

March 5, 2017
Luke 10:25-42
First Sunday of Lent

Ry O. Siggelkow

“The Cost of Discipleship”

Good morning, today marks the first Sunday of Lent. In the Christian tradition Lent is a time of self-reflection, of confession and repentance, of prayer and fasting. It lasts forty days and charts the movement of Jesus toward his crucifixion on Good Friday. At Faith Mennonite, the Lenten season began this past Wednesday evening when a small group of us gathered together at the front of the sanctuary for a Taizé service. We sang hymns, received ashes on our foreheads, and in silence contemplated the mystery of God’s life-creating and life-sustaining power; we were reminded of our creatureliness, our finitude, our mortality, our total dependence on the mercy of God. “Remember, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return!” We were reminded that we are mortal creatures, not God or gods, our lives precarious, dependent on God.

As precarious creatures we are nonetheless freely given, even today, to *live* and to live abundantly. “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy,” Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10). What is this abundant life that is given through Christ and how do we receive it?

When an offer like this is made, an offer of new life, life that comes from heaven, it is only natural to ask the question, “What should I do to live into the fullness of that new life given in Christ?” Or, in the words of the lawyer from our passage today, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Given that it is a lawyer asking the question, Jesus replies, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” As if responding to a question on the bar exam, the lawyer provides the answer drawn from the Law of the Hebrew scriptures: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Then, Jesus says, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

This kind of question that begins with “What must I do?” is a common one throughout the Gospel of Luke. The question echoes the crowds that gather around John the Baptist in chapter 3 (3:10) and it is repeated by the rich young ruler in chapter 18 (18:18). Each of the questioners are trying to comprehend what it is that one must do to inherit new life. It is as if people are looking for a checklist: okay, so I must first do this, then that, and if I complete these tasks, then everything will be alright, I will achieve that “new life,” that life that comes from eternity.

Sometimes we can act this way in church too, right? Sometimes we think that if we go through these specific processes, hold these meetings, follow this vision statement, remain true to this constitution, if we make time for these potlucks, maintain these traditions, sing these songs, go to these protests, take part in these workshops or book studies, *then* we will truly be followers of Jesus. While we may not all live out of an anxiety about inheriting eternal life, we do want to create the right conditions for Christ. And I think many of us do look for ways to live our lives so that they accord more to what we take to be something of a glimpse of eternal life.

Perhaps sometimes we too are caught up in all the things that we must *do* to inherit eternal life. Certainly Jesus calls us to *act* and to *do*. The call of discipleship is certainly not to stand idly by; faith is always faith *in action*, that much is clear from the story of the Good Samaritan. But then why is it that Martha is scolded by Jesus at the end of the chapter for working on her many tasks. Presumably Martha was the one working in the kitchen, preparing the food and drink for Jesus, while Mary sat around. Why is it that Mary, the one who sits at the feet of Christ, rather than working and doing, favored in this passage?

When the lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus responds with, “*Do* this, and you will live” (10:28). He affirms the great commandments to love God and love neighbor. And after telling a story that seems to leave his questioner with more questions than answers, he says once again, “Go and *do* likewise” (10:37). So, it would seem that the question, “What must I do?” is a valid one. But what is the answer to this question? Of course, it is not something other than loving God and loving neighbor. But who, we might ask with the lawyer, “is my neighbor?” How does Jesus answer this?

Most of us have heard this story before. It’s the story of the Good Samaritan. A man is stripped and beaten by a group of robbers and left for dead on the side of the road. A priest and a Levite, two pious and good men of God, take a look at the man suffering and walk right by him. Then, a Samaritan is the one who is “moved by pity” and cares for the beaten man, cleans and bandages his wounds, and brings him to an inn for care. It’s important to remember that Samaritans were not regarded as “good” people by Judean and Galilean Jews. The historical roots of the conflict with the Samaritans run deep; Galilean Jews considered Samaritans hostile foreigners. So it is important that the one who helps the beaten man is a Samaritan. And it is important to Jesus’s story that the lawyer, in particular, who asks “Who is my neighbor?” hears this offensive truth. Jesus asks, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Notice how the lawyer responds: “The one who showed him mercy.” Notice how he doesn’t say, “the Samaritan,” even though that is clearly the important lesson to be drawn from the story. It’s as if he cannot even bring himself to say it, for it would force him to admit that it is precisely his *enemy* who exemplifies what it means to be a disciple.

