

Let us pray: God of sacred story,
the words you speak have powers:
power to create, power to disturb, power to heal.
Help us hear your word, in these words.... for us today. Amen.

This week's gospel reading is another section of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." This sermon follows Jesus' call to the disciples, and his teachings about living as a community of God's people. In today's reading, Jesus paints a picture of discipleship, along with a troubling set of instructions. Through the writer's lens, (Matthew), Jesus' followers are promised God will be with them forever.

This gospel reading makes us wonder. It's a difficult reading with lots of;
"If you do this, then I'll do That"
"I haven't come to do this, but to do That"

Biblical context is always important, and in a difficult passage it's even more important. This might make more sense if we read it in the setting of Matthew's community at the time.

It was a time of division for early Christians; disciples were being tested, and families divided. It's in this background of division and disagreement that Matthew is writing. At the end of the first century, Matthew insists on continuing the legitimate mission of the Jews, even though his community is experiencing the downfall of many synagogues, and Jesus' arrival seems very far off. The early followers were left vulnerable, and without protection.

At the same time, in rural Palestine, there were travelling charismatic missionaries who had voluntarily left their homes and families because they felt a sense of urgency that the end-time was coming soon.

Matthew uses this as a parallel to call the disciples to radically give up everything they own, including their families, for Jesus' sake. Matthew's message from Jesus can be difficult to hear. As the reader, we might wonder why Jesus, the Prince of Peace, says, "*I have... come, not to bring peace, but a sword!?*" (vs 34)

What can he possibly mean?

How can we ever feel safe if Jesus carries a sword? The Prince of Peace indeed!

When we are horrified at the image of Jesus wielding a sword, we need to remember that it is not an endorsement for armed conflict, but a reference/metaphor for the divisions that will become evident as people are forced to decide whether they are For him, or Not for him. When we read it over quickly, it's a good example of what the biblical word is Not saying, just what it Appears to be saying.

Another focus might be discipleship; what we're learning from Jesus. We are to stop and think about what we're supposed to be, what we're going to say, and how we're going to communicate this teaching with those around us.

One part of discipleship is obedience. The word 'obedience' seems to imply the one being obedient doesn't have a choice, and that's often the case...the obedient person doesn't have a say in the matter.

There are many examples of not being obedient that result in consequences. They might lead us to think of the word obedience along with the word 'power' ..obedient to, power over.

Power; as control, rule, or domination, submission.

Where the world is divided into two parts:

those who have power, and those who does not, and so are vulnerable.

We only have to look at our neighbours to the south. At the moment they are a country divided by violence caused by the oppression of a particular race, and other issues. How many 'Black Lives Matter' signs do they have hold up?

How many, "You Are More Valuable Than Many Sparrows" signs can we hold up?

This interpretation of obedience as power is not what the scripture intends. Context is always important (verses 34-36) An interesting interpretation from The Message bible:

"Do not think that I have come to make life cozy; I have come to cut – make a sharp knife-cut between father and son, mother and daughter, bride and mother-in-law, cut through these cozy domestic arrangements, and free you for God. Well-meaning family members can be your worst enemies."

In the verses before and after this section, we are encouraged Not to hold onto the knowledge of God, working in and through us as if it were our very own secret, but we are to be light for the world and share our experience with others. Are we good secret-keepers?

Emily Townes describes 'obedience' in two ways;

The 'Worldview of Authority' context, and the 'Biblical' context.

1. In the 'Worldview Authority'obedience

- ~likes order and rule...can't handle change very well
- ~views the future with fear and suspicion
- ~only follows directions
- ~invites us to believe that if we follow the instructions of our teacher, we will become the teacher.
- ~may lead us to give up all of our authority;
at best, we become passive, and at worst, we become vulnerable.
- ~can lead to manipulation by authority for its own purposes

2. while the 'Biblical' ... obedience is

- ~a guide on our journey to greater faithfulness
- ~a responsibility to tell the True Story
- ~and most importantly, Biblical Obedience invites us to listen carefully to the teachings of Jesus, and then decide on an appropriate response that calls us to develop our ability to learn and grow in faith.

Townes describes the Biblical Worldview, saying,
"We are all life-long learners, seekers, we are never finished learning."
The word disciple means 'learner.'

Pre-determined routines and ideas of the situation, of the scripture, or the will of God, as cozy and comfortable as they may be, are not always appropriate and can leave us stumbling in the dark.

The United Church of Canada invites us to seek, to question, to discuss, to agree to disagree, and to discern for ourselves. Studying this way can lead to a deeper belief. Sometimes it takes Faith to belong to the United Church.

Maybe the United Church of Canada has grown enough in faith
-to apologize to our First Nations brothers and sisters,
-to include 'to live with respect in creation' in our Creed,
-to accept all peoples into leadership ministry in the United Church.

We might not have done any of these things if we hadn't been obedient;
a very truthful and perceptive obedience.

Rather than a pre-determined or routine preconception of what discipleship is, Jesus requires his disciples to have "a discerning obedience"one that has its eyes wide open, accepts responsibility for the world and participates in its transformation.

This week's passages challenge us to reflect on the power-forces at work in our own lives, and how we, as people of faith, are called to live Jesus' call; turning over tables, leaving our homes, figuratively if not physically, and sharing the good news about how to live in God's way.

These readings also demand that we engage deeply, and really focus on how they are speaking to us in this time and place:

- ~What are we asked to let go of, what to do when we encounter injustice?
- ~How do we live in right relationship with others, and with God?
- ~What does resurrection's new life look like, what does it ask of us?
What is our part in it?
- ~How far are we willing to go to "feel safe"? For how long?
- ~what does "safe" mean in the scripture?

Lance Pape asks if Jesus was really the enlightened and affirming nice guy we insist on imagining, why doesn't he stay out of trouble?
Why would following him destroy families?

The answer is not that his enemies had strange and unsettling ideas, but that he did. Though some like to think it's true, not everything about Jesus can be learned in books, movies, or even popular opinion. Just one book.

Kin-dom work is hard work. Today the work is more controversial and subversive than the average kindness. True discipleship is an art; the art of seeking kin-dom, sharing kind-dom with strong determination.

Lance Pape says, "If the church manages to go through life without ever making anyone uncomfortable, this might be reason enough to question whether it's this Jesus that the church honours and hopes to follow.

Let us pray: Jesus, you call us to live our faith,
traveling beside you, in a world filled with tension.
As you bring peace to the world, you also disrupt our peace
and turn our world upside down.
May we continue to feel your disturbing presence in our lives
as a reminder that we are heard, known, loved, and sent,
as Children of God. Amen.