

**Discipleship**  
**#2 of Sermon Series**  
**Susan Flanders**  
**Matthew 9:35-10:8**

**June 15, 2008**

This morning's theme - Discipleship – flows very naturally, not just from the Gospel reading, but from last week's sermon on Justification. Discipleship is what we do in response to God's gracious love and acceptance of us as worthy. Discipleship is response. Discipleship is not what we try to do to get God to love us or what we do to get to heaven (whatever that is) when we die. We are already accepted, and, like the list of disciples in the Gospel reading, we are called to do and be something in the world, and that something has to do with God. We are called to be channels for God's grace, just as Jesus was.

As a young person, I thought being a disciple meant being an officious goody-goody, like our Sunday School superintendent (that's what they called them in the Presbyterian Church) – Mrs. Orndorff, or being sweet and passive and self-sacrificing like our organist's wife – Mary Louise Johnson. In addition to these matrons, there was the flock of nuns who lived in the Convent of the Sacred Heart that adjoined our back yard. They seemed to worship Jesus with their shrines and statues, their reverent glidings across their lawn, wimples flapping in the breeze. We actually invented a game that consisted of climbing through the big old rhododendron grove that formed the border between our yard and the convent and which we called the "Nuns' Woods". The goal was to complete the climb from one end of the grove to the other without a) touching the ground, which was quicksand, or b) being spotted by a nun – for some reason, a very scary prospect, although the nuns never paid any attention to us.

In those days, my image of Jesus was mostly the way I saw him in that old picture with the idealized, shining Caucasian face, the long, light brown hair, the blue eyes cast heavenward – totally pure and good, totally removed from my life except as a model of something I could never do, and as a source of mercy – pity, really – for my inadequacy. Yuck!

This was not discipleship – it was really more like idol worship as I think back on it. Real discipleship, Biblical discipleship, discipleship that makes a difference in the world is more muscular, more difficult and way more challenging than the tepid examples I met as a young girl. Discipleship is not worshiping Jesus; it is following him – listening, looking, attending to what the gospels tell us about him and about God at work in him, and then trying to live that way ourselves. Discipleship implies a path and a process of both learning and doing, and in the relationship of Jesus with those first disciples, that is what we have. They receive his teachings, travel with him and see what he does, and then they are sent forth on their own to do the same. They were to be in the world and be in relationship with God as God's children, just as Jesus was. It was

from these first commissionings of Jesus as well as from the earliest memories of what Jesus said at the last supper that the Church has developed this whole Body of Christ theology that says that we too and all who have ever followed Christ are part of Christ's body – the risen presence of Jesus, living on forever in the church and in us. Baptism is our ritual of entry into this Body.

I have more and more come to appreciate the heft and brilliance of this Christian claim about the Body of Christ, as long as we don't shrink back from its implications. Let me offer this take on Jesus and us as the Body of Christ:

In Jesus, people experienced the presence of God in a human being, so much so that they saw Jesus as God's incarnation, God in human flesh. What if all humanity is God's incarnation, even the whole creation is God's living presence? What if who God is and what God does, in the way of creating, redeeming, sustaining, is in and through us? Isn't that where incarnation theology and Jesus' own commissioning of his disciples takes us? The Body of Christ means more than being church members or even faithful people – it means being part of God's presence in the world, being collaborators with God. It means being disciples in the same way that the first 12 were.

There are at least two huge stumbling blocks to this extrapolation of incarnation theology:

One is the unfortunate emergence of the title Son of God for Jesus and the birth stories that try, in their first century way, to legitimize this with the supposed virginity of Mary. Never mind the other gospel accounts of Jesus' descent from King David, who was the ancestor of Joseph! If Jesus is the only Son of God (capital letters) in some literal way, then we're stuck! The attempts to reconcile the way people experienced Jesus as fully human and fully divine, especially when he appeared after his death, led to centuries of strife in the Church, stubborn conflict over creeds, and a doctrine of Incarnation that seems to remove Jesus from any connection to who we are in relationship to God except as mediator, the one who bridges the great gap, the one who advocates on our pitiful behalf.

In this way of thinking, Jesus is essentially, ontologically different from us, and we are off the hook as followers. We can't be God's presence in the world, and the Body of Christ then does become just symbolic, connected with the Eucharist, but not something we can claim in our very being.

