

Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church + Third Sunday after Pentecost + June 25, 2017

(1st Lesson: Jeremiah 20:7-13 2nd Lesson: Romans 6:1b-11 Gospel: St. Matthew 10:24-39)

When you heard today's lessons, what thoughts entered your head? Did you have to do some mental gymnastics to make sense of this Word from God? What kind of feelings were stirred up in your heart and soul? Were you comforted or threatened? My first thought was *I don't want to preach on these lessons*, so I was tempted to say *No!* when Pastor Anne asked me to preach today. I had the uneasy feeling that the lessons offered "great reasons to think twice about following God and being Jesus' disciple."

God called and commissioned Jeremiah to pronounce judgment and doom upon Jerusalem and Judah. He was put in the stocks, publicly humiliated, and then set free. Jeremiah then turns on the Lord, crying out: *O Lord, you have enticed me and I was enticed. You have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.* Do you get it? Jeremiah is accusing the Lord of seducing him (without his consent) and that he is the victim of abuse—and that the Lord is the abuser!

And then Paul comes along and tells us that we have been crucified, died and been buried. *You must consider yourselves dead!*

Then Jesus speaks disturbing words to would-be disciples: *don't be surprised when you are called children of the devil; don't fear those who kill the body... but the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.* He doesn't stop: *If you deny me before others, I'll deny you before my Father.... I have not come to bring peace but a sword... to turn family members into enemies.* Jesus warns, *If you find your life, you're going to lose it.*

Have you heard enough? Do you really want to be a follower of a God who, according to Jeremiah, is abusive? Does this talk about being dead and losing your life for Jesus' sake make you say, *Gee, how can I get me some of that?* To me, it feels like this Sunday should be called *Discourage Discipleship Day!*

Who needs this? Perhaps we should just put our worship books back in the rack, put away our bulletins, gather our things, say, *Lots of luck* instead of *Peace be with you*, and bid one another *adieu or goodbye*. But, on second thought, by saying those words we would be commending each other to this God. Maybe we should just be quiet and *go gentle into this hot day.*

But, here we stand—or sit—for we can do no other. What makes us stick around? Whatever the reason, we stand in good company: Jeremiah has a burning fire in his bones and cannot but speak the word of the Lord; Paul, who once the persecuted Jesus and his followers, becomes his most fervent disciple, suffers for the faith, winds up imprisoned in Rome, and dies a martyr. Jesus prays *Father, let this cup pass from me* but remains obedient to his Father's will and is faithful unto death, even death on a cross. Down through the centuries, many who bore the name of Jesus paid the cost of discipleship with their lives.

So, why did they—and why do we stick around? Why do we continue to come here week after week? Why do we serve on council and boards, teach Sunday School or Vacation Bible School, and seek to be faithful disciples in this world? Why do we as Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church seek to discern where God is leading us?

I guess that for some, it might be the fear of hell. Didn't Jesus say in today's Gospel that we are to *fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell*? But I don't believe that fear of hell is the best motivation for discipleship—or even a good one—and I really don't think that Jesus does either.

Perhaps we stick around because we feel that *it really hasn't been so bad*. We haven't experienced the persecution that some of Jesus' followers have gone through down through the ages—and that some Christians are still experiencing this very moment. I would guess that most of us have never been locked up or imprisoned because we follow Jesus, and it's a sure thing that none of us has been put to death. But we may have experienced the cost of discipleship in not-so-dramatic ways. Perhaps you have had family members or friends turn away from you because of your faith. Maybe your faith has been challenged at work or school—or even at church! Only two major events in my life come even close to reaching the level of paying a price because of my faith: the one, dealing with the conflict within my former church body and the other, dealing with who I am and finally being honest with my family, friends, my church, myself—and with God. Amazingly, it was in the middle of these struggles that I felt and experienced the Presence of the Holy One more than I had ever known before or since.

We have not paid the high price of following Jesus that others have, but we have experienced enough to know that the forces of evil that Jeremiah, Paul, and Jesus faced are still at war against God and God's people. As long as we are "above the grass," we are still on the battle field and sin still has power in this fallen and broken creation.

So... Why do we stick around? Why do we continue to be followers of God, disciples of Jesus? Rudolph Otto, a 20th Century German Lutheran theologian and scholar of religion, offers a keen insight. In *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto describes what he calls the “numinous” (and what we might call “God”) as *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the Mystery before which we both tremble and are fascinated, are repelled and attracted. This One is wholly Other—totally amazing and outside our human experience, absolutely unapproachable, terrifying and overwhelming, making us aware of our creature status—that we are “nothing” and “unworthy.” At the same time, we are pulled in, because this One is *fascinans*, attracting and fascinating. The Holy One, the wholly Other, creates a yearning, catching us up and drawing us in.

If Rudolph Otto is too “heady” for us, perhaps St. Augustine brings it more “down to earth.” In his *Confessions*, he prays: *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*”

But there is more and it is good news. In Jesus, we see the face of the God. We discover that this Holy One is not unapproachable and terrifying, but smiling with outstretched arms. Jesus assures us that we are of great value to God, who even keeps track of hair follicles and falling sparrows. In Jesus, we see into the very heart of God, and discover that God is merciful and compassionate--God is love.

St. Paul was right—and all this talk of “crucified, dead and buried” is Good News! In the waters of baptism, we are joined to Christ and his death and made alive with him in his resurrection. The Spirit of God who has called and gathered us now empowers to walk in newness of life. This Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead, joins us today. He is the host at the table, and gives us not only the bread and cup, but give us his very own self for the forgiveness of sin.

So, *what does this mean?* What does this mean—to *walk in newness of life?* What does this mean as you seek to live as followers of Jesus every day? I wish I could give you specific answers for your life’s situation—but that’s your job, not mine! Spend some time this week asking yourself *What does it mean for me* to follow Jesus faithfully?

What does this mean for us as the faith community called Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church? We are called to discern together how God is calling us to be disciples here and now:

- Phinney has become a *Reconciling in Christ* congregation and adopted a welcoming statement which affirms that *all are welcome... you are welcome* (check it out on our homepage—prlc.org). What are the next steps to take so that we live into and live out this vision and become an even more loving and welcoming place for all where all together we grow into the fulness of Christ?
- Our Phinney Food Bank has provided countless meals to countless people—and this ministry remains vital even as the number of people seeking help decreases. Is God calling us to address the systemic causes of on-going hunger problem as well as providing food for our hungry neighbors?
- We provide the Phinney Houses and open our doors to Mary's Place. Are we now called to address the systems that perpetuate the homeless crisis?
- We are reaching out to other faith communities, including our Jewish and Muslim friends. How do we break down walls of hatred and bigotry and build bridges of understanding and peace—*shalom, salaam*?
- Perhaps God is giving you a vision and insight into new ways for us to live out our calling together as Phinney Ridge disciples. In the days ahead, ask yourself *What does this mean for our congregation* to follow Jesus faithfully.

But right now, I invite you to open your bulletins to the Prayer of the Day on Page 4 and pray it aloud with me: *Teach us, good Lord God, to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labor and not to ask for reward, except that of knowing that we do your will, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen*