

Proper 8  
Year C  
6-30-13

*ARE WE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS?*  
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I need to be honest with you. The gospel lesson for today makes me feel uncomfortable. This passage portrays a Jesus that goes against what I typically think God expects from us as people of faith.

This is not one of those heart-warming stories, but rather an in your face kind of passage. The Gospel reading today gives us a view of Jesus who is not gentle, meek and mild. Rather, we see a fierce, unwavering Jesus who asks more from us than we may be willing to give. This Jesus spells out in no uncertain terms some of the difficulties and hardships of being real disciples in the world.

For Luke, being a disciple is not just a matter of having warm and fuzzy feelings about Jesus or doing charitable things when we have some extra time. Instead, discipleship is a hard, demanding, gritty way of life that involves giving up things most of us hold dear. Things like family, safety, comfort, security, control and getting our own way.

Jesus confronts us with the truth that we are not as committed to being disciples as we would like to believe. Our desires for comfort, wealth, power, control and even family, get in the way of our promise to follow. These are hard words to hear and accept.

This is true for us as it was for the original followers of Jesus. Let's look at how Jesus responds in four different situations to people who say they want to follow him.

The first involved two disciples from his inner circle – James and John. On their journey to Jerusalem, Jesus sent these two ahead to make arrangements for lodging in a Samaritan village. As we might expect, the disciples became angry when they were rejected by these villagers – so upset in fact, that they suggest it would be a good idea to call fire down from heaven and consume those unfriendly Samaritans. Rather than agree with them, Jesus rebukes these disciples for wanting to use their power and authority for violence and destruction in order to get revenge on those people who went against them.

**LESSON #1:** To be a follower of Jesus then – and now – means not holding grudges, seeking revenge or using our authority or power to hurt others. We have to put aside our egos and when we feel slighted we cannot pout or seek revenge.

Moving along from that village, Jesus met three more prospective disciples. But instead of greeting these well-intentioned folks with joy, appreciation, or encouragement, Jesus greets them with less than open arms. He talks to them in ways that feel almost antagonistic.

The first man who walked up and volunteered to follow Jesus received a somewhat chilly reception. Jesus does not say anything like "Good for you!" or "welcome aboard!" Instead, he responds rather sarcastically that following him means no more safety, no more security.

**LESSON #2:** Following Jesus then – and now – is about uncertainty, unpredictability, about giving up a lot of what makes us comfortable. Our desire to control our environment and have things go the way we hope and want is challenged because the word of God never settles into a predictable place and routine, it is always on the move. Things change everyday and we never really know what is coming next. We are called to trust that God will take care of us and lead us where we need to be, even if it is out of our comfort zone to a place where we would rather not go.

To the second potential recruit standing nearby Jesus said, "Follow me." This man was obviously interested and willing to follow Jesus, but he wasn't quite ready to go. He replies, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father and then I will follow you. It seems like a reasonable request, but Jesus says to him, "Let the dead bury their dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

This response by Jesus sounds even harsher than the previous two. Jesus tells the man that those who are not working now to bring about God's kingdom are already dead, at least spiritually.

**LESSON #3:** Following Jesus then – as now – is about reordering our priorities – about putting God and faith first, and everything else – especially our own agendas – after that. This one is a lot harder than Jesus' first demand.

If all this isn't tough enough, Jesus has to add one more zinger in there at the end about what it means to be a disciple.

Even after hearing all of the previous requirements of discipleship, the third man still decides to present himself to Jesus and says, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." This seems like a simple request. After all, this man was willing to do all those other things that were mandated, but Jesus turns a cold shoulder. In his most stinging response yet, Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Now, I have never plowed, but it's my understanding that back in the day when farmers used hand plows, they would choose a point in the distance and move toward it. Any looking around, over the shoulder or backward would lead to crooked furrows and a plowing disaster. I am not sure what affect a crooked row would have on growing vegetables but Jesus is very clear that anyone who commits to being a follower and then looks around for excuses or looks back to change their mind is not fit for the kingdom!

**LESSON #4:** Following Jesus then as now is about letting go of old attachments so we can bring all of our energy, resources and ourselves to do God's work. Following Jesus is hard. There is no playing it safe and no looking back. God invites us on a journey that is demanding, difficult, and unpredictable. It is God's agenda, not ours.

Our lives are so full of competing loyalties – to family, work, community and our church, that it may seem impossible to focus all of our time and energy on following Jesus.

In addition, I think there is an even deeper theological reason that many of us struggle with our calls to discipleship. It has to do with how we understand who Jesus is – or was – and how he fits into our lives today.

We all have preconceived notions of who Jesus is and who we want him to be. At some level we want to trust that Jesus will take care of us and keep us safe. Unfortunately, the road he trod and the way in which he leads all his followers is not comfortable. This path assumes no material security and does not revolve around our needs, desires and wants. Yes, we want a savior, but perhaps one that is more palatable to the kind of life we'd like to live.

And yet, if we let ourselves get back to the historical Jesus – he is anything but gentle, meek, and mild. He is not just a nice, inoffensive guy who wouldn't even step on a bug.

Jesus told it like it was. Day after day, up close and personal, he challenged the status quo. Day after day, he called people to a way of life that was radically different from "business as usual." He taught that some of our lives may be fine, but other people's lives are not – there is suffering and starvation, there is poverty and unnecessary death – and we need to do something about it!

Our Gospel begs us to decide. Did you notice that we don't really know what any of the would-be followers of Jesus in this passage actually did? Luke does not tell us. We see them approach Jesus, we hear them converse with Jesus, but that's all. The people in the story do not make a response either way because we are the ones who are supposed to respond. Luke wants us to finish the story.

So, how will it unfold for us as individuals and for St. Andrew's?

These are the questions we are left to answer. Are we willing to follow this Christ? Are we willing to trust where he leads us? Are we willing to be uncomfortable? Are we willing to let go of our personal agendas and desires? Are we willing to compromise and move out of our comfort zones? Are we interested in a new future together? And if we are, are we willing to do what it takes, with God's help, to get there?

The good news is that the original disciples never got it right all the time. They were not perfect followers. They faced personal struggles that we still encounter today. That gives me hope for my own discipleship. I will do my best and I will trust the Holy Spirit to work in all of us so that together we will be the follower's of Christ that God calls us to be.

AMEN.

