

The Way of the Cross
Discipleship – Part IV
Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

This morning we are concluding our look at the third Foundational Pillar of the church – Discipleship.

1. Worship
2. Mission
- 3. Discipleship**
4. Community

So far we have talked about how discipleship is all about “following” Jesus. Jesus’ first command to his first disciples, who just happened to be fishermen, “Come follow me and I will make you fishers of people.” And by the accounts we have in Scripture, they just dropped what they were doing, left their families and friends, their jobs, and followed Him, without any idea where they were really going. As I said a couple of weeks ago, I’m pretty sure that Jesus didn’t tell them where they were going because if he did, they probably wouldn’t have followed. Jesus’ journey here on earth ends at the cross. Each of our journeys as disciples of Jesus must go through the cross.

The journey of discipleship, following Jesus, starts out rather easy and simple and it usually intensifies along the way. So, why don’t we tell potential followers of Jesus that? Probably for the same reason that Jesus didn’t tell them that.

Jesus starts out by telling them, “come, follow me.” Then he shows them some cool things. He starts out by turning water into wine at a wedding feast. And not just any wine, vintage wine, the best wine. Who wouldn’t want to follow someone who can do that? Then he throws in some miraculous healings, drives out some demons, even sends a herd of pigs into the lake. He feeds 5,000 and then 4,000 people with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. He even raises a couple people who were dead. I don’t know about you but I would drop just about everything that I am doing to see all that. And along the way Jesus does some teaching, some teaching that goes against the norms of the day. Teaching that goes against the culture and against our human nature. But I’m not really sure how well the early disciples were paying attention to Jesus’ teaching? It kind of reminds me of my own Kindergarten through 12th grade days. I think they were more interested in the fun things.

But as Jesus’ teaching intensifies over the course of the three years of his earthly ministry, many of his supposed disciples begin to fall away. In John 6 it says that when Jesus started to teach that his disciples were going to have to eat the same bread and drink the same cup that he did, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (John 6:66). In fact he said they were going to have to eat his body and drink his blood. “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54). That was kind of spooky and they just couldn’t wrap their minds around the meaning of it. Of course he meant it metaphorically but they couldn’t understand it. And even if they did it was probably more demanding than they could have handled at the time.

Peter, one of Jesus' first disciples who originally dropped everything to follow Jesus, witnessed all the miracles and healings, heard Jesus' teaching, is finally confronted by Jesus as the others are falling away, recorded in Luke's gospel:

¹⁸ *Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"*

¹⁹ *They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life."*

²⁰ *"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"*
Peter answered, "God's Messiah."

²¹ *Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone.* ²² *And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."*

²³ *Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. ²⁵ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? ²⁶ Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*
Luke 9:18-26 (NIV)

We think Peter is starting to get it but then we get to Jesus' last week here on earth and he tells Jesus that he will never deny him. But as Jesus is being taken to the cross, three times Peter denies him. It's only after Jesus' death on the cross, his resurrection, and just before his ascension back into heaven that Jesus restores Peter to his status as the representative disciples telling him to feed his lambs, tend his sheep, feed his sheep. Again Jesus is talking figuratively, he's not talking literally about his lambs and his sheep, he's talking about His people. And Jesus concludes with these words:

¹⁸ *Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.* ¹⁹ *Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"* John 21:18-19 (NIV)

This morning is Palm Sunday on the Christian calendar. The primary Scripture passage for this morning has Jesus entering Jerusalem at the beginning of the week leading up to the Jewish Passover.

Jesus is entering Jerusalem with all the fanfare of a great king entering, or a popular celebrity, or a mighty military figure but only He has any real idea of what's going to happen by the end of the week.

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

⁴ *This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:*

⁵ “Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

¹¹ The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

¹² Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ¹³ “It is written,” he said to them, “‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it ‘a den of robbers.’”

¹⁴ The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple courts, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant.

¹⁶ “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked him.

“Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read,

“‘From the lips of children and infants

you, Lord, have called forth your praise’?”

¹⁷ And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.

Matthew 21:1-17 (NIV)

Jesus was not just addressing those who were buying and selling in the temple courtyard. He is addressing all of us who put earthly things over the things of God. Of course money was back then, and still is today, that which most people put over God.

