

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“Discipleship 101”

Luke 14:25-35

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus gave his first disciples what has since been called “The Great Commission” when he commanded them to “go and make disciples of all nations.” That is the same commission that has come to us today, his present day disciples. But I wonder if we really understand what a disciple is let alone how to make one for Christ. Perhaps today’s Gospel lesson can help us.

As our lesson begins we find a large crowd following Jesus. He was charismatic and people wanted to be around him if for no other reason than they thought some of what he had would rub off on them. It was in that context then that Jesus said some pretty hard stuff. “Those who come to me cannot be my disciples,” he said, “unless they love me more than they love father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and themselves as well.” And “those who do not carry their own cross and come after me cannot be my disciples.” I’m sure this isn’t what the crowd wanted to hear because, in large part, it’s still not something that we want to hear either.

Hans Kung, a well-known Roman Catholic theologian, once said, “Jesus expected his disciples to be totally different, new people ... people with a radically changed awareness, a fundamentally different attitude, a completely new orientation in thought and action. To Jesus, it’s not a question of simply changing one’s behavior nor is it an intellectually determined or strongly emotional religious experience. To Jesus, it’s a change of will, a change of awareness from the roots upwards, a new attitude, a different set of values.”

This change of will, of which Kung speaks, this change of awareness from the roots upwards, this new attitude, this different set of values, was to be based on a love that’s even greater than a love for family or even for self. Jesus didn’t call for his disciples to “hate” others, or even their own lives as much as to love him more. After all, love for family and love for self was natural but love for Him was to be supernatural. And it required that life itself – at least that old life which was lived apart from Him and which was based on self and the things of this world be put into a secondary position so that love for God and for His will and word and purpose might be put into a primary position. Only in that way would they be able to willingly shoulder the cross of Christ, which all disciples of Christ are called to bear, and thus follow Him into a life of ministry in His name even unto death.

As if to add emphasis to that very point, Jesus shares two short parables – one about a man who wanted to build a tower and another about a king who was about to go to war. The meaning of both is apparent. One needs to count the cost of such discipleship before one undertakes to be a disciple of Christ. And don’t be mistaken, there is a cost. Jesus himself said it best when he said, “None of you can be my disciple unless you give up everything you have.”

Now, that kind of cost, that call to complete self-sacrifice, has never been nor will it ever be the kind of call that sinful human beings want to hear. By nature, we don’t want to give up anything and, conversely, we want to get everything. We want our religion to be comfortable. And while

God wants to give us everything He knows that we cannot receive it unless we empty our hands first. We want what we want when we want it and in a way that is most comfortable and convenient. But that's not the way God operates.

Christ reminds us that we have already gotten something that should enable us to give up everything else. His call to total love and devotion is based on the fact that, in Him, we already have all that we truly need. For in Him we have the very means by which we have the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, not only for this life but also for the life to come. And as we believe and trust in Him as our personal Lord and Savior and as we receive that forgiveness, life and salvation by grace through faith, we are free to give up the old because the new has come. It's because that's true that Christ's disciples are not only called but are actually empowered to give up everything else that would hold them back from receiving the fullness of Christ's very life, death and resurrection. You see, we are free! Or, in the words of the old Janis Joplin tune, "freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

Giving up all that which would hold us back from truly being Christ's disciples is not so much a matter of the law as it is a matter of the Spirit. It's not so much the "actual" giving up of everything – as it is for those who follow a monastic way of life – as it is a "willingness" to give it up. For just as it's not "money" itself which is the root of all evil, as some like to say, it's the "love of money", so also it's not family and friends, work and leisure, time or possessions per se which hold Christians back from realizing the fullness of discipleship, it's the "love" of such things. The fact of the matter is that if we love and devote ourselves to the people and the things of this world above all else, we are not free to truly love Christ and devote ourselves to the mission of Christ in this world. And if we're unable to love and devote ourselves to that, we will never truly understand what it means to be a disciple of Christ nor will we truly receive the blessings of such discipleship.

It's like this. In the Berlin art gallery, there once hung an unfinished picture by a man named Menzel – a picture that was to depict Frederick the Great talking to his generals. Menzel had painted in all the generals but had left a blank space at the center of the picture where he was going to paint in King Frederick. Unfortunately, Menzel died before he could complete the picture. As it was for Menzel, so it is for many today. They carefully put in all the "generals" of their lives and leave the King for last, with the hope that someday, somehow, they'll have the time and the inclination to do so. But, sad to say, for many that time or inclination never comes and their lives are left without a king.

But it need not be so. God is offering us the opportunity once again through His Word to repent of our reluctance to really be the kind of disciples Christ has called us to be and, in that, the opportunity to rededicate ourselves to let Him make us those disciples through the power of the Holy Spirit active in Word and Sacrament. And as those disciples may we recommit ourselves to the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations as well.

May God grant this to us all for Jesus' sake. Amen.