And besides Jesus' acquired designation as God's only Son, there is the second stumbling block – the miracles and the Resurrection – things that God did through Jesus that are almost entirely beyond our experience. There are actually a number of accounts in scripture, like Peter's brief steps out across the water and some reports of healings, exorcisms and other extraordinary feats - mostly in the Book of Acts - that do imply that the first disciples did share in some of Jesus' powers. Apparently Jesus

expected them to. In today's reading, Jesus commissions the disciples to do exactly the things he does – including even raising the dead! We don't know what to make of these stories because they don't square with our experience. We can't do that stuff, so how can discipleship really mean sharing in Jesus' work, being his co-workers with the same power over human misery and weakness that Jesus had? (We could remind ourselves of all that modern medicine has brought by way of healing and saving lives from death – not miraculous in our view, but even so – a huge contribution that I would not dismiss as being devoid of God's power to work through us – but that's a whole other sermon).

My thinking about discipleship boils down to what some scholars pose as the question of whether we are different from Jesus qualitatively or quantitatively. I want to say the latter – that we are all bearers of God's presence in our humanity, capable of showing divine love in the world. We differ from Jesus in degree, not essence. Some would say this robs Jesus of something or arrogates something to us, but I persist in my conviction. I want to sign on as a disciple who is committed to doing and being the best I can to be an agent of compassion and transformation in this world. My faith is that God will work through me and use me as God did with Jesus and can with all of us, even, sometimes, because God is God, the most unlikely or unwilling. Take Mozart – a childish, irresponsible scoundrel out of whose soul poured some of the most sublime music ever heard!

True discipleship is open to all of us if we're willing to claim it. The question is, are we nothing like Jesus? If so let's be cautious and limited in what we even try to do – the occasional good deed, kindness to our friends, going to church, praying, receiving the Body of Christ as a ritual – because, after all, we're not Jesus and we aren't those first disciples – they were different!

Or, are we a lot like Jesus? If so let's claim discipleship as the gift and challenge that it is and live with every fiber of our being in response to the God who loves every single one of us as God's daughter or son. The question "What would Jesus do?" isn't such a bad one, but the better question is what should we do to be agents of the love of God, here and now, today and tomorrow in whatever ways we can.

Years ago I came across a passage by John Snow, then Professor of Pastoral Theology at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge. It is about who Jesus was, and what our discipleship might look like. I know I've read it from this pulpit before and used it in a class or two, but I've never tired of it, so here it is again:

"When, at the baptism of Jesus, God spoke and said 'This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased' [it is as if God is saying to us] If you want to know who I am, if you want to know what reality is, if you want to understand what I have created and why, and why I have created you, look very closely at the piece of history this baptism begins. This is the most complete answer you are ever going to get to these questions.

'Look closely at this Jewish peasant standing here [in the water]. Keep your eyes on this man, listen to what he says, watch how he deals with the people around him and the creation within which he moves. See how he addresses the sick, the crippled, the blind and the deaf. See how he relates to outcasts and sinners. Listen to what he has to say to his enemies, to his persecutors, to the religious and secular authorities. See how he uses his time; what is important to him and unimportant to him. Watch him at weddings and funerals...Pay attention to how he treats women and how quickly they understand who he is.

'Consider his attitudes towards the use of force and violence. Notice his courage when he is afraid. Notice that there are things that make him angry, and pay attention to what they are. Notice how at home he is in the world, how he acts as if he has a right to be here, how he enjoys being here...And pay attention to how he dies, how his fear of pain and death do not stop his expression of love and concern for his friends and family...How he meets death itself as a completion and perfection of his life, and not as bad luck or a dirty trick.

'But above all, continue to pay attention when he dies. Watch as he is taken down from the cross and washed and wrapped in grave cloths by the women and put in the tomb, and notice a bit later that the tomb is empty. And notice how much this person my beloved child, is like you.'"

Discipleship is following this Jesus, because in him we see what God would have us be, because, like Jesus we are all beloved sons and daughters, and because God's power that worked through Jesus can also work through us. My sense is that it's only a matter of degree – but we'll never know. Discipleship is our response to God's love - may our response be as extravagant and radical as we dare, and may our faith grow with our discipleship. Amen.