

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Dorothy Burton Pearman at Clarence Presbyterian Church on July 2, 2023

TO BE A DISCIPLE

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” Matthew 10:40-42

Years ago, a wise teacher, seeking to help a youth group understand discipleship, shared a bit of sage advice. "If you want your life to count for something, look at the world around you, then find a need and fill it. Your life will be rich and full if you learn right now how to find a need and fill it."

Even though he was talking to kids, they understood their teacher's advice; they were to go out and mend the broken lives of others. They became dedicated fixers, trying in a variety of earnest, naive ways to find the needs around them and to fill them. Sometimes their efforts succeeded; sometimes their efforts failed. They tackled prisoners, the homeless, the hungry, the brokenhearted. They read to those who had no sight, comforted the sick, and befriended the lonely, always looking for ways to bring the light of Jesus Christ into the dark corners of our world. Even though they were kids, it is how they understood their call to discipleship.

That effort led to wonderful experiences within that youth group, produced a lot of good Christian men and women, and eventually led several of them to seminary. The teacher was right. There is no better life than a life invested in others.

In today's text from Matthew, we hear Jesus the teacher speaking to his disciples, searching for ways to teach them discipleship. Certainly, there was no shortage of human need all around them; everywhere they turned they saw lives invested in all the wrong things, lives lost and struggling and suffering. Jesus sought a way to show those first followers – and to show us today – how to be sensitive to human needs, and then do what can be done to make things better. Find a need and fill it, he might have said, and thereby bring humankind a baby step closer to God's kingdom.

These closing verses from the tenth chapter of Matthew follow on the heels of some of the heaviest pronouncements Jesus makes to his green-as-grass disciples. There in the tenth chapter of Matthew he says things like; "I have not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. I have come to set son against father, daughter against mother. And whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me."

And then there is this commandment, offered without reservation: "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me, for those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Listening to these words, those first well-intentioned but theologically unenlightened followers of Jesus must have paused to ask themselves what they had gotten themselves into. Would they, could they dare to live a life that demanded so much of them? Can we? The answer to that question lies in our understanding of our call to be sharers of compassion, people who search out human needs and try to fill them.

We can imagine the quick, instinctive emotional withdrawal of the disciples as they paused to weigh Jesus' heavy words. They had set out in search of a kingdom filled with spiritual riches at the very least, and perhaps earthly riches as well. Now comes all this talk of swords and crosses, of abandoning home and family, of losing their lives to gain their lives. This is hardly what they were expecting. Would they, could they dare to live a life that demanded so much of them? Can we?

We can further imagine the reaction of the ever-compassionate Jesus as he sensed their fearful withdrawal. Gazing with love upon their puzzled faces, he seems in verses 40-42 to bring the heavy talk of discipleship down to something, which is their size, something manageable for their just starting-out abilities and understandings. In these verses, Jesus speaks of acts of welcome, given and received; of righteousness; of reward; and of the beauty of small deeds carried out faithfully. In *The Message*, an interpretation of the Bible in contemporary language, the author Eugene Peterson presents the ever-compassionate Jesus speaking to his inexperienced disciples in language chosen to encourage their devotion. "This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice."

A true apprentice. That is a goal to which we each can aspire. The word "apprentice" suggests long years spent learning. The true meaning of apprentice suggests a life of simplicity and obedience. It suggests a strong mentor, enabling the green young disciple to experience and learn and grow. Most of all, it declares our lives to be about servanthood. It is in giving our lives away to others that we gain our lives. It is in giving our lives away that we grow more like our Master daily.

Apprenticeship is about humility and sacrifice and love. It's about looking within, knowing our own needs, and allowing our souls to be filled with so much love for Christ that it spills over onto everyone we meet.

The concept of apprenticeship, of quiet, steady giving to the world, day after day, year after year, without measuring the successes or failures along the way is the way of Christ. It's never about keeping score. To be the one who is known as the fixer, to be recognized as an expert, a major player in the fixing of a broken world, one misses the joy and serendipity that comes from living out an apprenticeship to Christ.

Many disciples, faced with the magnitude of needs in the world and burdened with the life or death importance of the work, turn away from Jesus, sometimes publicly but more often privately, in the darkness or a troubled heart.

The ever-compassionate Jesus, who is able to see into our puzzled, overwhelmed souls, offers us a place to dig in, a beginning point, an invitation to apprenticeship. Permission is given to "start small." And, best of all, Jesus admits up front that it's "a large work" we're called to do, but we must not be overwhelmed by its magnitude.

Human needs will keep on coming, sometimes quietly and sometimes in a thunder of suffering. We are called to be apprentices, not experts on human need. We are called to offer tender, personal responses whenever and wherever we can. You may not see great changes in the world around you, but, over time, both you and the world around you will see great changes within you. It's the reward for living an apprenticed life.

Some people spend their lives carrying spiritual water to a parched and dying world. Remember the kids who were given life-changing advice: "If you want your life to count for something, find a need and fill it."

He was right, this teacher. There is no better life than a life invested in others. Can we, will we dare to live a life of true apprenticeship to Christ? AMEN.