

3 Pentecost, Proper 7, Yr. A

June 21, 2020

Jeremiah 20:7-13, Matthew 10:24-39

This morning's Gospel continues where we left off last week with Jesus telling his disciples what following him is going to cost: they won't be protected from things that Jesus himself had to suffer, he tells them. You will remember that, at one point, in fact, at more than one point, the disciples were found to be arguing among themselves about who was the greatest. Or over who was going to sit at Jesus' right and left hand when he came in to his kingdom. They pretty much misunderstood what Jesus was about. And he wants to disabuse them: there is going to be a cost to following me is what he is telling them, but by taking up your cross, by losing your life, you will find it. You will remember Bonhoeffer's book *The Cost of Discipleship*. And there's that one sentence that is often held up as the substance of the book's message: **WHEN JESUS CALLS A MAN, HE CALLS HIM TO COME AND DIE. We can bring that up to date with inclusive language: **WHEN JESUS CALLS A PERSON, HE CALLS THAT PERSON TO COME AND DIE.** Probably not literally, but figuratively, to die to our self-centeredness.**

A number of us are reading Jim Wallis's book, *Christ and Crisis* and the central question posed in that book is **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A FOLLOWER OF**

JESUS? What are our expectations; what do we think it's all about?

Looking first at the reading we heard from Jeremiah, we're hearing from someone who had expectations that were disappointed. Perhaps Jeremiah had some concerns that being a prophet wasn't going to be a bed of roses because when God first called him, he tried to get out of it by pleading that he was really too young. But, of course, he went any way. He had been preaching a message of repentance and the doom and destruction that would follow if that message wasn't heeded. And, not only was the message not heeded, he was persecuted, discounted, reviled, beaten and humiliated by being put into the stocks. "Who wants to hear your downer message" was the general response. What we hear today is his frustration. What do you think Jeremiah's expectations were? At the very least, I would imagine that he thought he would be heard and taken seriously as the mouthpiece of the Lord. Maybe he even hoped that people would change! But if so, those expectations were all dashed.

Maybe that's what's going on in the Gospel. Jesus is telling the disciples to examine their expectations. And then laying out some hard truths: that his message would bring dissension and struggle.

I think it's fruitful for us to take a look at our own expectations. What does it mean for me, personally,

to say that I am a follower of Jesus? Do you remember the children's story *Charlotte's Web*? One of the characters, Templeton the rat, always had that question: what's it in for me, Charlotte? So for each of us there's that question: why follow Jesus, what's in it for me?

Many of you are aware of what's called the Prosperity Gospel, sometimes called the health and wealth gospel. There the answer to that question is pretty straightforward. Jesus wants me to be rich. The answer is about money, material wellbeing, it's about me getting all I want. It's a uniquely American Gospel and it's made a lot of its preachers extremely wealthy, because part of the message is that if you want Jesus to bless you, you need to begin by sending in some seed money. And the more you invest, the richer will be your harvest. I don't know how this particular gospel would be preached, because it says quite the opposite.

Part of this goes to what you think Jesus' essential message is. If you think it's about getting materially wealth, the prosperity gospel will be just what you want to hear. But here's the question: is that what Jesus' message is about? Jesus, who says that it's about loving God and neighbor; Jesus who says that it's about the coming of God's kingdom? Jesus, who says that as you have cared for the most vulnerable:

the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the poor, you have cared for him? That's a very different message.

One way of thinking about our spiritual lives is to see them as journeys, ever deeper into the mind and heart of God. As we said last week, we could see Jesus' message grow from his mission to just the Jews to include the whole world. You can see something similar in this morning's Gospel. Jesus is saying that, when our primary identity is as his follower, that identity will trump everything else: family, tribe, nation. That identity will require a heart and mind that will be ever broader. We have to grow into that.

It reminds me of a story, a good metaphor for what I think is being said here. The story goes that each of us is shut up in a room where we are perfectly content, at least at first. But then one day, we start feeling a bit confined and so we start looking for the door. When we find it, we step out of the room into a hallway, but the door shuts behind us and we can't get back in. We feel our way along that hallway until we come to another door, which opens and VOILA! This new room is bigger and brighter than the first one. And we're content for a while and then, we begin to feel a bit confined. And so on. Growth, bigger minds and hearts.

Of course, the opposite of this is fear. And Jesus talks about this. Don't be afraid, he says. Don't fear those who can kill the body but not the soul. And

when you think about it, while love and trust and discipleship are all about widening the circle, fear is about circling the wagons. Closing down rather than opening up. I think that's what Jesus is talking about when he talks about trying so hard so save our lives that we lose them. Because what kills the soul is sin and selfishness, and that closing down, that closing in upon oneself.

There's a lot of fear in the country today. Those who are vulnerable fear, sometimes for their very lives; those who are on the other side fear the loss of life as they have known it.

Will Willimon tells the story of talking with some people in a Mississippi church. He was talking specifically about this dying to yourself, to your old way of thinking, and asked people whether anyone had ever had to die in that way to be a Christian. At first, he said, there was silence, but then one man spoke up and said that he had thought he wouldn't be able to live in a world where black people were treated the same as white people and that when segregation ended, he thought he would die. "But I didn't," he said. "I was reborn. My next-door neighbor, my best friend, is black. Something old had to die in me for something new to be born."

So: expectations and blessings.

I know I told you the story about taking a group to a food kitchen in downtown Dallas. Since there were quite a few of us and not really enough jobs, I took a place at the end of the line where I could put a glass of milk or water on each tray and at least give a greeting. Some people acknowledged me and some didn't. But at one point, a large black woman, dressed in a dirty old winter coat, looked at me when I said, "I hope you have a good day," and smiled and said, "Honey, I am so blessed!" And she left me standing there, wanting to call her back, to ask her how she could feel blessed in her awful situation, but realizing two things: she had a larger view of blessings than I did and that she had blessed me by her joy, in that most unlikely of places. Amen.

