

Discipleship

Isaiah 50:5-9
Matthew 9:9-13

Andrew Conner has done a fine job of leading our Lenten Study Series. Last Sunday we addressed the, "I was naked and you clothed me," part of Jesus' Matthew 25 discourse. For this topic Andrew found a video that used images of street people of many races and ages to show the tragic pervasiveness of homelessness. It had no narration, only images and music, which slowly, inexorably came to a climax near the end, only to continue to its conclusion with a progression of quiet, haunting chords over the printed questions: "Do you see them now?" "Do they seem like you?" The answer for any person of faith and heart had to be, "Yes."

Many of the images contained dogs. Street people do often have dogs. This reminded me of something I'd read on the website of Safe Harbor, a ministry of the churches of Traverse City, Michigan. In one post a man experiencing homelessness explained why so many street people have dogs despite the challenges this poses. The answer, he wrote, comes down to one word: love. These people have lost nearly everything. As the video Sunday evening noted, the world does not see them, let alone care. But their dogs do not care how they smell or if their hair is matted. Their dogs are happy to go wherever they go. Their dogs love them unconditionally. It means the world to them.

Linda and I have a dog that once belonged to a homeless man. We do not know him. But the fostering agency told us she'd lived with him for nearly three years. He lost his home, then couch-surfed with various friends—with her—for months. Finally he ran out of places that would accept them together. He could not keep her. And so she has been ours for five years. She has issues. We do not know her whole past. We do not know what she has seen, what she has suffered. She can be impulsive with us and hyper-aggressive with other dogs. But she loves us with an intensity I have never before experienced, even from dogs. For the most part, she and our other rescue dog love each other in that same way. And we love her. We have come to believe that God has put us together. Caring for her is one of our life callings. If we are to walk as God calls us to walk we must walk with her.

We continue today with our Lenten sermon series on the process of reconciliation. A quick refresher: reconciliation is the healing of damaged relationships. Theologically speaking, reconciliation refers first to the restoration of our relationship with God in Christ; second, it speaks to our ability to heal damaged relationships with one another. The Bible teaches that reconciliation must follow a progression of steps in the proper order: sin, confession, repentance, forgiveness, discipleship and finally, reconciliation. This morning we have reached the discipleship step in this progression.

Disciples are people who walk with others *in order to learn*. The word comes to us from biblical, Koine Greek via Old English with remarkably few alterations along

the way. No doubt this happened because following has always proven a highly effective method of learning. From blacksmithing to lab tech work to pastoral counseling, absent visible examples we struggle to understand how to do certain jobs. Jesus' disciples followed him in order to learn not only how to live in a more godly way, they also followed him to try to grasp who he really was. Discipleship means walking in the footsteps of Christ vicariously in order to learn how he wants us to live, and who he really is. Discipleship means learning how to “do” Jesus. Discipleship means following Jesus in order to become more like him. Discipleship also helps lead to the healing of our relationships with God and human beings.

Today we read the verses in the Gospel of Matthew that depict the calling of the man who wrote them. Matthew was a tax collector. Under the Roman system this meant he had the full power of the empire behind his vacuuming up of the people's money. The system was ruthless, corrupt and brutally effective. Tax collectors may have betrayed their own people but they got rich in the process. Matthew tells us he is “sitting at the tax booth”. This meant he is in his “office”, a shaded shelter along a major thoroughfare in Nazareth, the regional seat of Roman authority. Jesus walks by and almost as if on impulse says, “Follow me.” Equally impovisationally, Matthew does. They sit at dinner “in the house”. Luke's version of this story tells us this house belongs to a Pharisee, a member of the local guild of the self-righteous. Somebody asks the disciples why Jesus eats with a tax collector. (They refer to him as a sinner but everybody present knows who they mean.)

Jesus replies in three parts. He starts with, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." He speaks of course not of physical, but of spiritual illness. He means, "Spiritual healers work on those whose spirits are ailing." He implies he has come to this world in order to offer healing to sinners. His words also constitute a backhanded slap across the face of the Pharisees, who sincerely believe they are not sinners.

Jesus next challenges his audience to understand the words of the prophet Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." On the surface this is a difficult saying to accept. Both mercy and sacrifice sound godly to our ears. Does God not call us to show mercy and to sacrifice our own needs in the service of others? Certainly, but this question betrays a misunderstanding of what the word "sacrifice" means in this sentence. Here it refers not to a noble elevation of the needs of others above our own. It refers, instead, to the act of animal sacrifice as practiced in ancient Hebrew religion. It refers to the offering of animals' lives on the temple altar as a payment for sin. As early as Hosea, some seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, God had expressed the supremacy of showing mercy to one another over observing religious rituals. "I desire that you put love into action more than I desire that you sacrifice a dove or a sheep for your failure to put love into action," Jesus is saying.

To drive home the point, Jesus completes his answer with, "For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners." And thank God for that. For we know that we are not righteous but sinners. God, understanding us better than we understand

ourselves, nevertheless loves and forgives us **when we take steps toward reconciliation**. When we follow our sins with confession, repentance, forgiveness and discipleship, we follow the path to wholeness Jesus has blazed for us. Which leads us to our summary of today's sermon: Follow Jesus, be reconciled.

Follow Jesus, be reconciled. As a sacrament, baptism displays the often invisible work of the Holy Spirit. It has many shades of meaning. The most obvious of these are the initiation, the anointing of us into the household of God; and the washing us clean of our sins Jesus accomplished on the cross. But as the Confession of 1967 tells us, "In baptism the church celebrates the renewal of the covenant with which God has bound his people to himself." Baptism demonstrates the perpetual and eternal decision of God to remain in relationship with us. God has **covenanted** to stay with us. And the method by which God accomplishes this bonding is the process of reconciliation. The theme of the entire Confession of 1967 is reconciliation. That year our nation saw Civil Rights and Vietnam War protests. Many were feeling free to express doubt about God for the first time. In response, the Presbyterian Church commissioned a group of theologians to write a confession about reconciliation.

Reconciliation is a big deal because sin is a big deal. We sin against God and each other continually. Therefore, we need reconciliation continually. This week a friend of forty years and I got into a tiff. I will not bore you with details but I assure you this really happened. As I walked the dogs Thursday afternoon I thought about it. I considered not reaching out to him. He has gotten exceedingly angry in recent years.

He seems to spend a lot of time consuming the news in some way or another that triggers him. Maybe it would be better not to risk having a fight with somebody I've always gotten along with well. I was not praying, just thinking. Yet I swear I heard a voice in my head say, "Mike, you're preaching on reconciliation this Sunday."

Oh. Right. Now take this personal need and multiply it by every human times every other human. A family of six has fifteen separate two-way relationships. A church our size has thousands. Vigo County, with over 110,000 sinners living in close proximity, has millions of separate pairings. As disciples of Jesus Christ we have the calling of seeking reconciliation in every wounded relationship we have, with however many people connected to them there are. We have the calling of confessing our own complicity in damaging our connections. We have the calling of repenting, of turning away from our sin and turning toward God. We have the calling of forgiving one another. We have the calling of walking with Jesus—and with our brothers and sisters—as together we learn how to follow him more perfectly. We have the job of following the process of reconciliation.

This is how the personal becomes the corporate. Imagine the healing you could initiate, with the power of the Holy Spirit working through you, in your teachers' lounge, in your workplace, in our community, state and even our nation. We have just experienced another year of torment. In our weariness and our wariness we have sinned against God and one another. Let us be the ones to initiate the process of reconciliation. Follow Jesus. Be reconciled.