

DISCIPLESHIP

Our gospel lesson, somewhat ominous in tone, is spoken by Jesus to his disciples, with some Pharisees listening in perhaps. I imagine that the Twelve are shell-shocked, having witnessed their Teacher confront the entire Jerusalem establishment. As events propel Jesus on course to his death, he keeps up the intensity of his attacks. The disciples probably are wondering what they've gotten into. They have no protection. Rather than getting reassurance from Jesus, they get their expectations lowered. "Don't expect to be called rabbi, for you are all students." "Don't expect to be instructors, for you are the ones being instructed." Clearly, these words are meant not just for the Twelve who hear them, but for all disciples ever after, including us. In various teachings, Jesus describes the ideal disciple as bold, generous, loyal, and compassionate. In our lesson today, Jesus lifts up three more virtues that disciples should exhibit: Humility, Repentance, and Learning. And he points to the Pharisees as examples of what not to exhibit: Self-exaltation, showiness in worship, hollow religiosity, and bookish knowledge. In the verses just prior to our lesson today, Jesus launches a polemic against Pharisees. He does this with a measure of respect for their knowledge of Jewish law. As scholars of Torah, the Pharisees are tied to the very roots of Jewish life and customs. They got to their status in Jewish society the old-fashioned way: they earned it.

Mental discipline, long apprenticeship, and family connections got them where they are. If you had to pass exams or serve residencies to attain your professional status, you can understand Pharisees' stake in their professional positions. Jesus endorses their scholarship but disapproves of their pious snobbery. They place ethical and moral burdens on the rank-and-file Jew which Pharisees themselves do not uphold. The leadership patterns of Pharisees are pretty much the opposite of the ways of discipleship of Jesus, who says, "My yoke is easy and my burden light." Think of burden in our Old Testament reading: What could be a heavier burden than trying to cross a river bed carrying a large wooden cabinet containing (so it was believed) stone tablets? But in the reading from Joshua for today the priests wade into the swollen river Jordan, lifting high the place of God's very presence. The flood-waters abate so that the Hebrew people cross easily into the Promised Land, at long last. The people remember: "We've come this far by faith." They walk out into the water, buoyed by the easy yoke of Yahweh. Discipleship is light-footed, like that. It is strong, self-denying, and sometimes silent. The ideal disciple, for example, picks out the neediest person in a room and patiently sits down next to them.

REPENTANCE

Pharisees need to repent of their egotism. The human ego works against discipleship.

It craves what it does not deserve.
 It demands credit for what it does not earn.
 It insists on having its own way.
 The ego’s need for privilege, power,
 and control undermines discipleship.
 At the same time, the human ego is useful.
 It is a first level defense.
 It holds together the formative personality.
 It’s part of what makes a person interesting.
 Insufficient ego is a personality defect
 often accompanied by assumption
 of a one-down relationship with others.
 Chronic subservience is spiritually unhealthy,
 spiritually unsustainable.
 Religion, unfortunately, can be pressed into service
 to maintain one-down relationships.
 Jesus’ disciples are never kept
 in a one-down relationship with Jesus.
 He doesn’t expect them to passively submit
 to his rule or authority.
 But in today’s lesson, Jesus tames egos.
 Jesus calls for a change of heart – metanoia –
 a complete turnabout
 regarding the disciple’s place in God’s kingdom.
 Metanoia means seeing things differently.
 It means seeing yourself differently.
 The true disciple repents of attitudes
 that put the self above the community.
 The true disciple repents of status-seeking.
 True disciples readily admit
 that they are not the center of the universe.
 That they do not have all the answers.
 That they do not replace Jesus in the community.
 Disciples are not priests.
 “You have one Father, the one in heaven.”
 The right posture of a disciple is humility.

