

PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST

– **Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches**

– **June 20, 2010**

Luke 9: 51-62

When we have our children baptized, the child's parents are routinely asked the question, "Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?" This is a significant question for anyone to answer and most of us seated here this morning have already answered that question with a strong, "Yes, I will." But what does it mean for us to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ?

Our scripture lesson for today reminds us that Jesus is serious about his ministry and that it is not easy to be one of his disciples. This section of Luke's gospel is one of Jesus' harder sayings and stops us in our busy tracks as we ponder on this day what it truly means for us to be a disciple.

In a sermon entitled, **High Priced Discipleship**, the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor boldly proclaims that Jesus would not have made a good parish minister. She says this about the duties of a good church pastor: "So much of the job depends on making it easy for people to come to church and rewarding for them to stay. Talk to any of the church growth experts and they will tell you how important it is to create a safe, caring environment where people believe their concerns will be heard and their needs will be met.

The basic idea is to find out what people are looking for and give it to them, so that they decide to stay put instead of continuing to shop for a church down the street.

This effort to please does not stop once people decide to join the church. A good pastor will work hard to make sure that worship is satisfying, that Christian education is appealing, and that plenty of opportunities for fellowship and service exist. A well-run church is like a well-run home, where members can count on regular meals in pleasant surroundings, with people who generally mine their manners. It matches the American ideal of Christians as upstanding and good-hearted citizens. When I hear people talk about Christian virtues and values, it is hard to imagine anyone but Norman Rockwell doing the illustrations: a third grade classroom full of little girls with blond pigtails and little boys with slingshots in their back pockets, all of them bowing their heads in prayer; families gathered around a Thanksgiving dinner table, with a carving knife in father's hand and a slotted spoon in mother's, while all the children wait eagerly to be served; a bench at the general store, where the milkman, the mailman, and the newspaper boy all stop to share a dozen doughnuts before getting on with the day's work."

"I don't believe that there is anything intrinsically wrong with these pictures, but according to Jesus in Luke, chapter 9, we cannot be his disciples unless we give up our securities, relinquish our familial obligations, and never look back. Later in Luke, chapter

12, Jesus tells us that we cannot be disciples unless we hate our families, carry our crosses, and give up all our possessions.”

Barbara Brown Taylor asks, “So, why don’t we all—preachers and believers alike—just turn in our resignations right now? Because clearly, none of us has what it takes. If Jesus were in charge of an average congregation I figure there would be about four people left there on Sunday morning, and chances are those four would be fooling themselves. Jesus would greet newcomers by saying, “Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this way of life? It will take everything you have. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. Plenty of people have launched out on it without counting the cost, and as you can see they are not here anymore. Why don’t you go home and think it over? I would hate for you to get in over your head.”

So what does it cost to be a disciple of Jesus? In the current edition of *Lectionary Homiletics*, the Rev. Kent Miller, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Denton, Texas shares some poignant insights into our text for the day and what Jesus is telling us about discipleship. He says, “Three followers come to Jesus and offer to become disciples by following him. The first person is turned away because the cost is too high. It costs your security. Even the animals have more security than Jesus and his disciples. There is a radical rootlessness to becoming a disciple. The disciple has no home. This doesn’t mean just that there is no roof over your head; it means that in whatever country you find yourself, or

in what ever culture you live, what ever planet or universe, there is a rootlessness that will be yours, because your home is the kingdom of God, and not the kingdoms of this world. Home is where your heart is, and your heart is with God. To become a disciple means you will be a wanderer.

The second person is also turned away because the cost was too high. This second would-be disciple wants to maintain his ties to his family and carry out the obligations he has to bury his parents. We do not know if the delay is to be a week or twenty years. But Jesus is direct and to the point. To become a disciple means social and family obligations are set aside in favor of the demands of God's reign and rule in the world of the living. This is a harsh one for me to hear because I work so hard to put my family first and not be one of those ministers who screws up their children even more.

