

SPBX – September 4, 2016 – The Rev. Jamie S. Samilio -- Proper 18

If I did not know better, I would think that Liz had specifically chosen the dates for me to preach based on the Gospel text. The last time I was with you, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, was telling the disciples, *“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided...”*

And today, Jesus tells the crowds following Him, *“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”* I think the preaching schedule is rigged – this is tough stuff!

If I stopped there the text it would be difficult to figure out exactly what Jesus was trying to tell us. There were several words I had to look up to really make sure I understood them. Hate = Aversion, meaning in opposition to. This means that you must serve only God, and avert your attention from anyone competing for your attention, in order to finish the work God has given you to do. This means that even the most precious things and important people in your life will take a back seat to your call to building up the kingdom. What would I be willing to sacrifice everything for, family included? What are you willing to sacrifice in order to follow the way?

Jesus is trying to get us to re-frame the ordinary view of the world we have. Discipleship is not just one more club we join, hobby we work at or extra-curricular activity. Would-be followers should count the cost of discipleship, and realize that the cost will be high.

Following Jesus is serious business that requires self-sacrifice. Following Jesus means living a love-filled life with a promise of salvation. The kingdom of God is not about temporal things, but about eternal things. A kingdom where joy can even be found in the midst of sorrow, if our foundations are on solid ground. A kingdom on earth, that we live out each day in the ordinary ways that we experience relationships with people and all of God’s creation. When we follow Jesus, it is not a short-term commitment, it is a life-long endeavor.

There is a famous line Yoda gives from a *Star Wars* movie that sums up the Gospel message for me today, *“Will he finish what he starts?”* Will we finish what we start when we decide to follow Jesus? Do we understand what it means to our world-view if we take up the cross?

This is where the text talks about how planning for the future comes into play. The Gospel speaks of planning and strategy in building a tower and negotiating a peace, and both examples tell us that planning and forethought are paramount to the success of the undertaking. Taking up the cross is a full-time job, not just a casual activity we can choose to do now and then as it suits us. Discipleship takes a serious commitment to finish what we start. To do the work God has given us to do without exception, and without giving up.

Speaking of *Star Wars*, are there any space enthusiasts in the congregation? I for one am fascinated by space exploration, and the idea that we are a tiny part of the whole of the continually evolving creation of God. To me the scientists, engineers, astronauts and others who work on reaching for the

stars, planning a mission to the moon and now to Mars, are truly living into the wonder of all of God's creation.

Last year I visited the Kennedy space center. What struck me the most from the trip was the Apollo 13 exhibit and the phrase associated with the mission. *"Failure is not an option."* When we commit ourselves to discipleship in Christ, failure is not an option. If this is to be a true statement, then discipleship requires a serious commitment – forsaking all else. This is the message Jesus was trying to convey to the crowds that day. Being a member of the Body of Christ is one thing, and being a disciple, is another.

Ruthven J. Roy is a church consultant for strategic ministry, Hagerstown, Maryland. In a recent article on discipleship in *Ministry Magazine*, Ruthven wrote this about membership vs. discipleship:

"...church membership is a viable biblical concept, it was never meant to stand on its own as the predominant shaping and denning influence in a believer's life and experience. Herein lies the error: Membership is not discipleship. One can be the member of a church and not be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The dilemma of Christian denominations today is that they possess few members, but even fewer disciples."

I want to add that I believe there are many of Christ's disciples who are not members of a church. Being a rogue warrior for Christ is fine, however we are human, and I think that ultimately when we are not part of a church body, we eventually rationalize our beliefs to be more self-serving, than God serving.

Ruthven went on to say, *"Accepting the personal call of Christ makes one a member of His body, not just of an organizational structure. Christ's call to discipleship is not another evangelistic option for the church. Rather, it is the lifeblood and the lifestyle of the church. We simply cannot grow the kingdom, or its people, without giving heed to and embracing discipleship."*

Jesus calls us personally, individually, to follow Him. And following Jesus is the foundation of growing and sustaining the kingdom of God here on earth. When Jesus calls us to follow Him, it means more than, come and join my other followers and become a church. It literally means to become like Jesus – to love, and then teach others to love as well – and to commit to it completely.

Jesus calls us to be his disciples. Jesus wants us to understand that answering His call means giving up our worldview and taking on His view of the Kingdom. The Gospel message today made it clear that if we do follow Jesus -- if we take up the cross -- it will require sacrifice, it may make us uncomfortable, and it may go against what the rest of the world considers acceptable behavior.

The Gospel message was supported in the reading from Deuteronomy. Moses tells the people, *"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish;"*

Moses is telling us to do what God commands us to do, and we shall grow and prosper and warns us to turn away from other gods, and not to serve them. I don't know about you, but I have not seen many golden calf altars placed around town, so I pondered what gods I might be bowing down to and serving. How about the god of greed, the god of lust, the god of envy, anger, gluttony -- there are more. We serve our vices and desires, drugs, alcohol, shopping, and we often serve ourselves and our desires more than we serve God.

Jesus call us to follow Him and love on another, and warns that it will not be easy – and that we need to be in it with Him for the long run. It is a serious commitment, but worry not – remember that with God, all things are possible. As a parish we need to focus on the vision of the Kingdom. A Kingdom where we love God, love our neighbors, and serve the world every day.

I want to give you one final bit of wisdom to think about when you leave here today. It is from the book, "*That Parent's Tao Te Ching*" by William Martin. *"Do not ask your children to strive for extraordinary lives. Such striving may seem admirable, but it is a way of foolishness. Help them instead to find the wonder and the marvel of an ordinary life. Show them the joy of tasting tomatoes, apples and pears. Show them how to cry when pets and people die. Show them the infinite pleasure in the touch of a hand. And make the ordinary come alive for them. The Extraordinary will take care of itself."* Amen Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33