

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 8 Year C
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The sun is blistering hot, the air is stilted with humidity, settling like a wet blanket. Relief can only be found in a swimming pool. And that's where we would find ourselves most days. Andrew, Phillip and I would head off to Overlook Swimming Pool nearly everyday, from the time the children were small.

Since Bill and I have always had a sailboat, when our boys were born, it was important to us that our boys loved being in the water, or at least were not afraid of it. So, when each of them was 6 months old, I took them to a swimming class at the YWCA, when, with a huge amount of courage, I followed the instructor's directions and dunked my tiny baby into the pool. I propelled him forward underwater, where, with barely a sputter, he learned the joy and ease of moving his body through the water, learning the rhythm of breathing when his head was above water and holding his breath when not. Each of our boys loved the water and spent years competing on the Overlook Swim Team, learning much more than the joy of being in the water, but also the benefit of discipline, hard work, and being a part of something larger than their own performance.

Even with these of experiences to draw upon, what I remember most about the boys in the water was the summer that Phillip, our youngest son, was three years old. Being a second child, his desire to keep up with Andrew overrode any sensibility that might have been born in his head. At far too early an age, his greatest delight was jumping into deep end of the pool, swimming to the ladder, tricking the lifeguard by walking extremely fast with straightened legs, (so as not to be accused of running,) and jumping in all over again. He could do this for hours. Being a hovering mother, I also spent my summer that year in the deep end, being splashed, yet ready to save him if one of the older children happened to jump onto him. Or, perhaps, to help convince the lifeguard that Phillip could indeed swim predictably to the ladder six feet away.

Phillip could have spent the same hours playing in the baby pool, or diving for rings in the shallow end with his friend Tommy, or eating snow cones from the snack bar, or even jumping into the 3 foot depth. Though he certainly did all of these from time to time, his one purpose in life that summer seemed to be jumping into the deep end. I am sure it was exhilarating, risky, scary, and completely wonderful for him. Again and again, he braced himself for the plunge, jumped with all his being into the depths, and came up ready to do it again.

In our gospel story today, Jesus tells us that he wants us to jump into the deep end with him, again and again, and live there. Jesus makes it clear that he is not interested in half-hearted discipleship. Jesus wants our whole being in the depths with him, to come up for breath from time to time, yet always ready to do it again.

Our gospel story today about discipleship can be confusing, so let's look at each of the would-be disciple stories and see what the message could possibly be for each of us.

On the way to Jerusalem, someone comes running up and says to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." You would think that, when you are building a group of disciples, you would take anyone, but Jesus takes the time to caution him, telling him that foxes have holes to sleep in but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. In other words, Jesus is saying: "if you follow me, you are following a homeless itinerant preacher. You won't know where you will sleep that night, you will need to rely on other people's hospitality to eat, and it is not a life of comfort or security." Jesus knows that he's heading to the cross. Does this man really want to come to the cross with him? Jesus challenges the man to be ready for hardship and vulnerability. Following Jesus is not swimming in the shallow end, where your next breath is just inches above your head. Following Jesus is being in the deep end where there's risk and many scary moments.

Then Jesus says to another, "Come and follow me" and the person's response is: "yes, I will, but let me go home and bury my father first." Jesus doesn't like that response. We get the sense from Jesus' rebuke that to receive a direct invitation from Jesus, which to us comes a sense of call upon our heart by the Holy Spirit, is to hear it as an absolute demand that requires an immediate response. But the man doesn't act on wholeheartedly on this invitation. Instead, he allows a family responsibility to take precedence. He's saying to Jesus that he will go back and live under the command of his father until the father dies. After he has buried his father – sometime in the indefinite future- his calendar will then be cleared for following Jesus. We can substitute "go home and bury my father" with phrases such as, "when I retire, when my children grow up, when I stop coaching soccer, when my life settles down, when I have some more free time, etc." However, with Jesus' command, "Follow me," a new and vital possibility has entered this man's life, and can enter ours. It is a possibility that demands immediate and wholehearted response. From Jesus' perspective, this practical plan of fulfilling a past obligation before undertaking a new one will not work and is not following him.

