



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

Hero's Journey 2: Teacher and Disciples

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017

Readings: Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35; Psalm 116:1, 10-17

Sermon text: By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:35

Jesus didn't make the hero's journey of Holy Week alone. Not that he had much help; though the disciples fetched the donkey on Palm Sunday and arranged a room and prepared for the Passover meal on Maundy Thursday, they became positively unhelpful after the meal.

Of course, I don't blame them. Consider what happened that night. Before the meal, Jesus required that they submit to his washing their feet, normally a task assigned to a woman or a slave. They were disoriented. Peter at first refused and only relented when Jesus told him that unless he submit he would "have no part" in him. Then, characteristically, he over-compensated. Wash all of me, Lord.

Just the feet will do. The point is to show you all that I, your teacher and master, am also and primarily your servant. My work is to cleanse you from sin and prepare you for the journey, to train you in the virtues needed to carry out the mission of God.

During the meal, they were confused. What did Jesus mean when he said the bread and wine of the Passover meal were his body and blood? How is he the Passover lamb, sacrificed in remembrance of the night God came with mighty power to deliver the Israelites from slavery? What did he mean when he said to remember him when they gathered together to break bread in the future?

They were distressed to hear that one of them would betray the master. Who? Not me, surely—and yet even Peter was told he would deny Jesus three times before the cock crowed at dawn.

Confused, distressed and maybe a little drunk, they followed Jesus out of the city up to the Mount of Olives and into the garden of Gethsemane. There he asked them to stay with him while he prayed. Three times he found them asleep. This was the sign that indeed he was now alone.

They briefly resisted when Judas brought the temple police to arrest Jesus. Interestingly, Jesus had not prepared them for this moment, though clearly he knew it was coming. He had not drawn plans to resist or flee. There had been other times during his ministry when he had slipped through a crowd, whether they were angry enough to throw him off a cliff or impressed enough to want to crown him king. He could have called the hosts of heaven to press his enemies into the dust. But he didn't do any of this. He just obeyed the will of the Father.

In his prayer in the Garden he had asked the Father if the cup of suffering might be passed. If he could avoid the cross somehow. But he received no for an answer. And then the Father fell silent and slipped away as well. Jesus was alone on the cross when he cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." The disciples first, then the Father; the taunting and torture, the terrible pain of being nailed to a cross, all that together—-that is the bitter cup that Jesus drank to the dregs.

It was his cup, his alone, to drink. Yet as he told Peter there would come a time when it would be passed on and shared with him, and with all of those who joined the company of disciples and saints.

What is to be a disciple and saint, to be part of the band of sisters and brothers that follow Jesus as Lord and Master?

It is more like being Bilbo or Frodo Baggins, brave but rather unexceptional hobbits, than being like Gandalf, a wise and powerful wizard (*Lord of the Rings*). Disciples are not Lone Rangers but more like members of a movie platoon of soldiers, each of whom has role though one may be the captain (*Saving Private Ryan*). Disciples of Christ are part of the supporting cast; no one else is the Son of God. Disciples follow the pattern of being ordinary people drawn into a supernatural drama and given a part to play, rather than a superman with super powers who comes to earth from outer space (the Jesus echoes of the comic book hero are clear). But, though the disciples of Jesus were and are ordinary people (fishermen, tax-collectors, women from various walks of life), still they were and are capable of extraordinary heroism and great self-sacrifice.

My point in referencing these books and films, is to point out that we have an endless number of cultural myths that lift up self-sacrificing leaders and the formation of a mission-oriented team. In the classic pattern, the team initially forms under duress, storms through friction and conflict, but finally comes together to save the planet or win the lawsuit against the evil corporation (which may come to the same thing).

Yet, despite all myth-making, this is still a deeply counter-cultural thing to do. Every day and in every possible way, our culture encourages us to put ourselves first, to satisfy our desires, to think of the good of self and immediate family—and consider everyone else "cannon fodder" (as the hedge fund anti-hero of the show *Billions* puts it). Even the show's other anti-hero, the crusading U.S. attorney played by Paul Giamatti, is morally twisted by a burning political ambition. In this respect the show is cynical but realistic (like the humorous take on politics in *VEEP*).

So the Way of Jesus is in line with the heroic myths and stories, but still counter-cultural and rests its case, so to speak, not on the *world as it is* but on the *world as it should be*—a distinction community organizers are fond of making. Therefore and quite rightly we

should expect disciples to come from the young, who have not been cynically co-opted into the reigning system of the world. We should expect disciples to come from the poor and downtrodden, whom the “winners” of the world treat as so much cannon fodder, or “collateral damage.” But we should hope that it appeals to all of us through the voice of our conscience, a gift of the Holy Spirit.

For there is a practice that may not always be brought to the front when reflecting on the hero’s journey, and that is the demand and practice of forgiveness. Jesus showed his disciples not only how to be servant-leaders and to be united to him and each other in love and obedience. He not only showed them how to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom, to heal the sick and feed the hungry, to lift up the poor and free the prisoners. He also taught them how to forgive.

“Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do.” Jesus forgave his enemies who put him on the cross. He forgave his friends who abandoned him in their fear. He did not return to avenge and judge but to greet, share a meal, and commission them to carry on his work of proclamation and reconciliation. How amazing! I will speak more of this on Easter Sunday.

But for now let us stay right here, during the night when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, when he shared the Passover meal that would be his last, when he instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion, and when he went to the Garden to pray. He asked his disciples to stay with him and join him in prayer. Even one hour, to share in the struggle and so in the glory. They could not—their spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. But the invitation stands.

In a moment, we will celebrate Holy Communion together. And then we will strip the altar, and lament our own separation from the Father. But if you stay or return this night you can pray for an hour at the garden we have prepared in the baptistry. There are books to read and a pad to draw and write on. Please do. Please spend an hour—alone in the middle of the night, or with others. But do not consider yourself alone or only with those whom you can see and touch. Consider yourself part of the communion of saints, the army of disciples, the monks in the desert, the missionaries abroad, the husband and wife at home, the pastors in their study. Together with Jesus, who kneels right over there, praying to his Father. Praying for us.

In Christ’s name, Amen.

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