the memorial service at Chambers for Carl Sosna, a good man, an elder of the church, and a WWII vet who had fought a day after D-Day and in the Battle of the Bulge, who had helped liberate one of the German slave labor camps. I’ve had the honor to know many other WWII vets, and, sadly, to officiate at many of their funerals. I am moved by the honor and courage of these ordinary men who were able to do extraordinary things in a

time of crisis and war for the whole world. I have learned much from them, and their service moves me to act differently myself .

This Lent, we are talking about what it means to be Followers of the Way. Today, we are talking about the Way of Discipleship. It seems to me that there are two steps in following that way. The first is to watch and learn as a disciple, as someone who learns from and models their behavior on others. The second step is, having watched and learned, to act on our own, using the best of what we have learned, motivated by their example. We are disciples who are followers of the Way of Jesus. What does that mean for us?

For almost three years, the Twelve, Jesus' closest disciples, and a number of other followers as well, followed Jesus around Galilee. They listened as he taught about life in God's kingdom and told stories to help them understand what that kingdom was like. They watched as he showed them by his life what life in God's world was supposed to be like. They stood by as he healed many people in body and in spirit. They were there when he reached out to people who others would consider outcasts – lepers, tax collectors, children, women, Gentiles – and treated them as human beings. They learned from him day by day. As was said of the disciples of the rabbis of his time, they walked in his dust, following him so closely on the dusty paths and dirt roads that they got their own clothes dirt from the dust he kicked up.

We follow at a greater distance, learning from Jesus himself through the scriptures and from other followers of Jesus who travel before us on the road to discipleship. We have our time of watching and learning. We learn in our families as we grow up what the way of Jesus looks like, as our children put coins in their fish boxes for OGHS, as we pray together at the table, as we hear the stories of our faith at bedtime, as we treat others with love and kindness, as we would like to be treated ourselves. We learn from our friends what the way of

Jesus looks like, as we see them quietly live lives that are transformed by their relationship with Jesus Christ and their understanding of his way. Most of all, we learn in the church, an incubator of disciples. We come each Sunday to worship and learn from scripture and preaching about the way to which God calls us. We practice living in community with one another, supporting each other, encouraging and challenging each other in faith. We talk and plan together for the life to which God calls us.

Yet discipleship doesn't stop with our watching and our learning. If we simply learn and admire, we have not yet finished our apprenticeship. In this morning's scriptures, we heard of a change in Jesus' itinerary. Instead of wandering around Galilee proclaiming the good news, teaching and healing, Luke tells us that he turned his face toward Jerusalem. That marks a change in direction for his ministry, a choice that he made that would lead him in a different direction for the rest of his life, a choice that would lead him toward the center of power and a confrontation with those powers, a confrontation that would lead to his death on the cross.

A chapter later, in our second reading, we learn that that change in Jesus' direction marked a change in the lives of his disciples as well. For the past two years, they had been following him around Galilee, listening to him, watching him in action, learning from him. But in this morning's reading, the disciples take on a new role. No longer are they simply disciples, followers, learners. They are graduating to the next step. They have learned enough that instead of just shadowing Jesus, Jesus trusts them enough to go on their own. They are becoming apostles, those who are sent out to do the work of the one who taught them.

And so the disciples – now apostles – go. They follow the guidelines Jesus gives them about what to do and what to expect.

Expect to work hard (The harvest is plentiful and the workers are few.)

You need to work as a team. (He sent them in pairs.)

Expect some people to be against you and reject what you are doing.  
(I'm sending you as lambs in the midst of wolves.)

Accept whatever hospitality is offered. (Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide.)

And drastically underpack. No purse, no bag, no extra sandals. Just take what you already have with you, what you've been preparing for the road ahead. No flashlight, no bug repellent, no sleeping bag and air mattress, no cold weather clothes or rainy day clothes. Instead, take your courage, your faith and your humility, for you will be doing not your own work, but the work of Jesus, healing and teaching, embodying the kingdom of God.

Jesus sent his disciples out to do just what he did. He sent them out to heal the sick and tell people just how near God's kingdom is. And he sent them just as he went himself, with empty hands and an empty backpack, ready to receive whatever was offered, whether that's the hospitality of a rich person or a poor person, whether it was a peaceable welcome or rejection. If it was rejection, he didn't stay and take the abuse. He just moved on. He was always on the way.

And so Jesus sends us out today. If we are truly to be disciples of Jesus, we cannot simply listen and learn and admire. If we are to follow in his footsteps and honor him, then we must act as he acted. There is no staying safely behind church walls for us.

These instructions on what to pack and what to leave at home clue us into the purpose of this mission trip. We are to be representatives of Jesus, announcing the advent of the kingdom of God. Given that purpose, you are to leave all the unnecessary stuff at home, but be sure to take along your faith and your courage. I would add to pack your humility. This trip isn't about your pride or your ego. It's about doing the work of the kingdom.

We cling so hard to the things we have. I can't remember the last trip I took when I didn't overpack. The advent of the Kindle is the only thing that saves me from lugging ten books with me on every trip I take. But it's not only the physical things we cling to, it's the relationships, the family, the work that we can't leave behind. A little further down the road, Jesus invites some folks to follow him and one by one they say, "I'd love to, just not right now." What holds you back from following Jesus?

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