

The Crisis of Discipleship

Matthew 10: 1, 16-20, 34-39

sermon digest

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Where do you go to church? Now that may seem like a strange question since almost everyone sitting in front of me this morning is here week after week after week. Considering the size of the crowd, you would think that I would know, wouldn't you?

Dr. Bill Tuck posed the question of his congregation several years ago and then went about the task of spelling out some of the available choices. He spoke in terms of "The Only Understanding of the Truth Church," which confidently proclaims a "my way or the highway" kind of gospel with the highway leading in the direction you wouldn't especially want to go. He went on to "The Traditional, Established, Routine, Well-Regulated, Standard, Status Quo Church of the Satisfied God" where you are guaranteed a good nap. The church that piqued my interest was "The Warm Feeling, Friendly, Everybody-Always-Happy, Noncontroversial, Easygoing, Crowd-Pleasing, Entertaining Church." I'm familiar with that church. I'll bet you are, too. For those of us turned off by the religious wars of church number one, it has great appeal. As a matter of fact, if you talk to any pastor willing to wrestle with the fundamental question of church identity, you will probably find that the Warm Feeling, Etc., Church qualifies as his or her number one temptation. "People have enough problems," we are told. Church should be the one place where they can just come and relax. Turn off the news, close the blinds on the world, speak in quiet, reassuring tones, breathe in, breathe out, and relax.

A large billboard on the side of I-40 in West Knoxville says it all. Advertising "The Comfortable Church," it pictures a large, attractive, comfortable-looking sofa and lists the church's address. Nothing more. Just a promise that if you come here, you can relax.

It is tempting. As someone who cares about people's pain, I can see the appeal. It is even gospel, for the Christ invites burdened humanity of every age, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" [Matt. 11:29]. It is, however, not the *whole* gospel, for this same Jesus speaks in no uncertain terms about conflict, rejection, taking up the cross and finding our lives by giving our lives. Somehow we have an inkling that he was not just speaking about the lives of those people back then, but our lives as well.

The way of discipleship passes through the crisis of decision. During the era of the twentieth century's two world wars, a group of theologians emerged who came to be classified as "theologians of crisis." Their theology reflected something of the spirit of unfolding world events, but, more than that, they centered on the necessity of personal decision. One's identity with Christ was not a matter of birthright or bland orthodoxy. Identity with Christ and the ongoing path of Christian discipleship confronted would be disciple with a crisis moment and a continuing series of crisis moments which had to be met with a decisive "Yes!" or "No!"

Jesus' announcing the Kingdom of God created just such a moment of crisis. Far from a mere adjusting of life here and there, Jesus' call to discipleship was on the order of an all or nothing. Far from rushing to assure prospective followers of a path of familiarity and comfort, Jesus painted a situation of continuing crisis. Unlike the slick salesperson who reduces costs and liabilities to fine print, Jesus enumerated the cost up front and in bold detail. Like an experienced builder preparing to construct a tower or a wise commander preparing to send troops into battle, he insisted that the cost be considered first. Identity with Jesus would not be a piece of cake, and he sought disciples who, having first counted the cost, would not turn back in the face of the difficulty that lay before them.

Commissioning the Twelve for mission, Jesus warned, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves;" and his warning includes no divine reassurance that the wolves will do no harm. The Twelve are given authority to cast out demons and to heal every disease, but not to fend off their own suffering and persecution. Jesus provides, David Garland observes, "no safe-conduct passes for their mission" [*Reading Matthew*, 114] or for ours.

The way of discipleship has its reward. Trials before councils, governors and kings, floggings, the loss of family and death do not make for an easy sell. The path of discipleship, Jesus assures would be followers, will not be easy. Yet see in the midst of his word of caution, a word of promise. His is not the promise held out for some of the biblical heroes of Israel's past. His promise is not that no hair on the disciple's head will be harmed, but merely that God numbers them. The promise of discipleship is the companionship of a God who knows us intimately and walks the path with us. We cannot begin either to count the hairs on our head or comprehend the reason for evil and suffering, but we put our lives into the hands of the God who walks beside us, and in giving our lives to this God, we find them.

The church to which we belong, then, makes a world of difference—not in terms of the denominational sign that may be out front but in terms of the God in whom we place our trust. Neither the God of a rigid, unbending orthodoxy nor the tired, standardized God of the status quo will do; nor do questions raised and struggles encountered along the path of Christian discipleship allow us to settle of a lesser God who merely caters to our

wants and whims. The baptized, William Willimon insists, do not gather on Sunday mornings “to be titillated, entertained, or even reassured.” If all people come for “is entertainment, let them fly to Vegas. If mere reassurance can soothe their pain, a score of chemicals and self-help books are cheaper than church” [*Peculiar Speech*, p. x]. If, however, they, or rather **we** come because we know ourselves to be summoned by the living God, worship takes on a whole new urgency for us. We listen as those for whom every act, every word, every song and prayer bears significance as we seek to find our way along the path of Christian discipleship. We thirst with every fiber of our being for light upon a way that goes not around but through the sense of loss and alienation that plagues our world. Guide our feet, O Lord, in the way everlasting. Amen.