HUMILITY

According to his autobiography,
 Benjamin Franklin set goals for himself

in matters of virtuous behavior and attitude.
 Last among the virtues was this:
 “Humility. Imitate Christ and Socrates.”
 We can just imagine Franklin
 feeling quite proud of his humility.
 “Today I’m imitating Christ.”
 The same Christ who cautions,
 “All who exalt themselves will be humbled.”
 Some people are proud of their self-abasement.
 There’s a Yiddish joke they tell on themselves:
 A rabbi rushes to the altar, falls to his knees,
 and starts crying, “I’m nobody! I’m nobody!”
 The cantor of the synagogue,
 impressed by this example of humility,
 joins the rabbi on his knees, saying,
 “I’m nobody. I’m nobody!”
 The custodian, watching from the corner,
 can’t restrain himself.
 He joins the other two on his knees,
 calling out, “I’m nobody! I’m nobody!”
 At which point the rabbi nudges the cantor,
 points to the custodian, and says,
 “Look who thinks he’s nobody!”
 Self-exaltation is related to the tendency
 to value oneself *over* others.
 Humility is a result of valuing oneself
with others, in solidarity.
 True humility is not self-abasement:
 “I’m no good to anyone.”
 Humiliation places control outside the self.
 Humility is not humiliation.
 Humility is an act of self-control:
 keeping the self in perspective.
 The humble person knows
 what she or he contributes to the general welfare,
 while acknowledging the contributions
 of others to her or his own welfare.
 In the context of discipleship,
 humility is related to service,

service in the sense of
voluntarily willing the betterment of others.
Serving is not the same as being servile.
Disciples cannot forget their own interests,
but rather see their own interests
relative to others in the community.
Servanthood is meeting the needs of others,
as you would want your needs to be met.
Disciples serve out of gratitude
for what God has given them.
Gratitude is a posture that results in humility.
Being a disciple of Jesus
doesn't make gratitude come any easier.
The habit of gratitude is learned over a lifetime.
One of Jesus' most idealistic hopes is that
his disciples would accept mutual equality.
Egalitarian is not an adjective
that describes the Twelve very often.
“You have but one teacher,” he reminds them.
“You all are students.” Lifelong Learners.

LEARNING

So far, our lesson has portrayed discipleship
as an extraordinary level of self-discipline:

1. Discipleship involves repentance
for the sins of the ego.
2. Discipleship involves humility
for the mutual benefit of the community.

The third discipline is the desire to improve.
Discipleship does not come naturally.
In some ways, it works against human nature,
which is ego-driven and control-seeking.
The word *disciple* means “learner.”
No one disciple has the position of teacher,
because there is one Master Teacher, Jesus.
All others are learners.
Disciples can teach one another.
Disciples can teach the world at large.
But disciples teach without the title, teacher.
No one is rabbi. No one is instructor.

A disciple can shift perspective
based on new truth as it becomes known.
No disciple, no matter how dedicated,
ever learns all there is to know.
I was taught, for example,
that nothing travels faster than the speed of light.
Now, physicists tell me that
certain unusually distorted regions of space-time
might permit some forms of matter to reach
distant locations in less time than light can.
That's a shift in perspective.
Jesus chides the Pharisees for rigid thinking.
Jesus is not anti-intellectual.
We forget that Jesus is himself a biblical scholar.
What gets him is scholarship as a mark of rank.
Pharisees parade their learning, treating others
as their moral and religious inferiors.
Allegiance to Christ should drive us
into new domains of knowledge,
says Tom Briedenthal in a sermon
at Princeton University Chapel.
Serious study seeks truth.
Christ is the ultimate source of truth.
So scholarship can lead to an encounter
with the living Christ.
“Faith has nothing to fear from scholarship,”
concludes Briedenthal,
and people of faith should support
the pursuit of truth as a spiritual discipline,
without reservation.
Nothing is quite so humbling
as the discovery of new truths.
It turns out certain particles
can travel faster than the speed of light.
Disciples treat knowledge as a gift
and use it unselfishly to enhance the community.
Discerning what the community needs
is part of discipleship.
So is discerning how to meet community needs.

Disciples accept the task of learning a Jesus-life
and applying that learning in humble service.

They learn from one another
and from those they serve.

Disciples develop sensitivity to the weaknesses
of the strong and the failures of the achievers.

Bold, generous, loyal, compassionate,
as well as repentant, humble, willing to learn:
Such a discipleship is possible with God's help.

CONCLUSION

When Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a prisoner
in a Soviet labor camp,
he worked in the fields at back-breaking jobs,
slowly starving.

One day it was all too much.

He walked over to a bench and sat down,
heedless of the guards who would
bludgeon him with his own shovel.

An old man with an utterly expressionless face
came to sit next to him, and with his stick
drew in the sand at Solzhenitsyn's feet
the sign of the cross.

Solzhenitsyn wrote later,

"Here was one man against the all-powerful state;
yet the hope of all mankind was expressed
in that simple cross."

One man, one life-long learning
in the art of humble discipleship.

The gift: the power to believe
that all things are possible
through the One God who loves us.

Amen.