

***“Why Would We Follow?”***

Last week, my sermon title was *“The Joy(?) Of Discipleship.”* Reflecting on the prophet Jeremiah, I questioned why he would follow without any guarantees. In essence, as we did last Sunday, so again today we reflect on what it means to answer the call to follow Jesus. Today’s title could be, *“Why Would We Follow? (The Joy? of Discipleship Redux).”*

John Jewel writes about a colleague who served a very wealthy congregation. He told Dr. Jewel that parishioners had invited him to go to Nassau and spend a week on their yacht in a harbor on Paradise Island. They just gave him the keys. *“That must be hard to take,”* John quipped. *“Well,”* came the reply, *“Someone has to minister to the souls of the wealthy and you can't do that if you don't accept their invitations!”* Dr. Jewel reflected, *“Not exactly, ‘Take up the cross and follow me!’ would you say?”* And yet that is a matter of perspective isn't it?

A young man and woman in Mexico saw their brand new 12 x 14 foot concrete block home. It had a dirt floor and a corrugated steel roof and a tiny patch of ground for a yard with a water spout behind the house. They were about to move in with their infant daughter and they were filled with such amazing gladness. It was a one-hundred-sixty-eight square foot house with a dirt floor and the woman wept with joy because it was light years from the abandoned car they had been calling home.

The difference between that little hut and what I had always considered my meager middle class home with its amenities in Macedonia is far less than the difference between my home and the half million dollar yacht where Dr. Jewel’s friend was about to spend a week! So — the happiest guy in the world has to be the owner of that yacht in the harbor on Paradise Island right? I mean when you look at a family of three in a 168 square foot hut and a couple on a 2,400 square foot yacht, you have to think the couple who owns the yacht feels like they are in heaven. Right? Wrong!

The rest of the story (as Paul Harvey used to say) is this: The owner of the yacht is miserable. That's right — he's miserable. He was fine, you understand, until his neighbor at the harbor pulled in with his new  $\frac{3}{4}$  million dollar yacht! It is fifteen feet longer and has 700 more square feet of living space than his does. Kind of gets you right here -- doesn't it? [You can beat your breast!]

To jolt your perspective just one more time. Can you think of anyone who might consider the couple in Mexico with their little hut to be quite fortunate? Does the name Jesus come to mind? There is a line in the eighth chapter of Matthew where Jesus tells a prospective follower, ***"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."*** [vs. 20] Amazingly, Jesus said this to someone who wanted to become one of his followers. That prospective follower was warned — a follower of Christ did not even have a claim for a place to lay their head at night after a long day's work. This almost sounds like those who make the commitment to follow Jesus will be homeless!

Perspective here makes all the difference in the world. Between homelessness and a  $\frac{3}{4}$  million dollar yacht the definition of who is well off and who is not changes radically. Perspective is everything. A mid-level manager who faces "downsizing" and the loss of a \$80,000 dollar a year job might have a hard time sympathizing with a star athlete who is holding out for an extra half million on his 4 million dollar a year contract.

Before he became part of what was known as the Celtics' "Boston Three Party," Kevin Garnett was holding out for \$130 million salary from the Minnesota Timberwolves (they had offered a "meager" \$103 million); he finally "settled" for \$ 120 million. Twenty-five years ago, all the media were ababble over comedian Tim Allen's salary being larger than Jerry Seinfeld's — \$1.25 million per episode to Jerry's paltry \$ 1 million.

We begin to wonder about the values we, as a society, place on people and what they do. Hardly anyone yells about a star athlete pulling in

millions (until his batting average slumps or his pass completion percentage plummets); but many will yell bloody murder if teachers' salaries are to be raised, or police officers, or fire fighters. I know, we have to pay taxes for those salaries; if the athletes want to sock it to the bloodsucking owners, more power to them! But we also witness the disparity between the CEO of a company being awarded compensation 20, 30, even 40 times what the workers in that company are paid.

Our Gospel today is an example of how perspective makes all the difference in the world. Literally!

Jesus has appointed twelve of his followers to take his mission and his message to God's people Israel (these are the twelve who were named a few weeks ago). What does it mean to follow Christ? Are there perks? What are the benefits?

Some people have taught (and are teaching!) that people who believe in and follow Jesus can expect to be healthy, wealthy, and happy. "If you believe strongly enough you can have that yacht! You can bypass sickness and disease." I can recall reading a newspaper ad on the "church page" that read in part, "*Come and receive your miracle!*" These promises are deep in what some have called the "prosperity gospel."

So what does it mean to have a full, meaningful life? Didn't Jesus promise hope, joy, love and peace to those who would follow him? There is a whole industry for Christian "self help" books and products. Perhaps you've seen those ads that promise success in almost everything if you will follow Jesus — and buy the books, tapes and videos.

Don't get me wrong here. I am very interested in health and happiness. I want to feel like I can take my trials and troubles to God. I pray for my wife and children, when they are ill and when they are healthy. I've been known to turn to God when there is more month left at the end of my check than there is check left at the end of the month.

I don't want to represent Christianity as a "hair shirt" or an invitation to gloom and doom. On the other hand, I am savvy enough to know that

John F. Kennedy's, *"Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country,"* cannot so easily be translated to the church these days.

People who study things like church growth tell us that the church faces a "consumerism" culture which must shape our outreach — or we'll miss the boat. People are looking for services from the church and not a place to serve. Given a choice between wearing a gold cross or bearing a wooden cross — most folks will take the gold!

