

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship

Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2020

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Psalm 84:1-5 - Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

Jeremiah 12:5-8 - If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?

Hebrews 11:13-16 - But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Matthew 28:16-20 - Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always to the end of the age.

Dear Christian friends,

If we wanted to take the simple approach on this Trinity Sunday to the events of recent days, I could simply point you to the words of Jesus, “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” I could remind you that two chief teachings of the Bible are Law and Gospel. I could point you to the summary of the first table of the Law which is to love the Lord your God with all of your heart and mind and soul. And the summary of the second table of the Law, which is to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. I could give you the most important news which is that Jesus loves you and He will be with you always. Now go home and do better!

But obviously you want me to say more! And so here we go.

I feel like most people do, I feel lost and somewhat hopeless. There's is so much sadness in the world right now and I'm feeling like we're going backwards instead of forwards. We need a plan to get back on the right track. I'm feeling some days when I pray that It's not helping. I'm feeling lost. We need to be positive and thankful again.

To which God would answer in Jeremiah chapter 12, **If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?** Which is another way of God saying, “Things are going to get worse before they get better.” That was God’s reply to Jeremiah who was wondering why the wicked were prospering and why his enemies seemed to be prevailing and why the world around him seemed to be going to hell in a handbasket. Things are going to get worse before they get better.

All around us these days, there is unrest, there is division, and there is distrust that seems to be leading us towards anarchy. Inside of us, there is confusion, there is anger, and there is a sadness that just makes us want to retreat into our own little comfortable sanctuaries and talk about something else. Which really isn’t much of a medicine for that which is ailing us.

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The best medicine, according to the Psalmist is to set our hearts on pilgrimage and to find our strength every day in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Author Eugene Peterson quotes Friedrich Nietzsche, “The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be long obedience in the same direction.” That is the title of one of Peterson’s books, and it is the theme of a sermon series we begin today, “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction.”

Already 40 years ago, he made the case for the idea that religion had been captured by a tourist mindset, that for many church goers, religion was a weekly visit to an attractive site and for many others, it was an occasional visit to a special service. His theory was that it was not difficult to get people interested in the message of the Gospel, but it is terrifically difficult to sustain their interest.

His book is a study of Psalms 120 - 134, also called the Songs of Ascent. These were the songs the faithful Hebrews would sing on their pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Faithful Jews would make that trip three times a year for three particular feasts (Passover, Pentecost, and End of Harvest). Next Sunday, our focus is on repentance, the Sunday after that on God’s providence, today it’s on Discipleship.

In these days of pandemic and racial division, what does it mean to be a disciple and a pilgrim? Peterson defines a disciple as one who spends his or her life apprenticed to the Master, Jesus Christ. In today’s Gospel reading, this is the Great commission that the Master gives his apprentices, that we go near and far making disciples by baptizing into the Name of the Triune God and teaching people to observe all that he has commanded.

He defines pilgrims as people who spend their lives “going someplace, going to God, and whose path for getting there is the way, Jesus Christ.” In Hebrews 11, we find this description of pilgrims, **But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.**

Our sermon hymn today reminded us that we’re but strangers here, heaven is our home. Here on earth, in every one of our days, we face the enemies of Christian faith, but in heaven, we live face to face with Jesus Christ, and the gates of hell are nowhere to be seen. Here on earth, our cities are filled with frustration and futility and so much worse, but in the city that our God has prepared, there is no racism and there is no injustice and there is no violence.

Three meditations I offer you today on the subject of discipleship, as related to both the Doctrine of the Trinity and current events. *Meditation #1 is related to God the Father Who is famous for creating all of heaven and earth and having particular concern for those who are oppressed. Meditation #2 is related to God the Son Who is famous for the redemption of all people and having particular concern for those who have been cast out and despised. Meditation #3 is related to God the Spirit Who is famous for sanctification and for coming alongside of all who are struggling in their faith journey.*

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Meditation #1 is related to God the Father Who is famous for creating all of heaven and earth and having particular concern for those who are oppressed.

