

Encourage the Disciples

Psalm 132:1-5

Mark 8:34-38

I have entitled this sermon Encourage the Disciples. But I have based it on one of the most *discouraging* Bible passages. In Mark 8 Jesus tells the crowds that have begun attending him that in order to follow him they must deny themselves and “take up their crosses”. They must die to live. They belong to an adulterous and sinful generation. (And so, we might add, do we.) Should we be ashamed of Jesus and his Gospel, he will be ashamed of us when he returns. Where do we find encouragement in *this*? Let us turn around the question. It is precisely because following Jesus is so difficult that we need all the encouragement we can get. Hence our brief summary of this message: Encourage the disciples. Every chance and any way you can.

Ron Chernow's excellent biography of Alexander Hamilton documents that like many, from his late teens into his thirties Hamilton experienced a period of skepticism about the graciousness, and even the existence, of God. As he matured, however, Hamilton regained his belief. A lifelong Roman Catholic, he attended mass most days and observed the sacrament of confession on a weekly basis. Among the Founders, Hamilton was easily the more dedicated to the idea that they must rely on the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus for guidance as they worked their way through the revolutionary events swirling around them. In Federalist Paper 37, Hamilton wrote that

“When the Almighty condescends to address (us) in (our) own language the sheer sublimity of the words must render them dim to our ears. Yet we must listen and learn what we may. The perfection of our enterprise relies upon it.” Translation: we struggle to understand what God says. But we must keep trying. The improvement of our government and of our culture depend on that effort.

Any honest look at our enterprise—at the state of our government and culture today—must discourage us. Several of you have recently shared with me how pessimistic you have become. We no longer trust the institutions upon which we rely for news; for governance; for moral, ethical and spiritual guidance. Many writers have chronicled the split in our society, usually describing two sides, red and blue. Writing in the current issue of the Atlantic Monthly, George Packer outlines four distinct groups in our nation. I commend it; it helped me finally feel that I understand what is happening and what differing groups in America actually want.

My calling is to apply biblical and theological insights to all of life, including to our national life. On this 245th birthday of our republic I must admit that I share in the discouragement. The biblical and theological insight I bring to this discouragement comes straight from Jesus. If we are to follow the Almighty’s will we Christians must take up our crosses and follow Christ. If our republic is to achieve any sort of healing we must deny ourselves and follow Jesus wherever he leads. I do not insist that all Americans follow Jesus. Many are Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or of no faith at all. Yet we who call ourselves Christians, “little Christs”, followers of Jesus, have this obligation. It

is our part to play in the complex and difficult process of national reconciliation.

Fortunately, commentators agree that Jesus' call for his followers to lose their lives and carry their crosses is a rhetorical exaggeration. He did not mean that we must literally die for him, nor that we must suffer affliction. He meant that following him requires, first, that we restrain our self-centered pursuit of what we want; and second, that we make the genuine effort to understand what he wants, to know his teachings and to follow them. This does require sacrifice. It is very hard to do. It can lead us into uncomfortable non-conformity with the mores of our neighbors and our nation.

Think of our Quaker brother and sister followers of Jesus. From their inception in the middle 1700's, they have stubbornly had the courage of their Christian convictions. As pacifists they refused to fight in any army, often going to prison for their troubles. They were among the first opponents of slavery, and one of the earliest Christian communities to welcome women into leadership positions. They see Jesus leading them to make personal sacrifices in pursuit of his justice. I have doubts about some aspects of the current calls for us to "check our privilege". Too often these appear to be nothing more than attempts just to flip the standings, to give power to those without it so they can wield it just as capriciously and selfishly as those currently in power do. But checking our privilege does seem very Christlike when we do so for the sake of justice. Virtually every one hearing these words occupies a rather privileged position. If we sacrifice as the Quakers have, in order to pursue justice, we not only help those less privileged, we also help our culture turn toward healing.

What is more, Jesus taught those crowds, when we deny our own selfish interests he will welcome us into life. And as his words so often did, these have both a now and not-now application. Sacrificing much of what we spend so much time, energy and money pursuing actually frees us to enjoy now, here and now, this life. And self-sacrifice helps us avoid disqualification for the not-now, the world to come which Jesus promised to inaugurate with his return. We live better now **and** then. The poet and philosopher Kahlil Gibran was a Lebanese Maronite Christian. In his book, The Prophet, he wrote, "You give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself that you truly give." When we give of ourselves we bring Christ's grace and generosity into a world that sorely needs them.

And so we come full circle back to that title, Encourage the Disciples. Self-denial is not easy. Though we might believe it is wonderful in theory, we often hesitate actually to sacrifice our time, energy and money. We need encouragement to do it. If as a congregation we were to focus on mutual encouragement we will come to look and act more like Jesus. We will increase his love as expressed within and beyond our comfortable circle. We will promote justice. We will maintain the bonds that tie us together in fellowship. We will witness to the reality of the Spirit. So encourage one another. Tend each other's spirits. Listen to those who need to speak. Share with honesty your own fears and doubts. Accept support. Compliment others when you see them giving in the name of Jesus and the Gospel. Encourage one another. Every chance and any way you can.