***PROPHETS’ PERILS AND DISCIPLES’ DILEMMAS***

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Texts: Jeremiah 20:1-18 and Matthew 10:34-39

No one said it would be easy – this discipleship thing, this Christian path we walk together. If somehow you are under the illusion that following Jesus is easy and pain-free, a bed of roses without the thorns, blessings without woes, then you have spent too much time listening to the preachers of the prosperity gospel – which is not Jesus’ gospel – and too little time listening to Jesus who says:

*If you would be my disciple then deny yourself, take up your cross,*

*and follow me. (*And taking up the cross is as hard as it sounds!*)*

It is Jesus who says to the rich young man who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life:

*Sell all you own, give it to the poor, then come and follow me. (And he couldn’t do it, for the text says, “he had many possessions,” and so do we.)*

It is Jesus who says in the words we just heard from Matthew’s Gospel:

*I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set family member against family member and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household, and those who love father or mother or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*

And it is Jesus who says:

*Those who find their life will lose it,*

*and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

That is what you are signing up for as a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is a path that is full of challenges, hard decisions, perils, and dilemmas. It is not a path for the faint of heart. Are you up for it?

In his classic book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, first published in 1949, Howard Thurman, a mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., tells of speaking in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) at the Law College at the University of Colombo. Over coffee, the principal of the school, challenged Thurman, saying:

*What are* ***you*** *doing over here? This is what I mean. More than three hundred years ago your forefathers were taken from the western coast of Africa as slaves. The people who dealt in the slave traffic were Christians. One of your famous Christian hymn writers, Sir John Newton, made his money from the sale of slaves to the New World. He is the man who wrote “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” and “Amazing Grace” ...The name of one of the famous British slave vessels was “Jesus.”*

*The men who bought the slaves were Christians. Christian ministers, quoting the Christian apostle Paul, gave the sanction of religion to the system of slavery. Some seventy years or more ago you were freed by a man who was not a professing Christian, but was rather the spearhead of certain political, social, and economic forces, the significance of which he himself did not understand. During all the period since then you have lived in a Christian nation in which you are segregated, lynched, and burned. Even in the church, I understand, there is segregation. One of my students who went to your country sent me a clipping telling about a Christian church in which the regular Sunday worship was interrupted so that many could join a mob against one of your fellows. When he had been caught and done to death, they came back to resume their worship of their Christian God.*

*I am a Hindu. I do not understand. Here you are in my country, standing deep within the Christian faith and tradition. I do not wish to seem rude to you. But, sir, I think you are a traitor to all the darker peoples of the earth. I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position.*

“Our subsequent conversation,” writes Thurman, “lasted for more than five hours. The clue to my own discussion with this probing, honest, sympathetic Hindu is found in my interpretation of the meaning of the religion of Jesus.”[[1]](#endnote-1) What is that *religion of Jesus*? How would you answer that Hindu principal in defense of the Christian faith that you embrace? Or would you defend it at all?

The term *Christian* carries with it some heavy baggage and dirty laundry as it has been lived out across the centuries. It carries the weight of the atrocities of the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition, the burning of witches and slaughter of native peoples, the abuse of children and support for slavery, the oppression of women and persecution of queer folk, support for anti-Semitism and self-righteous nationalism, and a host of fractures that have split the Church and churches again and again. The hateful actions of people professing love for Jesus have chased away many folks, especially young people, amid cries of rampant hypocrisy in the pews. The baggage that comes with the term *Christian* is so heavy that some, including noted author Brian McLaren, have jettisoned the term and call themselves simply “followers of Jesus.” As if the road of discipleship was not hard enough, it has been made even more difficult and hazardous by two thousand years of unfaithful following by a host of unfaithful followers. As Morgan Roberts writes: “Jesus is *not* the problem; the problem is with the people who profess to be his followers.” Thus the bumper sticker: “God, please save me from your followers.”[[2]](#endnote-2) What then are we to do, we who still want to follow Jesus?