Some of us may have tried to live in this in-between place, hearing a call to follow Jesus more fully, but we are waiting until we think our life is ready to respond. Perhaps when our calendars are cleared, or our 401K is at a more-than-comfortable place. Jesus is saying to this man and to us, "if you stay rooted in these past obligations or way of life which don't quite fit you anymore, and you don't jump into the deep end with me, you will end up spiritually dead. If you choose to wade through life in the shallow end of the pool, knowing there is a deep end, but not choosing to go there, your spirit will die."

I saw this transformation of embracing the new life happen as I sat on the other side of the glass in the Franklin County Jail this week, visiting with someone who is in a terribly difficult and desperate situation. Yet, this person had moved from a place of

fear and obsession about the possibility of what may happen to him living in the moment; he had moved from denying his brokenness to welcoming therapy; he had moved away from grasping onto the dream that, when he came out in 25 years, he could resume his former life, to comprehending that there were all sorts of possibilities of who he may become by then. He heard the invitation of Jesus and he followed him with resolve. His deep end is deep within himself, and he has found Jesus there.

The final would be disciple is interested in following Jesus if everyone agrees with his choice. He does not go back to his family for a final farewell party. He wants to return to his family for their blessing on what he has decided to do. If they do not bless his following Jesus and he does so anyway he will be caught continually looking over his shoulder. Jesus makes it clear that the kingdom is about steadfastly moving into a future that we must desire more than anything else. We have to go forward, never look back, never count the costs, and never wonder if we have made the right decision. We don't need anyone's permission to follow because this decision is about us and Jesus and no one else. Jesus sets the bar high, requiring solid personal decision, making one's following a priority, (not just when it's convenient,) and accepting the risk that is inherently involved, for Jesus knows that it is only by sheer individual resolve that we will overturn the earth significantly enough for the seed of the gospel to be planted. A determined hand on the plough is Jesus's concern.

The message to us is to be it now, live it now, and do it now for Jesus, with all your being: jump into the deep end and find your home there.

Over my years as priest, I have read a lot of letters written by people who are exploring the call to ordained ministry. In response to the standard question about why they should be in the diocesan discernment track, most people speak as though ordination is the goal: they proclaim a radical transformation of who they will become when they wear a collar around their neck, they speak of the total surrender they will offer to God as they kneel before the bishop so she can lay hands upon their heads and make them priests in the church, they often clear their calendar and expect God to show up in the thin timeline given to God to make this all happen. I am always concerned when I read those letters. It appears as though they are waiting to jump into the deep end with Jesus until they are ordained. My sense is that they should already be in the deep end. They should already know how to live in a risky and vulnerable place; they should be ready to jump at Jesus' invitation, or wait until God's window opens, not the other way around. They should be willing to risk it all, change it all, and be it all, long before they kneel before the bishop. The best letter I ever read requesting admission into the diocesan discernment process was written by someone who ended the letter with the statement: "I am a priest. I am a pastor. The only remaining question is whether I continue that ministry as a layperson or as an ordained person." This person was clearly saying: "I am following Jesus and that's what matters to me. I live in the deep end and will be swim there forever. If I do that, all else will work out." That's faithful living.

So, if you are called to be a healer, to mend the brokenhearted, to raise up the lowly in spirit, to side with the poor and oppressed, do it now, and do it with all your heart. Don't wait until you find a convenient time to do this, do it now. If you are called to journey alongside others in their spiritual lives, to listen with compassion, to draw people into the awareness of God, do it now. If you are called to explore the Bible in depth, to take the plunge and immerse yourself in solid study of our scriptures or our theologies, then do it, and do it now. Follow Jesus, for he's calling you.

If you are called to something new, let go of that job that binds your heart to misery or boredom. Embrace the passion God gave you and center your life on it. If you are called to bring people into the church, don't give it your leftover energy. Do it now, with commitment and passion. Tell your story, listen to others, and make this work the driving force in your life. We each have something we care deeply about. Jump in the deep end with this. I promise, you will find Jesus there.