

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Discipleship Defined: Peacemakers”

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Zechariah 8:9-17, Luke 10:1-11

He was mid-sentence in the middle of our meeting when the alarm sounded. It was one of those embarrassing noises your phone makes - a rock song that completely tells everyone your age. He jumped up and fumbled around in his pockets until he found his phone and silenced his alarm.

“10:02,” he said, as though we should all know what he was talking about.

Getting our quizzical looks in response, the chairperson of this Presbytery committee went on to explain that at the last General Assembly, commissioners had been encouraged to set their alarms for 10:02 every day. When the alarm sounded, they were to pray about Jesus’ words in the gospel of Luke, chapter 10, verse two, which says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Lots of prayers are needed to find willing laborers in this field. You might be tempted to think that this prayer is asking for more people to go to seminary and train for ordained ministry in the church. But it’s not. At the time Jesus spoke these words, there were no ministers, and there was no church. There was just a group of 70 ordinary folks willing to follow Jesus, to be his disciples, and to spread the good news of the kingdom of God.

The fact that Jesus could summon up 70 people willing to be sent out as laborers in the work of God is pretty miraculous considering the job description.

It might read something like this:

Seeking: Persons willing to get devoured by the world around them in order to help people see Jesus.

Job Requirements: Depend on the hospitality of strangers. Eat whatever you are served, even if it’s weird or offensive. If you experience rejection, just walk away.

Qualifications: no money, no stuff, no shoes.

Who’s ready to sign up for that? It’s no accident that this passage falls on the heels of a series of conversations Jesus has with people who would like to follow him, but they need to take care of such trivial matters as burying a father or letting their family know that they are leaving and might not be coming back.

The fact that anyone at all is willing to fulfill this job description is miraculous, and you would think Jesus would be pretty happy with 70 willing applicants. But no. He calls for more.

And so our meetings get interrupted at 10:02.

Because 70 disciples isn’t enough.

The gospel of Luke begins with a spotlight on Jesus which then expands to cover the first 12 disciples. Here in chapter 10, the flood lights come on to reveal 70 followers being sent out to spread the gospel. And if we follow Luke's narrative into the book of Acts, the lights come up in the auditorium and in the hallways and out in the parking lot to illuminate how the gospel message spreads to the ends of the earth.

Until Jesus returns and God's redeeming work is complete in the world, there will never be enough disciples.

Disciples are not just pastors and church staff. They are not just missionaries and people who run faith-based non-profits.

Like most numbers in the bible, Seventy is not a random figure. The tenth chapter of the book of Genesis lists all the nations of the earth, totaling seventy. From there on, Seventy becomes a biblical code word for EVERYBODY.

So this episode in Luke's gospel is telling us that everybody is called to be a disciple. Every one of us with the courage to submit to intentional poverty, to travel lightly, to depend upon the hospitality of strangers, and endure rejection peaceably. Every one of us with the power to heal, to bless, and to announce the kingdom of God.

Sound like a tall order? You betcha. Feeling underqualified? You wish.

We are qualified for discipleship in our baptism. For those of us who were baptized as infants, we never even got a say in the matter. Those who were baptized as adults are thinking, "I should have paid more attention to the fine print."

But before you start sneaking out under the pews, let's look at what discipleship really means.

A disciple is literally a learner, someone who chooses to follow a particular teacher. Here at Everybody's Church, the Session has worked over the last year or so to develop a definition of discipleship that is a little more descriptive. During the Session retreat last year and in the months following, they discerned the specific qualities they thought would define disciples of Jesus Christ in this time and place.

And here is the definition that emerged from that process: "As disciples of Jesus Christ, we live and grow in God's Word as peacemakers, faithful stewards, and compassionate neighbors." You can review this definition in First Things each week, and it's on our church website as well. And it is the focus of our sermon series for the rest of this month.

Today we are focusing on the first of those three qualities – disciples as peacemakers. Now, Christianity certainly has a checkered past when it comes to making peace, but Jesus' teachings are pretty clear on the matter. He tells us to turn the other cheek and declares that peacemakers are blessed and will be called children of God.

But scripture is also very clear that peacemaking is much more than beating swords into plowshares and favoring diplomacy over the nuclear option.

In our passage today, the FIRST thing the disciples are told to do when they reach their destination is to pick a house, seemingly at random and say "Peace to this house!"

Now, that might seem like a strange thing to say, or at the very least a fairly innocuous greeting.

But these are not idle words. Jesus says that the peace the disciples speak can come to rest upon the house and those in it if they share in the peace, or it will return to the speaker if they do not. This peace is a tangible force that can come and go, that can be shared or rejected. It is a gift, a blessing, that the disciples bring to those who will accept them.

What is truly radical about this peace that we as 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans do not hear right away, is that this peace is fundamentally different from the prevailing “peace” of first century Judea. The peace that reigned in that time and place was the Pax Romana, a peace enforced by the Roman Empire to suppress opposition and quell uprisings of conquered peoples. It was a peace that came with a sword or a prison cell or a cross. This was a peace that was being actively resisted by some and actively enforced by others in the towns to which Jesus sent out his disciples.

But the peace brought by Jesus’ disciples is different. It is a peace that engenders hospitality rather than suspicion. It is a peace that leads to healing rather than injury. It is a peace that pronounces the reign of God, not the power of Rome. It is a peace that, as author Barbara Brown Taylor says, “puts you as close to God as you can get. To learn to look with compassion on everything that is...to open your arms to what is instead of waiting until it is what it should be; to surrender the justice of your own cause for mercy; to surrender the priority of your own safety for love – this is to land at God’s breast.”

The peace of Christ, the powerful force of connection and wholeness and humility, is not easy to develop. I should tell you up front that discipleship is hard. That is why it was important to the group who wrote our definition to acknowledge that we live and grow in God’s Word as we develop these qualities. This is an ongoing endeavor, not a one and done activity.

This peace is a force that outlasts even our mortal lifetimes.

On this day, this All Saints’ Day, we experience the peace that has been left behind by those faithful disciples who have died, those who now share in the eternal peace promised in Jesus Christ. We share in the peace of compassionate nurses like Marion Cox and Helen Williamson. We share in the peace of Marjorie DeLong and Marilyn Achterlonie, who were wise teachers and advisors and caring friends. We share in the peace of Hudson and Marilyn Scheifele and Jeryl Marlatt, who served in our country’s armed forces to bring peace in a violent world. All those who have died in the faith, all those saints we will celebrate today, have shared their peace with us through many years of shared meals, volunteer service, caring words and actions, prayers and participation in the life and ministry of this body of Christ.

So as we remember them, let us remember also that we are all called to be disciples, living and growing in God’s Word, as peacemakers, as those who bless and heal and announce the kingdom of God. Because you are the workers we have been praying for, at 10:02 and many other times. You are the saints whose peace will sustain generations to come. You are disciples of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.