

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

June 22, 2008

What Have You Lost?

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 86:11-17; Matthew 10:16-39

Disciples can expect resistance, opposition, and persecution. That is a fair summary of what Jesus tells his disciples as he sends them on a mission to heal the sick and to proclaim the good news that “the kingdom of heaven has come near.” He warns his disciples that as they answer his calling, they can expect to be insulted, rejected, hated, flogged, dragged into court, and even betrayed by members of their own family. Now, that sounds like a trip we’d all want to take, don’t you think? And yet these disciples sign up. They go willingly.

I do want to talk about what it’s like to accept the call of Christ and embark upon the journey to which he invites us, but I also want us all to consider what an extraordinary call this is.

Jesus does not sugarcoat the message. He does not downplay the task and the challenges it will bring. He is honest, perhaps to a fault, about the difficulties which lie ahead.

At many times in the history of the church, and even today, Christians have experienced the kinds of oppression which Jesus foretells. At great risk to their life and liberty, they have persevered. They have stood firm. They have joyfully shared the good news of salvation despite threats all around. And, I would add, they have derived strength and inspiration from this very passage, knowing that their own suffering draws them closer to all followers of Christ. Indeed,

the very resistance they face is a sign, not of their failure, but of their faithfulness. They have chosen the right path, difficult though it may be.

In the 1960's theologians began to raise a question that we hear only rarely nowadays. They published best-selling titles such as *The Comfortable Pew* and *The Suburban Captivity of the Church*. They asked, "In the world in which we live, if we as Christians are not facing conflict and struggle, are we being the kinds of disciples Jesus wants us to be?"

This is the thing: there is a vision of the Christian faith which holds that a life with Christ is filled only with pleasant things. Religious practice relieves us from conflict. It helps us get along better with our family and friends, in our neighborhood and at our workplace.

To be sure, the Christian faith is about peace. That includes a peace within ourselves, but it is not the kind of peace envisioned by many of us.

Some years ago, a member of my church came to speak with me. He was quite agitated by something going on at his workplace. At the time, he was an engineer employed at a large chemical plant on the Houston Ship Channel. Refineries and chemical plants are dangerous places. The people who work in them know the risks and are trained to be on guard for their own safety and the safety of those around them.

My friend was upset because a few workers at his plant had been getting chemical burns on their arms and legs. These were non-English speakers, likely undocumented workers. They weren't working for him or directly for his company but for a sub-contractor. However, the plant provided the safety gear for them. My friend discovered that these workers had been issued inferior chemical protection suits. How had this happened? These suits normally cost more than \$1,000 apiece and function well in the situations for which they are designed. When he asked the boss why the suits were failing, the boss said he had gotten a good deal on them, saved the

company thousands of dollars by going outside the normal purchasing process. “But they don’t work,” my friend protested.

“They’re good enough for illegals,” the boss responded.

The member of my congregation was wrestling over what to do and with whom he should speak. He decided to go higher up the chain of command. The next time he came to talk with me, he was out of work. “You lost your job?” I asked in disbelief. “That’s terrible.”

“No, it’s not,” he said. “I am at peace. I did what my faith required, and there were consequences to that. My relationship to God is more important to me than any job ever could be.”

Just as a follow-up to that story, let me add that this man eventually left his work in the chemical industry. He is now a Presbyterian minister. I am sure that he gives some challenging sermons on the joys and the costs of faith.

Of course, that is what Jesus does when we listen to his teaching, all of his teaching, and don’t skip over the rough passages simply to rush ahead to the ones that don’t cause us to squirm quite so much.

It is hard to listen to such messages, because everyone around us is promising us something quite different. “If you use this hair product, you will have men falling over themselves for you.” “If you drive this car, the women will love you.” “If you move to this kind of house in this kind of neighborhood, the world will know that you are a success.” “If you take a job making X amount of money, you will be forever happy.” “If you come to this church, you will be blessed with material riches beyond your wildest dreams.”

I had to slip that last one in, because it is true that even some churches trade in the currency of comfort and prosperity. It’s called the gospel of success, but it bears little

resemblance to the gospel of Jesus Christ who says, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

At the heart of the gospel there is loss. Loss of the old self in order to gain the new. Loss of the former life, in order to experience life renewed. Loss of what we know now in order to welcome a whole new creation.

We are trained to anticipate loss, never to run from it. It is a part of life. Always it is a part of life, and the fact that we grieve simply demonstrates that we are alive. Particular kinds of loss, suffering even, are simply a part of faith.

But, Jesus offers reassurance and encouragement. “Have no fear,” he tells us. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

In the face of grief and inevitable loss, Jesus calls us to trust. The way he begins to build that trust is through a basic honesty about the challenges we may expect to face.

Over the past several months, I have become increasingly aware of how grief and loss shape our relationships with one another. With genuine kindness, some of you ask me from time to time how the transition to this place is going for me and my family. It’s not been easy. We left behind a church, and a community, and many friends whom we deeply love. In every way, there was a high cost to my decision to come here. And it was primarily my decision to accept the call of this body, because I was seeking new challenges and the opportunity to place my skills at the disposal of a congregation which needed what I have to offer. This is something that we ministers do from time to time as we feel the leading of the Spirit. In our tradition, it is

uncommon for a pastorate to last more than eight or ten years though in your own history you experienced the remarkable twenty-six-year ministry of the Reverend John David Burton.

Sometimes, a new minister follows a minister who was much beloved and did a very good job shepherding the congregation. At other times, the new minister follows an unpopular minister. That may not be precisely the right term, but I think you may know what I mean. People were happy to see these pastors move along.

That is not what happened here. Three years ago, you did not want Chris Chakoian to “move along”; you grieved at her leaving and still do, but it was not simply Chris. You also felt bereft by a quick succession of other departures: your associate pastors Beth Merrill, John Vest, and Corey Nelson. Add to that the loss of some beloved older members and the violent death of a child of the congregation, and it is easy to see how those losses added up and multiplied. People and things very precious to you were lost. Quite a few of you have spoken to me about how hard that has been.

Now we know from studies about grief that there are certain identifiable patterns which seem to accompany serious loss. Quite often, the first of these is denial. “It hasn’t happened. I’m not going to think about it. Nothing has really changed.” Denial doesn’t work for very long, does it? We cannot keep denying forever.

There is also anger. Anger at the loss. Anger over feeling vulnerable, not able to control events. Sometimes that anger gets directed in the most inappropriate ways. Someone or something which had nothing to do with the loss gets blamed for it.

There can be bargaining, too, trying to gain control of a situation that is out of control.

There can be depression and withdrawal, as well. The present situation is too hard to handle. And the future? That doesn’t even enter the picture.

In the end, with support, encouragement, and faith, we sometimes reach a point of acceptance. That is a much better place to be. The grief and the loss are still around. They never go away. But there are new challenges to face, and a new energy for facing them.

There is not one right way to grieve, and certainly no schedule for how it should happen. These stages, insofar as they have been identified, do not have a priority, one over the other. They are all part of a process of healing: a slow and often painful process.

I also think it is a process that we can be prepared for. And that is precisely what Jesus seems to be doing through the disturbing words he offers to his disciples. There will be loss. There will be hard times. Even when you are doing everything right. Perhaps because you are doing everything right, there will be plenty of challenges to you.

Besides a warning, however, Jesus also offers a reassurance. You do not need to fear. God has not forgotten you. God will never abandon you. God's love will always be there for you. For beyond the loss and the troubles and the heartache, there is always victory, new life, and hope. "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it." That is our challenge, and our joy.