

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

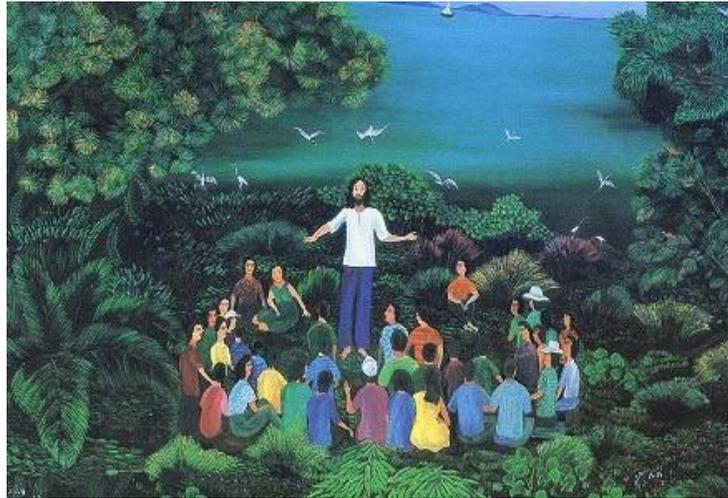
February 17, 2019

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

Jeremiah 17: 5-10

Luke 6; 17-26

**Discipleship According to Jesus,
Part II**



Marina Silva, Solentiname 1981

I especially like this bulletin cover depicting a kind of contemporary image of Jesus speaking to his disciples. Some of you have already playfully accused me of pulling a vision from the 1960's causing you to wonder if the standing Jesus figure here is wearing bell-bottom jeans and the seated ones, barefoot with flowered face-paint.

Those were the days, but the aspect of this picture that resonates with me is the informal and somewhat intimate authenticity implied by the gathering. Authenticity and genuine conversation were the proclaimed values back in the day, standing in stark contrast to the world of materialism and institutional authority and perceived superficiality. It all worked for me back then, and I would have quickly joined a group like the one depicted on our cover...and did...until my father called and said if he ever saw me on television in one of these protest marches or sit-ins (as we called them), he would cut off my tuition.

In any case, this speaker is clearly inviting a familiarity with this circle of people, and they, in turn, appear to trust him and want to hear what he has to say.

I like the notion of Discipleship, Part II, (today's sermon title) for the same reason. Those of you who have commented on this title have added, "I think I missed Part I." You did not. In fact, many of you know them by heart and would refer to them as "the Beatitudes" as they figure prominently in the Gospel of Matthew. All the Beatitudes...blessed are the poor, blessed are the mourners, blessed are the persecuted and disinherited...followed by "for they will receive..." thus and such in the end. The "blessed are those who struggle for they will be rewarded" template suggests a kind of reward or compensation ultimately for their difficulty in the here and now thrust upon them because they follow Jesus. In other words, Part I Discipleship is the Beatitudes and appears to be addressed to those who follow Jesus and suffer consequences for it.

Part II Discipleship is directed to a different population. In Luke's gospel, he gives a quick and somewhat abbreviated run through on the "blesseds" and then gets down to business. While in Matthew's gospel the delivery of the "blesseds" occurs atop the mountain where the disciples go up to him and gather round; in Luke, Jesus comes down the mountain and stands on a level

place. His stance on this level place puts him in an equal, look them in the eye kind of place with the others and comes at us like a kind of statement about the seriousness and urgency about what he's about to say. Yes, blessed are these things and situations, but listen to THIS now because this is where discipleship gets messy and costly. Part II.

“Back in the day” I fell in love with a guy like the one on the cover of this bulletin. I never met him personally, but had been gathered in a group like this while he, with this amazingly shiny long hair and, yes, bell-bottom jeans, was talking about peace and equality of people and how effective we could all be if we just worked together on things, and what a difference we were making in the culture by our refusal to buy into corporate and institutional values. And then he “came down to level ground” by standing in the center of the circle and saying, but woe are we (effectively) if we settle and get comfortable with this just because we could be creating another level of superficiality. I recall being a little embarrassed by my Papagallo cradled feet (I had several pairs...violet with green bows, blue with yellow, and so on and was not sure about giving them up for the proposed commune lifestyle). Like I say, I never met Francis personally. I went back to dating Johnny at Washington and Lee and we, although going separate ways after graduation, both ultimately became therapists. But that's another story.

Jesus says from his level ground place, “It's not just all about “blesseds”...if you experience this, then you get that...” In fact, discipleship can not only be demanding but miserable and, often, apparently, impossible.

Part II Discipleship is about the “woes.” Where the “blesseds” are addressed to those who suffer in this world for the sake of righteousness and who can therefore look to crowns of righteousness in heaven, the woes belong to the ones who have the good life here on earth and are unwilling or unable to let go of it in order to pursue discipleship sincerely and truly and completely in order to follow Jesus.

