



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE MIRACLE OF DISCIPLESHIP”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 14:1-7; John 1:29-42; II Corinthians 5:16-21

*This sermon was preached by Dr. Joseph S. Harvard III on Sunday, January 15, 2017
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Gracious God, slow us down for a few minutes; silence all the voices that clamor for our attention. And then startle us again with your truth, your love, your living presence in the world, in the church, and our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Jesus had just come from the Jordan; his hair was still wet from his baptism when he heard John say: “The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” He was the one to heal the sin and brokenness in the world. He was the one who was going to set things right.

I’ve been thinking about this week and hearing over and over again on the news about the confirmation hearings for all the Cabinet members for the new President that is about to be inaugurated, and well, there was no vetting of these new people that Jesus was going to call. But one thing that was amazing was Jesus set out not to do this by himself.

Some of you are old enough to remember that character in the westerns called “Lone Ranger.” He had a horse named Silver, and an Indian companion named Tonto who went with him. But, Jesus was no Lone Ranger. He knew he needed others to help him.

What did Jesus do? He called some fishermen who are working at their trade. They heard a man’s voice, “Come, and follow me!” The text says that they dropped their nets and followed. This small group is described in the book of Acts as “turning the world upside down.”

That appears to me to be a strange way to begin a revolution. To call some fishermen, not by creating an army, not appointing special envoys, but to choose a group of untrained fishermen, and they go off stumbling after Jesus.

Most of us hear this story and start thinking about what we would have done, whether or not we would have left all to follow Jesus. If we got the call tomorrow afternoon while in line at the Harris Teeter, or sitting at home watching TV or reading the paper, what would we do? Last week we celebrated the baptism of Jesus and affirmed our own baptisms. What baptism means is that we have signed on to follow Jesus to be his disciples.

Once I was having dinner with some seminary classmates and good friends who were all Presbyterian ministers. Someone walked by our table and said, “You seem to be having a good time. What do you do?” We paused; one of our group who had a quick answer said, “We are undertakers, in the funeral business.” The questioner left quickly. I have reflected on the question. What do we do? You and I who are in the church of Jesus Christ?

We make disciples. We try to strengthen our own discipleship. Disciple comes from the Greek word that means, “to learn.” Historically, the word recognizes a pupil-teacher relationship. By looking at Jesus’ ministry,

we see how His relationship with His disciples transcended the normal pupil-teacher relationship. Jesus poured Himself into those who would follow Him – teaching His disciples, spending intimate relational time with them, and sending them out to proclaim the gospel and do good works. Jesus literally staked His whole ministry on those who followed him. He was quietly equipping the saints so that they could lead the multitudes.

I may have told you about what happened when Jesus ascended into heaven. Some of the heavenly hosts asked him how it went. He said he initiated the Kingdom of God. It's on its way. "How did you leave it?" was the question. "I left it in the hands of my followers." "You did what?" was the response. It is in our hands to keep the kingdom going.

When we think about it this way the focus is on us. Am I really worthy or capable to be a disciple? Am I good enough? Will I measure up? Look at the crew that Jesus calls to follow, fishermen. The point of this story is, God does not choose us because we are worthy. God calls ordinary people, fisherman folks just like you and me.

If you really are God, why would you choose amateurs to bring in your kingdom, to bring in your reign? Yet Jesus announces the coming of God's Kingdom by calling ordinary people to be his disciples.

Robert McAfee Brown, a great American theologian and Presbyterian minister in the last century, wrote: "There are little moments when vast things happen." Little moments when we are called to serve in the line at the soup kitchen, or teach a Sunday school class, or sing in the choir, or to visit the sick or those in prison. They heard the call, "Come and follow me," and they left their nets immediately.

I find it strange that Jesus called these ordinary people and even more strange that they followed. In fact, this is the strangest point of all; they left what they were doing and followed him. Who in his or her right mind is going to leave what they are doing and follow a rabbi? Unless, unless God created in them the faith to follow.

