

Proper 17_A
The Rev. Betsy Ivey

How appropriate is it that we are given texts this morning that instruct us in the ways of discipleship as we prepare ourselves for the September renewal of the Church. Across this country parishes will be welcoming back members next Sunday after the celebration of the Labor Day, which used to be the last official cook-out day of the Summer. At least it was in my family. Our venerable group of about twenty families would gather together at our home, as we offered our official farewell to Summer for school would be starting the day after in those days. And, we children would receive various and sundry words of advice and encouragement from each adult on how to have a successful school year. This is rather how I saw these texts for today ... as words of advice and encouragement on how to have a successful life as we recommit ourselves to Church for the remainder of this Church Year. And, I do mean 'life' because we are not just talking about our Church life, but the life to which we commit because of Church.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is telling his disciples for the first time (he tells them twice more) that the result of his ministry will be to give his life in order that we might be saved from the lives we are leading. Now, I know the theology of the Church is that Jesus saved us by dying for our sins; but, I have always been wary of this theology because I think it has led too many Christians to sit on Jesus' laurels and not live into the salvation he gave us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it best when he coined our sitting 'cheap grace'. And, in this Gospel, Jesus spells out discipleship as one in which we don't sit on our duffs, but must follow his example of sacrifice. And, as I have said before from this pulpit, we privileged Christians don't do sacrifice well which is why we are very happy that Jesus did it for us, so we don't have to do it, or so we have theologized to ourselves. But, Jesus says quite the opposite. To be a disciple, we have to be willing to follow his example which is to be willing to give up some part of our lives when God calls on us.

And, I'm going to shift here momentarily to the Hebrew Scripture reading on Moses because Moses'

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response to God's call on him from the burning bush is exemplary of the response Jesus is calling for in our being his disciples. Note that when God calls out to Moses, what does he say? He says, 'here I am'. He doesn't hide, he doesn't tell God to hold on while I finish what I'm doing, or ask God to get back to him on that request, or even more, I don't think I can go there, God ... what will my friends think of me? Moses says 'I'm here. What do you want me to do?' And, what is more, God wants Moses to change the world. Just as God did when he sent Jesus, God wants to change the balance of power so that the least among us will have more. And, Moses asks 'Who am I that I should go up against Pharaoh, the most powerful force in my universe?' It was not a question of shrinking away, but one of an underestimation of his ability to do so large a task. When called on to meet God's estimation of how we should live our lives, which may be far more than we might think we are capable of meeting, we might ask ourselves 'who are we to take on so mighty a task as changing the world?' Aren't we lucky that Jesus led the perfect life, and died for our sins so that if we fall short in our own estimation of what we can do, we don't have to answer to the call from the burning bush that requires us to say 'here I am'. Jesus did it for us.

But, Jesus said 'no, that 's not how it works'. If you want to follow me you too must deny yourself, and take up your cross. We must extend ourselves beyond the comfort of our lives to live as God expects us to live. If the world is not as God made it, and I think we disagree with God about how God wants things to be more than we want to admit ... God wants us to understand we have holy work to do. We must take off our sandals, and understand that as Christians we have the sacred privilege to do the work of God. We must answer 'here I am'. If we are to be disciples of Christ, we must take up that holy cross that Jesus showed us how to carry, and we must shoulder it.

For those of us for whom life is good, this is not any easy task. We have been given the 'stuff of life' that makes life good, and we are loathe to part with it under most circumstances. We are loathe

to stand up and shout out for causes we might believe in because doing so will make us unpopular with our families, co-workers, or neighbors. But, doing so is shouldering the cross, saying ‘here I am’, and acknowledging that we want to make the world the place God intended it to be.

This is sacred work because it is sacred any time we give up our lives, to deny ourselves, to live as God would have us live. And, not just ourselves as individuals, but the collective ‘ourselves’. Because we really are no better than the worst off among us. We can’t be and call ourselves disciples of Jesus. Jesus requires us to look at all the places in our lives, in our world, where God is crying out to us to pay attention. Jesus hung out with all the folks we don’t want to be around to bring them to our attention. They are our burning bushes. God speaks out to us through them to let us know that we have holy work to do.

These words of encouragement and advice we are given are a tall order as we prepare ourselves for the renewal of our commitment as disciples of Christ. But, we should not underestimate our commitment because God is with us because it is God’s work we are doing. Any time we stand up for the justice of another human being we are doing God’s work. And, this may be something we’ve never done before, and it may be scary because we are denying the person we were in favor of someone we are not familiar with. But in so doing we are finding ourselves for Jesus’ sake, for Jesus’ sacrifice of his life that we might find our life in God. And in doing so, we are giving value to God’s grace.

Matthew’s Jesus asks a question that I think we all need to answer to add to his prescription for discipleship; and, that is, ‘what will we give in return for the life God has given us’? And, as a follow-up question, you may ask yourself: What will I say when I come across the burning bush and God calls out to me to change the world to the way God intended it to be? Amen.