The Greek word for “woe” is used here by Jesus and carries a twofold meaning: 1) the idea of the grief that he feels for his audience...“alas.” And 2) the notion of total loss and suffering that he believes is essentially inevitable for these people. Having primarily “the spirit of the world” as their comfort, they are on the way to complete destruction. Jesus knows this and tries to warn them. “Here's the deal,” he says. Standing on that level ground he says, “Look, here's how it really is.” He is not concerned with whether they like what they hear or not...or whether they feel good about it. Unlike what's happening in the “blesseds,” he's not attempting to console or encourage them to keep going. He simply wants them to know the cold, hard truth about what they are facing and what they may have to give up in order to live out God's call. One cannot be taken seriously tromping around in a peace and scarcity march while wearing Weejuns! (lol)

What Jesus is doing here is radically shifting perspective about comfort. He is, essentially, consoling those people who are suffering because of being his disciples, those following him offering words of blessing about the “reward” of such living and how good things will be for them in the future. And he is telling those who currently enjoy comfort (via material riches and good reputations, etc.) that they are potentially in big trouble. Not because they are wealthy, rich, content, and well-respected, but because they have placed their confidence in those THINGS to be happy. Their present day “wealth” is where their hearts are focused...these things are their

treasure. Again, there is nothing inherently wrong about having things or about being happy. The difference lies in attitude...attitude about where we invest ourselves. Jesus is warning against finding ultimate satisfaction in present pleasures.

Part I seems dedicated to those who already belong to the Kingdom of God in terms of their dependence, while the Part II crowd do not belong because of their investment in worldliness.

Jesus points out the fallacy and danger of placing one's happiness and confidence and emphasis on earthly and material treasure. In 1975 six armed gunmen broke into the deposit boxes in a London bank and stole valuables worth more than \$7 million. One woman, whose stolen jewelry was appraised at \$500,000, reportedly cried, "Everything I had was in there. My whole life was in that box."

Focus on such treasure also opens us up to suffering and risky decisions that may place us and others in harm's way. One author noted that people have rushed into burning houses or resisted armed robbers in order to hold on to their stuff. You and I are inclined to say, "Well I know better than that. I'd never do or say any of those things. I'm not that stupid." But Jesus would retort that not heeding the "woes" *is* that stupid. Seeking life and happiness, placing dependence on material things and pleasure in the things of the earth is equally irresponsible and puts us in peril. Specifically, being satisfied NOW with wealth, popularity, and fullness means that we have received all we will ever get. It can cause us to set aside what is important for what is pleasurable.

A man and his friend are playing golf one day at their local golf course. One of the guys is about to chip onto the green when he sees a long funeral procession on the road next to the golf course. He stops in mid-swing, takes off his golf cap, closes his eyes, and bows his head down in prayer.

His friend says, "Wow, that is the most thoughtful and touching thing I have ever seen. You truly are a kind man."

The man then replies, "Yeah, well we were married for 35 years."

Again, we all know what is important. We are here in church, are good people, follow the rules and try to follow Jesus consistently. We also know that, like someone told me, going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car. But we are not unlike the rich young ruler who knows and does those things as well but still feels something is missing in his life, and so asks Jesus, "What more can I do?" You know the story. Jesus tells him that he has lots of stuff, and he has to be willing to let go of it if it's required of him, or if it is getting in the way of his discipleship. Discipleship requires sacrifice...sometimes incredible sacrifice, and the letting go of things we value and dreams we have.

Jesus knows how hard this is. It's why he approaches the subject with such intensity, with such compassion for us: "Alas, OMG, I feel so badly for you...for you who have it all."

A couple of nights ago I was having this discussion with my son and a friend of his...talking about the difficulty of following Jesus to the point of being able to give up so much that one's life is changed forever. "Like Mary who had to change her entire future because of God's call to her to give birth to Jesus," which then led to conversation about how do we know God only had one son. Might there not be others. I said, sarcastically, "Yeah, it was tough when that angel came to me and I had to agree to have you." Without missing a beat, Andrew asked, "Who do I look more like...God or you?" Sacrifice.

Interestingly enough, it's a good question. We should look more like God, all of us, than the things of this world. Woe unto to us if we do not. Discipleship Part II says we must be willing to change how we look if we are to follow Jesus. We must be willing to sacrifice anything and everything if necessary.

Bringing the definition of "stuff" to the 21st century and making it personal, Peter Gomes, former Harvard Chapel preacher, gets my attention on this when he reframes the translation of Jesus' words in the text, "sell all your possessions and give to the poor" in this way:

"...give away your talent, your time, your brains, your looks, your board scores, your tenure, your partnership, your pension plan, your children, your spouse, your dreams, your ambitions. Give up all that and follow me."

This makes it really clear that Discipleship Part II is not about money, etc. but about us. Truth be told, the price for ultimate peace and perfection is too high for any of us. And we, like the rich young ruler, would walk away sad and with heavy hearts. But the willingness to place our trust and our lives in God's will and purpose for us is what is required. We do better at it sometimes than at others.

If any of us here this morning feel like something is lacking in life, consider what it is that you are holding onto so tightly that its possession, its focus, gets in the way of your relationship with God. Again, not that having or loving is wrong, only that the commitment keeps you from honoring that which is truly worthy and substantial and life-giving. Not that we are asked to let go of our dreams or our children, but that we consciously place and trust their existence to God's care more than our own.

Gomes reminds us that, "The one who is rich toward God is the one who recognizes here and now that treasure is not in what one has, or even in what one leaves or gives away, or even in what one does. Those are not riches. Treasure is in who one is, and ultimately that treasure is defined in terms of the relationship we have with God. Treasure is knowing that one belongs not to self, or to work, or to vocation, or ambition, but that one belongs to God."