The third person is likewise turned away because the cost of following Jesus was much too high. This would –be disciple asks Jesus to let him go kiss his parents good-bye. Now who could be against that? After all, doesn't every mother teach her child to tell her where he is going, to call her when she arrives, and to tell her what time he or she is coming home? A more than reasonable request! But Jesus is not easier on this person than on the other two. "No," says Jesus, "There is no looking back. Either you are with me, or not. Once you agree to come, the course is set and we move on. Jesus says, "Follow me." And he wants his friends to

commit themselves to the tasks of living the good news of God's reign.

“Don't look back,” Satchel Paige used to say, “Something may be gaining on you.” No one who puts hand to the plow and gazes longingly backward is fit to plant this field. Life moves us forward; to look back is to engage again in death. To become a disciple means no backward glances.” (Lectionary Homiletics, June/July 2004)

Rev. Miller reminds us that Christian discipleship is not something to be engaged in casually. It is not a summer cruise; it is not an alternate lifestyle; it is not even a career choice. It is not about joining some new group or doing the popular thing. It is not even about being a good person. Discipleship is about becoming a new person altogether—it is about a new identity. Discipleship, Jesus tells us, is a matter of life and death that costs you everything you are so that you can become everything God intends for you to be. The disciple is the one who gives it all up in order to gain it all.

Is there any wonder that so few followers of Jesus became full-fledged disciples? Is it any wonder that we struggle with our own excuses, and our reasons, and our cautious commitments? As Barbara Brown Taylor said, “While Jesus may not have ever made a very good parish minister, he was indeed a very good savior and thank goodness, he is not through saving us yet.” We who have answered “Yes” to the question of becoming a disciple certainly

know that it is not easy to be rootless and a wanderer in a country that values securities. We know it is not easy to hold our faith higher than we hold our family and social customs. Even as we know how hard it is to be a disciple of Christ's in our world today, we can be assured that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ has walked before us and will be with us, always leading us, guiding us, and encouraging us to life of greater discipleship. We know that in the struggle to be a disciple, we will be called to serve one another, to care for one another, and to bear one another's burdens.

On June 8th, Diane Sawyer ended the ABC Evening News with a wonderful story about a 98 year-old woman who left her fortune to her hometown when she died recently. Diane Sawyer told this heartwarming story, "There are two things about 98 year old Verna Oller that just about anyone around her neighborhood in Long Beach, Washington can tell you. She was feisty and she was frugal. Few knew Verna Oller was a savvy investor or what she did with her \$4.5 million. Verna was so frugal that she never went to a hairdresser. After all, she could cut her own hair for free. She refused to buy new shoelaces and improvised by looping the zipper from an old coat through her boots. When her longtime friends, Guy and Carolyn Glenn, bought her a new coat on sale, she sent it right back. She found a cheaper one for just \$2. There was no reason to go buy new clothes if there were good ones at the thrift store," Carolyn Glenn said. "So that's where she bought a lot of her clothes."

Oller never made much money, earning an hourly wage filleting fish until she was in her 70's. She cut her own firewood until she was in her 90's. But Oller was carrying a secret, a big one, and she entrusted the Glens to keep it. It turned out she was a master investor. "She went to the library and read Barron's and the Wall Street Journal." She call Glenn 'the paperboy' because he would give her his already read copy of the newspaper. She never wanted to spend money on it herself. Verna Oller was so savvy, she gave the Glens' son stock investing tips, telling him about how she made a 50% return on AT&T when it was at a low point.

The sturdy old lady with no formal education amassed \$4.5 million and before she died, she directed Guy Glenn to spend every cent of it on her hometown. "She wants a swimming pool to be built, that was her main goal," he said. Part of Oller's money will go to building the town's very first indoor swimming pool. The pool was important to Oller because as a poor little girl growing up there it frustrated her that kids often had no place to swim. Money will also be set aside for scholarships and grants for local teachers. When Verna Oller died, she didn't want a funeral or even an obituary. In fact, she didn't want any credit at all. I think we could learn a lot from how Verna Oller lived frugally and invested wisely so that other people's lives would be made better!

