

6.25.2023 Time after Pentecost, 4

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 69:7-10, 16-18; Romans 5:1-11; Matthew 10:24-39

“Be like the teacher – follow him”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

How often do you think about your baptism? I don't remember my own baptism because I was baptized as an infant, but I have come to give thanks for my baptism daily because it is how I know Jesus Christ and his grace. Having been buried with Christ by baptism into death, daily I am able to walk in newness of life by the power of Christ's resurrection. The Christian journey is the journey of living into your baptism throughout your lifetime. Over and over, we die to our old selves, our sins, our neglect, our uncharitable, and even at times, evil ways. Baptism is the power of Christ making us into a new creation over and over during our lives.

In the reading from Romans, Paul is speaking about the very core of the Christian life, of living into our baptisms with new life each day. In order to help us think of baptism often, Martin Luther encourages us to think of baptism the “daily garment” we wear every day. Luther wrote,

Therefore let all Christians regard their baptism as the daily garment that they are to wear all the time. Every day they should be found in faith and with its fruits, suppressing the old “self” and growing into the new. If we want to be Christians, we must practice the work that makes us Christians. (*Large Catechism*)

For Paul and for Luther, Holy Baptism is not simply a ceremonial event; rather, baptism is the start of our ongoing regeneration, always recreating the old self into the new creation God is working in us. The garment that Luther refers to is, of course, Christ's garment of righteousness which he gives to us, taking our tattered sinful garment upon himself.

Today's gospel is very difficult. Jesus speaks in the prophetic tradition of someone like Jeremiah, who said that God's word was like a fire burning within him, that he had to speak. Like Jeremiah, Jesus openly says we must take up the cross and follow him. We can follow him only if we rely upon his grace.

Now I will be the first to admit that speaking and acting for Christ is not always easy, nor is it always very popular. Most of us have heard or even said that the best way to get through life is to avoid speaking about religion and politics. And yet we can align ourselves almost daily with certain political parties and their views. We may spend too much time following or watching news platforms that support our political views, yet how much time each day do we spend speaking and

acting for Christ?

Jesus does not sugarcoat his words in today's gospel, rather he tells us clearly that following him will make us unpopular with those closest to us. Jesus says, "*I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother...one's foes will be members of one's own household.*" I have seen this time and time again in my ministry, people don't like it when others follow Jesus rather than family, friends, or even the household of one's nation.

Three times in today's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid. He says this because he knows that asking us to take up the cross and follow him will set us against our world, family, friends, and even at times, our country. When Jesus says, "*Follow me,*" he asks us to love God and our neighbor, and to pray for our enemies and persecutors. This will bring discord with those close to us. They might tell us, "Well, you might love them, but I cannot accept them, and I wouldn't walk across the street to help them." Loving one's neighbor sounds like a noble thing until we actually try to love someone that the world tells us is a sinner, an outsider, a stranger, and the Other. Again, Jesus is very clear with his disciples, telling them,

*What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*

Like Matthew 25, we might ask, "When have we denied you, Lord? When have we not acknowledged you?" Like one separating sheep from goats, Jesus will reply, "When I have been before you in the weak, the vulnerable and the outcast, and you did not acknowledge me."

Jesus' words today are tough words. What Jesus whispers in your heart, he is asking you to do in the light, boldly proclaiming him in word and deed. Jesus' words, "*Be not be afraid,*" are meant to lead, encourage, strengthen us into Christian service for others.

Yet the difficulty of Jesus' words haunt us. If we deny him with our silence, inaction or neglect, he says he will deny us before the Father in heaven. Hard words from a Savior that we have often over-sentimentalized.

All of us are probably familiar with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and theologian in Germany during the tumult of the 1930s and early 1940s. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned and killed in a concentration camp because he dared to speak and do what he heard Christ saying to him. He dared to speak up for the Jews when very few others had such courage. In his work titled, *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer wrote in 1937, "An expulsion of the Jews from the west must necessarily bring with it

the expulsion of Christ. For Jesus Christ was a Jew.” In writing this, Bonhoeffer identified those who were being maltreated, expelled, and killed with Jesus Christ himself.

Writing in January 1943, Bonhoeffer looked back and reflected on ten years of Nazi power and terror, writing,

We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. (*Letters and Papers*)

Like Bonhoeffer, we too must be able to see the events of our own times “from below” – from the perspective of those who suffer. To be a Christian is to become like the teacher, following him.

Who are the outcast, suspect, maltreated, powerless, oppressed, and reviled today? Who because of the color of their skin, their gender, identity or nationality, their social rank as homeless or poor, are treated as outcast today?

I am very aware this morning of the plaque on the wall behind the pulpit that reads, “*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*” Sometimes I wonder if we really wish to see him. I remember on one occasion after preaching, one of my seminary professors, Dr. Bob Bertram, said to me, “If you preach like that you’re going to get into trouble – a good kind of trouble.” If we wish to see Jesus, then we must stay close to him. He will meet you at every turn in your life with his cross. He will lead you to where he serves in this world: to the outcast, suspect, maltreated, powerless, oppressed, and reviled. He will lead you to others so that you can say, “*Do not be afraid.*” He will lead you so that you might offer your life to those who suffer.

Jesus does not sugarcoat his call to follow him. We are to become like the teacher. It takes a lifetime of living into our baptism, of following him and sharing his life with others. Listen to his voice so that so that his voice might speak through you.

Who is it that you are afraid of? Who is it that you have difficulty praying for? Who might you lift and help because of the love of Jesus that lives in you?

Live into your baptism each day. Give thanks that Christ has given you his garment of righteousness so that you might offer his life to others.

Become like the teacher – follow him. Boldly proclaim his love for all people. Amen.