In the previous chapter, Jesus sends his messengers into a village of Samaritans, but Luke tells us that the Samaritans did not “receive [Jesus], because his face was set toward Jerusalem” (9:53). In response to this James and John acting as the great protectors of Jesus inquire, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Jesus rebukes them for asking this question. It’s as if the disciples are saying, “look, Jesus, these Samaritans are not worth your time. They will not accept you as the Messiah and there really is no hope for them. I mean, we *knew* they would reject you. They are not willing to be disciples like *us*. Trust us, they will reject you just as they have rejected us. Clearly these folks do not have a chance of inheriting the eternal life that you offer. Not only that, they are dangerous and violent. They will probably kill you! So, why don’t you let us take care of this for you, let us bring fire down on them.” What are these guys, bodyguards of Jesus? Who do they think that they are?

I think keeping this exchange in mind from the previous chapter makes the Good Samaritan story all the more poignant. For now it is as if Jesus is saying, “you all are so sure of yourselves, you all are so eager to be my disciples and to think of yourselves as the ‘good guys,’ but you all don’t really know what discipleship entails. In fact, you may only learn what discipleship entails from the very people you think I

need protection from; you may only learn what discipleship entails from the very people upon whom you cast judgment.”

.....

Okay, so that's it. Now we've got it, right? In order to inherit life we must learn about mercy from the lives of our enemies, right? Is that what Jesus is saying? Or, is he saying that in order to inherit life we must not pass by the neighbor in need, but help him out? Okay, let's do both just in case. Okay, let's make a list and begin the work of checking these things off. Easy enough, right? Now we know the answer to the question, “What must I do?” Or, do we?

After James and John ask Jesus whether they should command fire to consume the Samaritans, Jesus and the disciples begin walking to the next village. An interesting discussion ensues while walking along the road. One of the disciples says, “Listen, Jesus, I will follow you *wherever* you go.” Here is an enthusiastic disciple, one who really takes *initiative*. I mean, he wasn't even called and he doesn't really know what he is doing, but he's jumping up and down ready to go. It's like he's saying, “Pick me! I'll do what you say and I will follow you wherever you will go!” But as one who is on the way to the cross, Jesus responds, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” It would seem that nobody can *call* themselves to discipleship; nobody can really want to follow someone like this by their own initiative. Then, Jesus calls out to a different disciple with the words, “Follow me.” But this chosen disciple says that he wants to first go bury his father. This would be in keeping with the Law, the fourth commandment, “honor your father and mother.” But here the Law seems to have come between the one called and Jesus. Jesus challenges this disciple by saying, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Nothing can come between Jesus and the one who is called. Finally, a third disciple speaks up, “Hey, Jesus, I'll follow you; but let me first say goodbye to those at my home.” This disciple is similar to the first in that he chooses himself, he thinks discipleship is a some kind of self-chosen program for his life, but unlike the first he thinks he can set his own conditions. He seems to make the mistake of the second disciple too by saying, “Let me first.”

Reflecting on this third disciple, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “He wants to follow, but he wants to set his own conditions for following.... First one does one thing, and then the other. Everything has its own rights and its own time. The disciple makes himself available, but retains the right to set his own conditions. It is obvious,” Bonhoeffer writes, “at that moment, discipleship stops being discipleship. It becomes a human program, which I can organize according to my own judgment and can justify rationally and ethically” (*Discipleship*, 61).

Discipleship as a human program is not discipleship. Discipleship is not about following some ideas or a set of doctrines; it is not even about making sure I do the right things in the right way; it is not about being especially spiritual or going to church every week; it is not even about following some basic principles and life-lessons based on the teaching of Jesus. Discipleship *does* involve learning from these lessons. It does involve loving God and loving your neighbor. It does involve learning from one's enemies what mercy looks like. But there is finally *no blueprint* for following after Christ, and that's because discipleship is about following after a *living* Lord, one who is present among us as the one who never ceases to baffle and offend us, one who calls us to follow him with our whole selves, one who requires us to remain vigilant and attentive, and not distracted. Discipleship is a response to a call; and it is the call of Jesus itself that creates the possibility of a new way of living. And this way of living carries

with it abundant life, even while it requires us to live unreservedly for God and for the neighbor with everything that we are.

If Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are finite, mortal creatures, who depend on God for life and mercy, then Lent reminds us that it is precisely as finite, mortal creatures that we are called out by Jesus to a new life that is given over to God, the neighbor in need, and to a living Lord that we cannot possess and control. That new life is one for which we cannot set up conditions, that new life is one we cannot program in advance, that new life is one for which we must be willing to follow Jesus everywhere even if that means to the side of the road, even if it costs us everything. And that new life is finally not an achievement of ours due to our eagerness or enthusiasm or capacity to do the good, but rather a work of God's free grace that creates the possibility for discipleship and new life today.