To all of this, today's scripture will shake up our perceptions. What does it mean to follow Christ? And more than that — what does it take to serve Christ? Perhaps the best way to look at this is to ask the question, *"What are my expectations for being a follower of Christ?"*

Unlike a lot of nominating committees in local churches, who often approach potential nominees with the message that the job they are recruiting makes almost no demands, Jesus does not pull any punches. When he sends out his chosen twelve, he tells them in very clear terms: Expect persecution and expect conflict — even within your families. Expect to make a "no holds barred" commitment. However . . . in the end, expect to find the true meaning of life and living.

Jesus' words center in three themes: Persecution, Presence, and Promise.

Persecution: When Jesus sent his chosen twelve out, he made it clear to them that they would receive the same treatment He received. They would face rejection, hostility, and persecution. In fact, his words about not fearing those who can "kill the body" had to send a chill or two down their spines! This seems almost 'other worldly' to most of us. We don't take much heat for our faith.

But there are those like Bishop Juan José Gerardi who was murdered in 1998 in Guatemala. Two days before his brutal death, he released a major study on human rights violations and atrocities perpetrated by the government during that nation's long civil war.

Or there were those church leaders in Congo-Brazzaville in the 90's who remained in a dangerous, destabilized nation caught up in civil war so they could be close to their communities to take up their ministry of peace once again.

You and I don't face that kind of danger for our convictions. Yet, there may be times when your inner values challenge the values of the world around you.

A manager in the health care industry quit her job because, *"I got tired of looking for ways to deny coverage to people who needed help. When I questioned my supervisor, he told me I knew where the door was."*

A committed Christian in Washington D.C. gave up a lucrative position to go to work for 1/3 of his salary to manage an inter-faith coalition for the homeless. *"Driving out of D.C. past all those homeless people to my wonderful home in Virginia got to me."*

A wealthy, elderly man re-wrote his will after seeing the plight of poor, sick children in Tijuana, Mexico. He provided for his two adult children, but willed a large portion of his estate to an outreach ministry that would help children like that. His son and daughter took him to court!

Admittedly, this is not exactly severe persecution . . . but — a strong commitment to Jesus Christ that results in commitment to keep his teaching will bring a crunch somewhere, sometime to all of us. And when that comes to pass — or if you should ever find yourself in tremendous conflict because of your faith — here is something that will help.

Presence: Two things help when Christians face a world that is hostile to their commitment: God knows and God cares! In other words, God is present with us in every circumstance. *"Don't be afraid,"* Jesus says, *"your tormentors can only destroy the body — they can't touch the soul."* But we are bodily people. And consider this. Even sparrows, which can be had at two for a penny, do not escape the attention of God. The one who is with the fallen sparrow is with the child of God.

The presence of God gives courage to openly affirm our values, our commitments, and our Lord! Jesus said if we deny him before others, he would deny us before God. We are to stand firm, all the more because we have the knowledge of God's care in the midst of trial.

Yet, Peter, as it turned out, did deny Christ when the chips were down. Jesus had been arrested and things did not look good for this “revolution of love” — and when asked, Peter swore up and down (literally) that he did not know who Jesus was. Nevertheless, Peter was forgiven, renewed and sent out to try again. Thank goodness! (There's hope for you and me.) The key thought here is that we are called to stand squarely for the person and passion of Christ.

There is an old gospel song that contains the words, “. . . *His eye is on the sparrow — and I know He cares for me . . .*” Because I am aware of the care of God and the presence of God at every juncture in my life, I am able to keep my commitments. And when my strength fades and my commitment wavers, I am graced with the knowledge that the one who bought my soul with his life will heal my failures with his love.

Promise: One of the amazing and wonderful things about our faith is this: In the midst of the most difficult test of all — when the worst that can happen has happened, the promises of God come through to bring hope, joy, and new life! *“If you lose your life for my sake,”* Jesus said, *“you will find it.”* Jesus makes this most incredible claim at the close of today’s Gospel. This claim is absolutely consistent with the whole thrust of his ministry.

Jesus takes the values and presuppositions of this world and turns them upside down and inside out! The way up with God, for instance, is down. Humility lifts one up while arrogance puts one down! The first, he says, will be last. That is, those who buy the line that “Looking Out for Number One,” as the way to success will ultimately discover that looking out for number one actually delivers a person into last place.

The world says that the one who has lots of servants is great while Jesus

says that the one who serves a lot is great! The world says he who saves and invests a lot in the markets of this world will be secure while Jesus says the one who gives up the treasure of this world will have the ultimate security — namely *"treasure in heaven."*

Here's the promise that just confounds the world. Christian faith is based on the way of the cross. Death is defeated and gives way to authentic life. When you take up a cross, the world sees death, but God sees life. When Jesus is executed, the world breathes a sigh of relief, but God brings about a resurrection.

There is profound promise here. When you surrender your life to Christ you do not lose. The world experiences this surrender as tragedy. For the world there is the Vince Lombardi line, *"Winning isn't everything — it's the only thing!"* Christians, on the other hand, turn that all upside down — surrender to Christ is to gain, it is a spiritual triumph. *"Take up your cross and follow me,"* Jesus says. Although the cross is the way of death in the eyes of the world, it is the way to life in the eye of God!

But what does it mean to take up the cross? What cross? Take it where? It means first of all to submit yourself to Jesus — not some of you or some of your life. Total submission. It means forgoing what I want for what Jesus wants. How do you know what Jesus wants? You listen for Him and then you listen to Him.

At a Formational Prayer Seminar, I had a healing encounter with a man in my small group. I cannot go into details, but I can tell you that he heard Jesus speak to him. After the encounter, he and I were processing the event, and he told me that he wasn't sure what he should do.

I asked: *"What did Jesus tell you?"*

Amen.