Barbara Brown Taylor, the Episcopal priest and teacher of preachers is right on target when she says this story should be called "the miracle by the lakeside." A God who has the power to create in the first disciples and in us faith where there is little or no faith which enables us to follow faithfully.

"And they followed."

This is the weekend that we honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King who shared his "I Have a Dream" speech with us in August 1963. But it was not an easy journey for Dr. Martin Luther King. He was the son of a Baptist minister, and became a Baptist minister. He is honored all over this nation now, but it was not that way in the beginning.

He was just a young pastor in Montgomery, Alabama. He was trying to learn what it was like to be a minister when a woman tired of the struggle, tired of the indignity, a woman named Rosa Parks said, "No, I am not going to the back of the bus." And the Montgomery bus boycott began. They needed a leader and reached out to this young pastor and he reluctantly accepted.

It was not long, as he described in his writings, that he received hate mail and death threats. He was worried about his own safety and the safety of his children. He was depressed and wondered why he had gotten into this. He couldn't sleep so he got up one night and went down to the kitchen and was sitting at the kitchen

table when he heard a voice, clear as any voice he ever heard: “Martin, stand up for justice, stand up for the truth,” and he said it sounded like the voice of Jesus, and then I heard him say, “I will never leave you.”

“There are little moments when vast things happen.”

The Bible tells us not to hide our lamp under a bushel but every moment is filled with the possibility that we are answering God’s call and that God is working through us whether it is serving in the soup kitchen, or teaching Sunday School, or singing in a choir, or bringing people together.

Did you make any New Year’s resolutions for 2017? Have you broken them? Let me ask you to make a resolution with me to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Let me ask you to go one step further: to resolve to be an agent of God’s reconciling love. Can we dare to reach out, to get with people who are different with whom we disagree and seek to find common ground, to affirm that we are all children of God who want us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God and each other. It isn’t easy—Jesus never suggested it would. But God can enable us in small and significant ways to be disciples this year.

This became clear to me in a story that Will Willimon, a Methodist minister, a friend who served as Dean at Duke Chapel for many years, tells. The Duke administration asked him to do a study on students’ life at Duke. He took this assignment very serious. He spent many evenings going to social events - riding around with campus police – interviewing and talking to people all over campus. He found some good things going on in student life at the university, but he also found much to worry about.

After he issued his report, a fraternity at Duke asked him to come and talk to them about his report. He had some critical things to say about fraternity life on campus.

Will knocked on the door and the president of the fraternity welcomed him. He noticed as he walked in, there were African American children with the fraternity guys. The young man who welcomed him said, “Dr. Willimon, they’re waiting for you back there in the common room. Follow me, I’ll take you there.”

“I hammered them for the moral failures of their generation for about half an hour. When I finally finished my talk, I asked if they had any questions or comments. Dead silence. So, I thanked them for the honor, and made my way wearily out the door,” Will says. “I noticed that the children were at the table. “Let me ask you,” I said, “who are those kids here tonight?”

“Oh, that’s Darrell, and his brother and little sister,” he said. “The fraternity has a service project in Durham, you know a type of Big Brother program. We met Darrell and his family that way. His mom is struggling to recover from addiction to crack and having a tough time. Sometimes it gets so bad that she can’t care for her children so she calls us up when she needs us. And with the approval of the administration, we go over, pick them up, and they stay with us until it’s okay to go home. We take them to school, buy them clothes, books and stuff. I tell you what’s amazing, Dr. Willimon, in fact it is a miracle,” the fraternity president said, “What’s amazing is that God would pick guys like us to do something this good for somebody else.”

It is amazing how God takes folks like you and me and does Kingdom work. So how about it, are you ready to re-up for another year of discipleship, letting God work through you so you might become a better disciple of Jesus Christ? I hope by God’s grace that I am ready and that you are. It is the miracle of discipleship. Jesus said: “Come, follow me!” And they followed.

Amen.