Perhaps we begin by doing what we claim we want to do – by following Jesus, by living as he calls us to live, by loving as he calls us to love, by forgiving as he calls us to forgive, even if that causes us to suffer as he warns us we will suffer. It is not always the popular road, this path of discipleship. It is often the road less travelled – welcoming the stranger, loving enemies, turning the other cheek – and there are a host of people claiming easier paths as being his Way. But if we are to follow him, then we must do as he asks us to do and bear the burden of being disciples. In speaking to the twelve, Jesus warns them that discipleship might split family relationships; following him may conflict with the values of family and friends who do not follow him.

When I announced that I was leaving my law practice to go to seminary, some of my fellow attorneys could not understand why I would give up being a partner in a thriving law practice to be a minister where I would make so much less money. It made no sense to them – no dollars and cents – and so they echoed that woman who asked the young pastor at a cocktail party, “Was ministry your own idea, or were you just poorly advised?” I wasn’t poorly advised; I was called. And there were many friends and family who understood what it means to be called by God – to ministry in the church or elsewhere – and offered their blessing.

In the passage we heard this morning, Jeremiah laments being called by God to serve as a prophet after being beaten and placed in the stocks by the priest Pashhur because of his prophecies of doom and gloom. Jeremiah would gladly have offered a sunnier word from the Lord if that is what the Lord had given him, but the word he was given was more ominous. Jeremiah did have the satisfaction of delivering a dire prophecy to the priest – “*You and all who live in your house shall go into captivity and to Babylon you shall go, and there you shall die and be buried, you and all your friends*” – but Jeremiah then vents to the Lord his frustration at the suffering he bears as a prophet of the Lord; yet he confesses:

*If I say, “I will not mention God, or speak any more in his name,” then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot*.

What Jeremiah describes is the burden of the prophet – bearing a Word from the Lord that he does not want to proclaim but must, and having spoken that word, he must endure the consequences. It is why no one volunteers to be a prophet. If God has a prophetic word to say through you, it may be good news or it may be bad news you don’t want to share; you may even try to avoid it – as Jonah did – but it didn’t work for Jonah, and it will not work for you either. Most of us are not called to be prophets, and beware those who seem to relish that role! But occasionally – whether from this pulpit or in some other place – God calls us to play the role of prophet and declare what God wants others to hear or do what God wants us to do. The challenge for any prophet, preacher, or follower of Jesus is to say and do what God wants said and done, and not what you want to say or do, and while that may not be as satisfying or easy, it is more faithful. Just ask Jeremiah or Jonah!

Which brings us back to that path of discipleship we walk. Why walk this path if it is so fraught with perils? We walk it because, like Jeremiah who was weary with fighting off God, we weary of searching for meaning in the world and finding none; we weary of looking for love in all the wrong places (to quote the country song) and for peace to calm our anxious souls and for hope with which to look to the future. Jesus reveals to us the God who created us, a God of love and faithfulness, a God who blesses us in order that we might bless others and live with joy, hope, and peace all our days, even those hard days when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. He reassures us of God’s promises for us, God’s presence with us, and God’s love embracing us always. Jesus calls us to be faithful disciples, not because it is an easy path, but because it is the only path we can walk to be the people God created us to be and calls us to be.

Across the centuries many disciples have wandered far from that path and done some awful things. We cannot deny that. But there have also been saints, some of whom sat in these very pews, who showed us how to walk that path faithfully. We don’t always follow their example; across our lives, we may have done some things that grieved God’s heart. But God does not give up on us; God calls us back to the faithful path, the path Jesus showed us, the path he calls us to walk, assuring us that we do not walk alone, for God is with us! We cannot change the past and the choices of unfaithful disciples before us, but we can try to be faithful today and then tomorrow and then the next day, seeking always to be faithful, come what may, and walking this path – day after day – together! Amen

1. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press:1976, pp.4-5 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. F. Morgan Roberts in *A Beautiful View: A Friendlier Christianity as a Way of Life*, Cascade Books:2018, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)