

June 21, 2020
Third Sunday after Pentecost
Judith Furlong, Preacher
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Benicia
Sermon preached via Facebook Live
Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 13
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

Good morning! It's so great to be doing this today – in spite of my constant conflict with my electronic helpers. I am thankful every day for the great achievement of our computer wizards who have made it possible for us to celebrate every week as we come together, in front of our monitors or tablets – to celebrate. In spite of nature's attempts to separate us, here we all are, coffee cups in hand, pajamas and sweats clean and pressed. So, good morning and God bless!

One day, back in the early seventies, I was visiting a friend in South Dakota. He was a young, middle-class, anti-establishment guy who had come out west to save the Indians. His heart was in the right place, for sure, because he was living in a log cabin, complete with wood stove, dirt floor and no electricity. On his wall, prominently displayed, was one of those great posters from that era. Surrounded by butterflies and daisies, it grandly proclaimed: "If you ain't busy bein' born, you're busy dyin'."

At the time, I thought it was pretty cool. I mean, how cynical, yet poetic could you get? How basic? How incredibly self-centered? The times they were a'changing, and those of us who had become embroiled in the

revolution of thought, culture and behavior of those years knew all the answers. For sure.

As the years passed, I thought of that poster many times, and, as my life became more complex, I realized that the old hippie poster had really left out most of my experiences in living - that obviously not very important time between the birthin' and the dyin'. The years of maturing and learning and, most importantly, the years of discipleship.

We have been hearing about discipleship for the past weeks – Jesus calling people, Jesus explaining and telling Peter that, yes, he is a Messiah who will die. Poor Peter!

Today's gospel is one of my absolute favorites. Yes, the concept of a jazzed up Jesus, talking about swords and conflict; setting relatives and friends against each other – no sweet-faced, blond, blue eyed Jesus with a holy half smile here. Nope. An impatient Jesus. Making demands. Giving fair warning. Challenging us to be prepared for some decisions that might just take us away from all that is comforting. Language about taking up a cross and following him!

For his first century listeners, the concept of getting anywhere near a cross must have been as frightening as it was impossible to accept. Everyone in that crowd was familiar with the Roman's efficient and incredibly cruel form of punishment. Take up a cross? Voluntarily? Who, me?

Jesus explains. To be a disciple means to proclaim everything I've been telling you. What you have heard in our small group – in the darkness of secrecy and security – you must now shout from the rooftops. You can't be afraid of physical death, only of death to the soul. You must acknowledge me in front of the world, and my Father will wrap the arms of safety around you. Be not afraid. Take up your cross and follow me. Give it up - give it all up - your life as you know it, your current value system, your belief or non belief in heaven, hell, or whatever, your ambition, your earthly goals, your hope that you will be rescued by some glorious hero - give them all up, take up your cross, and follow me.

But, while I'm at it, don't think I have come to bring peace. I've come to bring a sword.

Wow, not the milder or nicer Jesus – the rabbi of sound argument, care of the poor, healer of lepers. No, bringing a sword? For us living 2,000 years after those words, with our knowledge of world history and the effect Christianity had on the known world following Jesus' death, it's not much of a stretch to get what he was saying. His word, his work did shake up the world, did slice away at the old ways and old rules, did create conflict and tension, just about everywhere it went. But for those listeners, it must have been earth-shaking and scary. What a commission to put upon a group of people who had generations of oppression and persecution surrounding them.

AND, I'm not just bringing that sword, I'm going to set boys against their fathers and girls against their mothers – and your enemies might be those

that sit beside you at supper. A sword. A challenge. Discipleship in a way that had never been presented before. A discipleship that would require the greatest courage and commitment a human could offer. He is sending the twelve out to stand up and proclaim the message – a message that will create a world where these disciples might find themselves in danger and alone.

A commitment that still stands today. We are called to the same discipleship created by Jesus 2,000 years ago.

But, how can we be expected to do great and earth-shattering things? Because, here we sit, locked up at home, at a time in our history that is surrounded with conflict and crisis. Pandemics, racism, violence, struggles of unemployment and financial hardship. And, we sit – cut off from our families and neighbors, trying to make sense of it all. It's hard to find hope, or joy, or even a promise of a return to normalcy – whatever that is. It's hard to figure out how we can shout it from the rooftops – we're probably not allowed up there right now, anyway. I have felt, lately, that I am stuck – not moving forward or even backward. Just stuck and feeling mighty helpless, trying not to fall into a place with no energy or purpose; no way to be that disciple that Jesus called me to be. I had to take myself by the shoulders and give myself a good shake.

I know in my heart that, in spite of all this, there IS hope. There IS joy – to be found in a discipleship that now turns toward more simple things. Making a phone call, writing a letter, helping and supporting the community meal and food tables, giving our help to those who prepare our worship each week, sharing the knowledge of our church's history in times like this –

teaching us we are not alone in that kind of suffering or uncertainty, donning a mask and going out into the fresh air to walk with like-minded people who are crying for change. Not being afraid to proclaim it from the rooftops – even if those rooftops are just our downtown streets and computers or iPhones. It may not seem like it is much of a cross to drag around behind us, but it is the work of the Spirit; it is discipleship in a way that is real to us today, as we wait for our lives to become “right” again.

The more I think about it, I only need to have faith in him, in the gifts of grace he is always giving me. I don't need to parse out what is an adequate response to the call to discipleship because we are all in a situation unlike any we have experienced. Before the US Army even thought of it, Jesus was asking us to be all that we can be, in his name and for the good of all his people, no matter where, when or what it is. He is, by asking us to take up the cross, also acknowledging that we can do it. And he will walk, or sit in quarantine, right beside us all the way!

Just as those first century disciples had to live in the context of their own realities, we, also, must live in ours. God bless all of us as we go in peace, even while staying in place, to love and serve the Lord.