

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, September 20, 2009.

Hear again these words from the Gospel according to Mark: Then they came to Capernaum; and when Jesus was in the house he asked them, “what were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way, they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. “What were you arguing about on the way?” That phrase, “on the way” refers not only to that dusty road to Capernaum, but it also is a shorthand for the way of discipleship, the way the cross and resurrection, the way of following Jesus.

On the way, what were those disciples discussing? They had been talking about who among them was the greatest. Earlier Jesus had been telling them again how he would be betrayed and killed and then rise again. And the scripture tells us that the disciples did not understand what he was saying and did not ask him any questions. But on the way to Capernaum they get into a discussion about who is the greatest. I do not think this is a mere boasting match. If the teacher is truly going to be betrayed and killed, then someone will need to be second in command. One of the twelve will need to be ready to be in charge. The fact that they are discussing this is evidence that the disciples really don't get it. They don't comprehend that Jesus is going to rise again, that Jesus is leading them on a way, on a path of discipleship that passes through death but emerges in resurrection. Jesus is leading them on a path of sacrifice and service. As Jesus says, those who want to be first in line must become last and servant of all. The way of servanthood is a way that leads to new life. “What were you arguing about on the way?” Jesus asks. In other words, “You all don't get it, yet, do you?”

What have we been arguing about on the way? How, like those disciples, have we managed to miss the meaning of discipleship? Jesus' disciples were discussing who among them was the greatest, who would be in charge, perhaps, if Jesus was out of the picture. In contrast, I have a lot of conversations where the people involved are talking not about who wants to be in charge but about who DOESN'T want to be in charge. Instead of asking “who's the greatest?” we more often end up talking about who has the GREATEST amount on their plate. “We can't ask this person to help, because they've got a lot going on right now.” “I'd love to help, but I just have too many other things that I am in charge of.” And it's true! Many of us are too busy and overwhelmed with everything we have to take care of. And there are always more things to do than we have time for. At St. Luke's, we have lots of ministries that require time and people and resources. We are trying to faithfully be the servants Jesus calls us to be. We have people involved with worship and music. We teach English for speakers of other languages. We serve homeless families with Interfaith Hospitality Network. We build houses with Habitat for Humanity. We reach out to the sick and dying. We teach Sunday school and Christian formation programs. We have quiet days for people to take a break and just pray. We extend a welcome to newcomers and people seeking God or a deeper knowledge of God. We have pie socials and dinners and conversations as a part of the via media project. The list goes on and on, and I have a whole other list of things that I would love to see us take on. But when I think about this long list of what I'd love to see us doing and the long list of what we're already doing, it just makes me tired! I'm tired because I can't do it all, and I can't think of anyone else who can do it, because I've asked people over and over again and been told, “I have enough on my plate already.”

But then I hear Jesus' question again, "What were you arguing about on the way?" And I realize that what we've often been discussing on the way is how full our plate is. That conversation has a way of overshadowing the larger concern, which is how do we become disciples of Jesus? Taking care of the things on our plate, even if they are serving others, does not necessarily equal discipleship. Jesus' disciples probably thought they were doing the right thing by thinking ahead, trying to choose a leader who could take the reins if Jesus was gone. After all, isn't that what Jesus would want, for the movement to continue, for someone to step up and take charge so that the work of healing and casting out demons, and preaching could go on? The perpetuation of ministries is not at the heart of what Jesus wants from his disciples, because what Jesus most wants from his disciples is their hearts. Jesus is most interested in us, in our hearts, souls, and strength being dedicated to him and his message of redeeming love. And if we want to follow him "on the way," we need to stop worrying for a moment about who is going to be in charge of this or that project and remember that first and foremost the one who is in charge...is not us.. First and foremost, Jesus is the way, and we are called to follow him and be his disciples.

Last night we formally began our stewardship campaign with a wonderful dinner and some inspiring words in Johnson Hall. For those of you who are new, stewardship season is a time when we remember all the gifts God has given us and consider how we are going to be stewards and caretakers of those gifts. It's a time when we set aside a portion of our time, talent, and money to give to the church. It is tempting to worry, what with the downturn in the economy and the reality that many of our St. Luke's members have so much on their plates. It's tempting to let our dialogue "on the way" of discipleship erode into an anxious discussion. So thank God Jesus is there to ask us, "what were you arguing about on the way?" Thank God Jesus is there to say, "hey folks, you're not getting it." The path of discipleship is not about figuring out who's going to be at the head of the line. It's about getting to the back of the line and following Jesus. In elementary school, I used to hate getting sent to the back of the line. In Christianity, it's the goal! And while we're at the back of the line, we can take a moment to remind ourselves that we are not the ones in charge. We are disciples, followers, students of Jesus.

It is stewardship season and we will be receiving pledge cards in the mail. Yes, we hope and believe that everyone will make a generous pledge to support the ministries of this church. But set aside the pledge card for just a moment. We need to remember that giving is not one more thing on our plate, one more item on the to-do list. Giving is an act of discipleship, and we give because we have given our hearts to Christ. While we have put aside the pledge card, let's also put down that long list of ministries that need volunteers and the long list of social concerns. We are not going to forget about them. We are not going to forget about the hungry children in this world, about refugees, about all the problems that face our world. We are not going to forget about them, but we are just going to set them aside for a moment. Before we pledge any more money or time or talent, I want us to take some time this stewardship season to make a different kind of pledge, a pledge to our own hearts. I want us to take some time and be stewards of our hearts, to take care of our hearts, to do what we need to do to refocus on hearts on our savior. Throughout the centuries Christians have done amazing things, impossible things. Many of those Christians were just nobodies, people without title or status. They did and do amazing things because their hearts were fixed on a savior who died for us and rose to new life, who taught us about love that is stronger than death. WE have done and will do amazing things, not because we know how to mobilize volunteers or raise money, but because we know how to make disciples who trust and love and follow Jesus.

The reading from the letter from James we heard this morning ended with the words, "draw near

to God, and he will draw near to you.” My brothers and sisters, stewardship season is a time to draw near to God, to offer our hearts, busy and worried and anxious though they be. Stewardship season is a time to ask God to draw near to us, to refresh us, renew us, rededicate us as disciples, and then as disciples first, following Christ from the end of the line, we can take up the pledge card. As disciples, “on the way,” we can see a way to deal with what's on our plate and the needs of our world. I don't usually in sermons tell people what to do, but I want to offer this little encouragement. This week, before you launch into whatever you do during the day, before you start checking email or pick up a telephone, or get into a car to go to an appointment just take one minute, 60 seconds, and ask God, “give me the heart of a disciple, again.” “Give us the hearts of disciples again.” So that when Jesus asks us “what were you arguing about on the way?” we can answer, “we were in talking about how to see you more clearly, love you more dearly, and follow you more nearly. We were talking about how great the view is from the back of the line. And we were wondering when you might tell us more about dying and letting go, and rising to new life, on the way”