
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Sermon for Sunday, June 8, 2008
The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta
The Rev. Canon Todd D. Smelser, Preacher

We have entered that summer season when folks are traveling, enjoying the warm weather, and by attendance records, perhaps finding alternative activities on Sunday morning besides going to church. Appropriately enough our Gospel readings for the next five Sundays from Matthew are a study about discipleship. What is it to be a disciple of Jesus? It might be read as scripture's way of asking what it really means to be a spiritual being in a very materialistic world. What are the challenges, comforts, changes and commitments that come with this calling? Today's readings are the appropriate place to begin the conversation about God's desire for mercy and not sacrifice, and the nature of God's call to each of us.

Today's first reading from Genesis, which ties directly to the epistle from Romans, centers on Abraham's faithful response and his role in the future of all nations. While Paul makes much of Abram's righteousness, that has yet to be proven. In today's story we are introduced to Abram through his actions. He goes, as God commanded him, from his own country and family. At Shechem he builds an altar to the Lord "who has appeared to him." He then builds a second altar near Bethel and "invoked the name of the Lord."

The character whose voice dominates the text, however, is God. God commands Abram to leave his country and his father's house and to journey out in faith. In a culture where identity is lodged in family and tribe, this is a remarkable demand. Today we move from place to place rather easily, since our cell phones and computers ensure that we are never very far away. But without family and social connections, Abram becomes dependent on God alone as the source of his identity and sustenance. Of course he has his wife Sari and his nephew Lot, along with all their possessions, dependents and slaves. Not exactly what I'd call traveling light! More reminiscent of the wagon trains crossing from the eastern part of our country in search of a new life in the West.

God also promise to make of Abram a great nation in a land of God's choosing. God will bless this endeavor, just as God blessed all things in the creation, and last week's story of Noah and the building of the ark. This blessing occurs, however, only we seek the One who seeks us. It is really the language of patronage: God will protect Abram, whom God has called, and he in turn serves and honors God by his actions. While the future still holds many uncertainties, it is the assurance of God's presence with Abram that makes it possible to step into the unknown.

When we turn to today's Gospel reading from Matthew we hear the second call story in that book, the first being the familiar call of the fishermen, who left their nets, their livelihood and their responsibilities and followed Jesus. But unlike that story which is imprinted on our collective Sunday school memory, today's reading is about the call of Matthew the tax collector.

While tidings from the IRS can bring anxiety and panic to us all, in Jesus' day tax collectors were seen as sinners"as outcasts from the rest of society. Typically these were Jews who were working for the Roman occupation, and they were not known for their good accounting practices. In some respects they were viewed as no better than thieves, perhaps because they took more than was due them for their own use. We must remember as well that taxes benefited Rome, not the people of Galilee. So when Matthew, no respectable fisherman, but a tax collector follows Jesus without hesitation, a very new kind

of disciple is being formed.

One can almost imagine the conversation among the other disciples, all those simple fishermen. Why is Jesus calling someone like that? "one of those people? Can this tax collector really be trusted? Aren't we in danger of losing our identity if he becomes one of Jesus' disciples?"

The story then moves quickly to a meal, in which Jesus eats with other tax collectors and sinners. Once again Jesus breaks the purity norms of his religion. His choice of dining companions may have more to do with hospitality than with power. Or perhaps Jesus' power comes not from eating with the powerful but from sitting with the unloved, the outcast of society.

Our lectionary then includes the following verses in Matthew's Gospel that lift up examples of those in need of healing. These stories suggest that mercy is revealed in acts of compassion and restoration. Here we meet both a leader of the synagogue and a woman who is bleeding continuously. These two folks are at opposite ends of the social spectrum: one a respected religious and community leader; the other a woman isolated in her uncleanness. Yet both figures are oddly united in their deep need of healing and the faith that Jesus can meet that need. Like so many other occasions in the Gospel, Jesus stops what he's doing and heals both the man's daughter and the woman who touches the hem of his garment. Both receive mercy and healing; Jesus makes no distinction between them.

What have we learned about discipleship from today's readings and how might that apply to us? Some Biblical characters like Abraham and Matthew the tax collector, respond immediately to the Lord's invitation. They are ready and willing to follow, without questioning the outcome. What this invitation does for all of us is to pull us outside of our selves, as we consider the needs of our neighbor. Like Abram, most of us do this in stages, as we journey in faith throughout our life. We also discover that disciples of Jesus sit at table with all manner of folk. We don't need a place of honor, nor are we picky about our table mates. As disciples of Jesus, we also become aware that we are all in need of some kind of healing "of our memories, our bodies, or our spirits" and that Jesus meets us where we are and offers us healing and wholeness. As disciples we know that our Lord does not desire sacrifice, but mercy. As we receive God's mercy in our lives, then we too are strengthened and empowered to be merciful to others, becoming agents of healing and reconciliation in our world.

This afternoon the Cathedral hosts a Diocesan service of Confirmation. Although our Bishops travel to different parishes every Sunday, three times a year we host this service, gathering together folks from around the Diocese for baptisms and confirmations. As I have been honored to do for the past seven years I will also be presenting folks from around the Diocese to our Bishop, including a class of adults that I have been teaching these past ten weeks. I really enjoy teaching Confirmation classes, hearing about people's religious histories, answering their questions and rejoicing in their commitment to this church which I love and have tried to serve faithfully.

There was a recent article by Cardinal Walter Kasper, the president of the Pontifical Council of Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church, in which he issued a challenge to the Anglican Church. The time has come, he wrote, for the Anglican Communion to "clarify its identity. Does it belong more to the churches of the first millennium "Catholic or Orthodox" or does it belong more to the Protestant Churches of the 16th century? At the moment it is somewhere in between, but it must clarify its identity now and that will not be possible without certain difficult decisions."

How unfortunate for this prelate that he really doesn't understand that we have always been "somewhere in between" and that is the genius and the attraction of the Episcopal Church for many of us who have sat through Confirmation classes and been presented to a Bishop to become a member of this church. If Abraham had not left the past he would never have been able to lead God's people. If Matthew had not left his previous vocation, he would never have found the freedom of serving Christ. If Jesus had not sat "in between" certain tax collectors and sinners at dinner, we would not be able to understand his deep and abiding message of inclusion and acceptance of those who differ from us?

I am a proud Episcopalian precisely because we are in-between "a bridge of understanding and prayer between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches and the churches of the Protestant Reformation. That doesn't mean we are wishy-washy about what we believe and proclaim. It is in that in-between place, in that theological and ethical tension in which God does seem to call us and speak to us "not be always right, but to be faithful in what we have received through this Church. If we Christians continually to bicker and draw lines in the sand about who is right and who is wrong, what hope is there for any progress in inter-faith dialogue.

These questions about discipleship are a bit deep for the summer season, but perhaps this is a good time of the year to refresh ourselves, but to renew ourselves in words of scripture and in reaching out to those in need. Perhaps it is the season to ponder anew Jesus' words in today's Gospel. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners."

Tender god, touch us.
Be touched by us;
Make us lovers of humanity
Compassionate friends of all creation.
Gracious God, hear us into speech;
Speak us into acting;
And through us, recreate the world.

Amen

Comments? Contact The Rev. Canon Todd Smelser at: tsmelser@stphilipscathedral.org