I live in a home that is saturated with sports talk and sporting activities and so it was not surprising that one night a few weeks ago, Elliot came into our bedroom and informed us that the former

UCLA basketball coach and Hall of Famer, Coach John Wooden was gravely ill and not expected to live much longer. The next day we learned that he had died in Los Angeles at the age of 99 with his family and several of his former players at his side. Coach Wooden was on the cover of last week's Sport's Illustrated Magazine and his famous quotes and life philosophies have been shared in newspapers around our country. This is what Bill Walton said about the man who has forever influenced his life personally and professionally. "The joy and happiness in Coach Wooden's life came from the success and accomplishments of others. He never let us forget what he learned from his two favorite teachers, Abraham Lincoln and Mother Teresa, 'That a life not lived for others is not a life.'"

Mother Teresa is known to have said that we are not here on this earth to be successful but to be faithful. I believe that she knew better than most Christians what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. In the famous book that was published almost twenty five years ago now, **All I Needed To Learn I Learned In Kindergarten**, Robert Fulghum ends his book with an encounter he had with Mother Teresa and shares how her life has impacted his forever. This is what he has to say about Mother Teresa, some ten years before her death in 1996:

"There is a person who has profoundly disturbed my peace of mind for a long time. She doesn't even know me, but she continually goes around minding my business. We have very little in common.

She is an old Albanian woman who grew up in Yugoslavia; she is a Roman Catholic nun who lives in poverty in India. I disagree with her on fundamental issues of population control, the place of women in the world and the church, and I am turned off by her naïve statements about ‘what God wants.’ She stands at the center of great contradictory notions and strong forces that shape human destiny. She drives me crazy and I get upset every time I hear her name or read her words or see her face.

Some years ago, at a grand conference of quantum physicists and religious mystics at the Oberoi Towers Hotel in Bombay, India I saw this powerful little woman. Standing by the door at the rear of the hall, I sensed a presence beside me. And there she was. Alone. Come to speak to the conference as its guest. She looked at me and smiled. I see her face still.

She strode to the podium and changed the agenda of the conference from intellectual inquiry to moral activism. She said, in a firm voice to the awed assembly: “We can do no great things; only small things with great love.”

The contradictions of her life and faith are nothing compared to my own. And while I wrestle with frustration about the impotence of the individual, she goes right on changing the world. While I wish for more power and resources, she uses her power and resources to do what she can do at the moment. She upsets me, she disturbs me and she shames me. What does she have that I do not?

If ever there is truly peace on earth, goodwill to all, it will be because of women like Mother Teresa. Peace is not something you wish for; it's something you make, something you do, something you are, and something you give away!"

And Jesus said, "Follow me! Go and proclaim the kingdom of God!"

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Gracious God, we gather together on this warm Summer morning with our friends and families to worship you and to ponder in new ways what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We hear once again the hard sayings of Jesus and according to him, we cannot be his disciples unless we give up our securities, relinquish our familial obligations, and never look back. We really don't know what to do with Jesus' words as we struggle with our own excuses, our own reasons, and our cautious commitments to the life of faith. We who have answered "Yes" to the question of becoming a disciple certainly know that it is not easy to be rootless and a wanderer in a country that values securities. We know it is not easy to hold our faith higher than we hold our family and social customs. Yet even as we know how hard it is to be a disciple of Christ's in our world today, we can be assured that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ has walked before us and will be with us, always leading us, guiding us, and encouraging us to life of greater discipleship.

We can give thanks that while there may not be a lot of people who have what it takes to shoulder the cross, it doesn't mean that the rest of us are lost. We have a loving and gracious Savior who is not yet through saving us and who continues to find ways in our

everyday lives to embrace a higher calling and a more meaningful way of living than anything our possessions, our securities, and our social obligations can provide.

We pray on this day for our friends and family members who are sick, hospitalized, grieving, facing difficult challenges or embarking on new journeys. We pray especially for our troops in Afghanistan and the Middle East and for our loved ones facing illness, grief and life challenges beyond our understanding. May our worship on this day remind us this week of the things that truly nourish our souls and encourage a life of greater discipleship. As we have been reminded, the gospel is not for sissies. It is powerful stuff, powerful enough to challenge the most sacred human ties and powerful enough to remind us that while the peace of God can divide us, it also is the only thing that can truly set us free. May we have the perspective and courage we need to live Christ's mandate of love and to more fully devote ourselves to his peace mission of bringing God's kingdom more fully to our unfinished world and incomplete selves. In the name of the One who showed us how to live and to love, we pray, AMEN.