The story of Jesus entering Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week, which is in all four of the gospel accounts, is really one of the saddest stories in all of the Bible. We often celebrate Palm Sunday with children running around the sanctuary waving their palm branches shouting “hosanna, hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” Only Luke’s gospel captures the full impact of the event:

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

Luke 19:41-44 (NIV)

It is one of only a couple of times in the gospels where it is recorded that Jesus was found weeping in public, though I’m pretty sure he wept many times privately over the sinful condition of the world he found himself in.

So, what does all this mean for us as Jesus' disciples, Christ followers today? Well, last week Alex talked about discipleship being about formation, or better transformation. We are supposed to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, that which we were originally created to be like before the fall, more and more each and every day.

The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the early Christians/disciples of Jesus in Philippi:

⁵ *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*

⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*

⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Philippians 2:5-11 (NIV)

How much did Peter grow as a disciple of Jesus? Well, if you want to know all you need to do is read and study the two letters that he wrote after Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and the sending of His Holy Spirit. These words from

1 Peter 2:21-25 -

²¹ *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²² “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”*

²³ *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ “He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” ²⁵ For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

1 Peter 2:21-25 (NIV)

Neither the God we read about in the Old Testament or Jesus, “the image of the invisible God,” we read about in the gospels promise their followers a life here on earth free of sufferings, trials, tribulations, and pain. Why God allows certain things to happen here on earth? I don't have the answer.

-Like the men, women and especially the young children killed in Syria this past week through the use of chemical weapons. But lots of men, women and young children have been being killed in Syria over the past several years. Is it really that much worse when young children are killed with chemical weapons as opposed to traditional weapons? Perhaps the world needed a wake-up call!

- Or the Mennonite peace worker, M.J. Sharpe, who Alex talked about last week who was murdered and buried in the Congo.

-Or the 1,000 mostly young men who are being killed in Chicago by gun violence each year, and especially the innocent victims who are being caught in the cross hairs.

-Or young children dying from cancer or leukemia or many other diseases.

-Or a young mother and father killed in a car accident hit head on by a drunk driver.

All of our journeys here on earth have to go through the cross. “Take up your crosses daily and follow me.” We don’t know what our crosses are going to be. Yours are going to be different than mine. Jesus doesn’t promise that our lives will be free of crosses, in fact he says the exact opposite. What he does promise is that if we put our faith in Him, He will walk with us.

²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)

Jesus also said:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, if you truly are my disciples you will do what I have commanded you, then I will be with you, always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20

Or God himself: “I will never leave you nor forsake you!”

One of the other Psalms for this, the 1st day of the week of Jesus’ Passion, other than those verses from Psalm 118 which were read for our Call to Worship, is Psalm 31:9-16 (NIV) –

*Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and body with grief.*

¹⁰ *My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak.*

¹¹ *Because of all my enemies, I am the utter contempt of my neighbors
and an object of dread to my closest friends— those who see me on the street flee from me.*

¹² *I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery.*

¹³ *For I hear many whispering, “Terror on every side!”*

They conspire against me and plot to take my life.

¹⁴ *But I trust in you, LORD; I say, “You are my God.”*

¹⁵ *My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies,
from those who pursue me.*

¹⁶ *Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.*

One of the books I am reading for my devotional time lately is one I have read through several times before, The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas Kempis. It was written way back in the 1400’s but it is believed by many to be the most popular book on Christianity throughout the centuries apart from the Bible itself. It is a rather demanding and challenging book that works good for a devotional because it is best to be read and digested in small chunks. The focus is what should a life of following Jesus, of imitating Christ – look like. Mostly it looks like a life of humility, a life of sacrifice, of giving up ourselves, of taking up our crosses.

This is from my reading for today:

“If it is Your will that I be in darkness, be blessed – and if it is Your will that I be in light – be blessed again.

If You grant me comfort, be blessed – and if you wish me afflicted, be equally blessed.

“My child, if you desire to walk with Me, this should be your condition. You must be ready to suffer as to rejoice.

And when you are destitute and poor, you must be as cheerful as you are when you are full and rich.”

Thomas Kempis, The Imitation of Christ

That is much easier to read and even to pray for than it is to live out.

Very few of us get to that point during our journeys of discipleship here on earth. The apostle Paul finally got there:

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Philippians 4:11:13 (NIV)

The same Paul who could say by the end, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).