In this church, we believe and we confess and we teach that Darwin got it wrong, we believe that our world and everything in it were created when God said, "Let there be." We like to look hurting and broken people in the eyes and say, "God knit you together marvelously and wonderfully in your mother's womb, God has ordained all of the days of your life before you were ever born, God is your Father in heaven, and you may approach Him every day as dear children approach a much trusted parent."

In this Church, we believe and we confess and we teach that God has preserves and He sustains and defends and guards and protect us out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy, without merit or worthiness in us, and that it is our duty to spend our days thanking and praising, serving and obeying.

In these days, we believe and we confess and we teach that our Father in heaven is inviting us to live as His precious sons and daughters out in our circle of friends and family and beyond. He is inviting us to look in the eyes people of all colors and all races and all stations in life, and say things like, "God loves you, you have been created with value and with purpose, God has a plan to work all things together for the good of those who love Him. To those whose lives have been devastated and are on the verge of despair, God invites us to be His hands, His feet, His ears, and His voice of concern.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers going through all the ups and downs of life together. They begin their days with the sign of the cross, grateful for being baptized into the family of God and anxious to contribute to a culture of generosity in their small town and beyond. They are working hard these days the advantages of life handed to them by God through parents and grandparents. More and more they are intentional about being quick to listen and slow to speak. More often than not, they get down on their knees at the end of each day and pray for brothers and sisters near and far who are falling through the cracks of society's safety nets.

Meditation #2 is related to God the Son Who is famous for the redemption of all people and having particular concern for those who have been cast out and despised.

In this Church we believe and we confess and we teach that Jesus Christ has lived the perfect life we needed Him to live, that He has suffered all that we needed Him to suffer, that He died the death we needed Him to live, and that He is risen and ascended and ruling over all things, even when and especially when it doesn't look that way.

In this Church we believe and we confess and we teach that as Jesus reached out to the adulterers and the tax collectors and the gluttons and the drunkards of His day, so are we to be spending time with those who are living on the margins in our day. As Jesus got down on His knees to wash the feet of His disciples, so are we to stay down low and walk humbly and

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carefully before God in our days. As Jesus found a way to be kind and patient and tender with those who are as down and out as they could be, so are we called to be practicing what we preach in strong fashion.

The kingdom of heaven is like a congregation of believers more and more looking in the mirror of God's law these days. Instead of wondering why "those people" are so angry and destructive, they wonder together how they could be better listeners and what God is trying to teach them. Instead of standing tall and proud for how they have not caused trouble like others have caused trouble, they stoop down low, they admit the good they have failed to do, they cry out for Jesus to intercede on their behalf to the Father. In that very moment, the angels and the archangels begin to dance.

Meditation #3 is related to God the Spirit Who is famous for sanctification and for coming alongside of all who are struggling in their faith journey.

In this church, we believe and confess and teach that it is the Holy Ghost who has called us by the Gospel, He has enlightened us with His gifts, He is in the business of sanctifying and keeping us in the true faith. We teach that as often as the Word of God is preached and taught and listened to and remembered and put into practice, there the Spirit of God has an opportunity to work in the hearts of hurting and broken hearts.

On Thursday of this past week, I put out a call for help with this sermon. I said I was stuck, and I asked people to comment on what they needed to hear. Here is one response, *Personally to me and at this particular time in my life, I have realized just how much I have slipped away from Jesus. Before Covid, I thought I had it pretty much together; I went to church, I pray, I read the bible. The fear of Covid, the fear of not seeing my family, the fear of the crazy world we have entered.....I realized I was/am distanced from Jesus far more than I want to be. The events surrounding George Floyd have shocked me and the world to the core. I think Jesus is trying to wake us up in a world where we thought we 'had it made'. We do not have it made. We have so far to go!! Praying that He will keep showing me in all his glorious ways that I need him so much more. I don't know if that makes sense.*

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers who doesn't know if what they're feeling makes sense, but they have set their hearts on pilgrimage. Some of them are afraid of the virus, others fear for their friends and family who live in the big city, others are afraid for where this country is headed, but as often as they rest in God's promises they are not afraid. As often as they remember that heaven is their destination, they are at peace. As often as they stay focused on the Mission that the Triune God has invited them to join in on, that often they are able to practice a long obedience in the same direction.