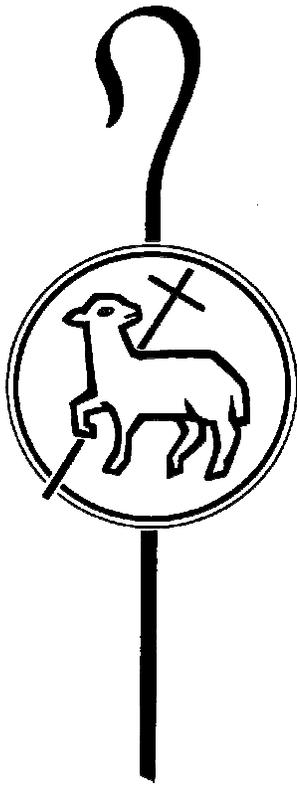


feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)

February 5, 2013

Dear Church Family,



In Luke 9:1-50 we see two main themes that are intertwined in the various scenes. One is the identity of Jesus (“*Who do people say that I am?*”) and the other is the nature of discipleship. Joel Green comments on how these two themes are related in the story: “One cannot embody authentic discipleship unless one perceives faithfully the nature of Jesus’ person and work; yet one cannot adequately comprehend Jesus’ person and work apart from genuine discipleship.” For both the nature of Jesus’ mission and the task of discipleship, we see a tension between great power and status combined with suffering and being a servant. And we see that the disciples have difficulty faithfully perceiving the suffering and servant role.

In the beginning of the chapter the twelve are given the power to drive out all demons and to cure diseases. They are sent to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick, which is exactly what Jesus has been doing. This is a major development. Up until now, the disciples have been chosen but have done little else.

This may be the most extraordinary thing that Jesus has done so far. People marveled at his power and authority over demons, but now he has transferred that power to very ordinary disciples. Yet Luke records no reaction of wonder or amazement to this development on the part of the crowds or the disciples themselves. This absence becomes conspicuous when you consider what this must have been like for the disciples. What do we imagine is going through their minds as they minister in this kind of power? The only reaction is from Herod, who we know to be opposed to God as he imprisoned John the Baptist. Herod’s reaction, to question who Jesus is, presents the ideal result of the ministry of teaching and healing of the twelve. It causes people to focus on Jesus. Herod’s reaction also raises an ominous note because we learn that John the Baptist has been beheaded. Learning of John’s fate in the context of the disciples ministering with such power introduces the suffering theme of discipleship.

In the next scene, the twelve have returned, but they are not playing the role of teachers or healers to the crowd that gathers. It is back to being all Jesus. The miraculous feeding of the crowd identifies Jesus with Elisha (see 2 Kings 4:42-44) and Moses (with manna in the desert), an important connection between Jesus and the law and the prophets. The role that the twelve play in this scene is one of being servants, emphasized by each having a basket to pick up the leftover pieces. Their servant role is very different in terms of status than being the teachers and healers. But this may well be what Jesus wanted to teach them about the nature of discipleship.

Peter’s identification of Jesus as the Christ is followed by Jesus talking about his suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. He then teaches about the nature of discipleship in light of what he will go through. The characteristics of discipleship presented here include radical self denial, in the sense of disowning oneself in terms of the self’s concerns and interests. To take up one’s cross means to face death from execution from hostile authorities. What does it mean to do that daily, especially in a context like ours where we do not face life threatening persecution? That is a question we need to keep in the front of our minds because Jesus presents this self denial and taking up one’s cross daily as necessary to following Him. It has something to do with where we are investing our lives. A way that appears to be saving our lives will result in losing them and vice versa. It also has something to do with not being ashamed of Jesus and his words. To be ashamed of Jesus implies that we would be looked down upon

by society; lose social status over loyalty to Him.

The Transfiguration scene is the fulfillment of v. 27 when Jesus says that some will see the kingdom of God before they face death. This is the ultimate expression of Jesus identity as the Son who is worthy of all glory. This is communicated directly to the disciples from a voice in the cloud. Jesus is linked to the law and the prophets by the appearance of Moses and Elijah, but he is preeminent. The disciples are told by God the Father directly to listen to Jesus, a further emphasis on the importance of listening carefully to the word.

Upon returning from the mountain, Jesus is met by the man whose son has an evil spirit that the remaining disciples have not been able to drive out. In the beginning of the chapter the twelve were given *power and authority to drive out all demons*. They expected to be able to deal with this demon and Jesus' response of frustration indicates that he expected that as well. Yet, he does not use this failure as a teachable moment and explain why they failed. This is pretty significant given that Jesus was talking with Moses and Elijah about his departure and while he is away from these disciples they have this failure. What does this mean for the future when Jesus departs? People are amazed at the greatness of God, but by this time in the story we are used to this reaction. We are much more concerned with the failure of the disciples.

Assuming that Jesus is concerned about this as well, the following verses where he says "*Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you*" become very significant. He is trying to get them to understand that even though he has all this power, he is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. The fact that they do not understand what he is talking about is a bad sign. Even worse, they are afraid to admit their ignorance and ask him about something that he has stressed as being very important for them to hear.

The argument about which of them would be the greatest is a major indictment against the disciples in light of what Jesus has taught about following him. This concern with their own status portrays them as caught up in saving their lives and gaining the world. They are evidently looking at their role as disciples as a vehicle for self advancement. This may well be the explanation for their failure with the boy with the evil spirit. Their discipleship is corrupted because they are viewing it as an opportunity to advance in status. Rather than rebuking them, Jesus provides an object lesson with a little child to teach them that discipleship is about serving and being the least, not the greatest. John's question about the man who is driving out demons in Jesus' name is further insight into the mentality of the disciples. They prevent him because that is their gig and not just anybody should be able to do it. Jesus' response is poignant when you consider what discipleship will be about for the twelve. Though they are caught up now in the heady nature of ministering with such power and exclusive access to Jesus, there will come a time when their discipleship will mean suffering persecution. In that day they will be glad for anyone who is not in opposition to them.

At this point in the story, the disciples are not doing very well at grasping the nature of Jesus' mission or the nature of discipleship. They are in process and we as readers will get to see that process. From the other side of the cross and resurrection, we have an easier time understanding why the Christ needed to suffer and die. However, I am not sure that we have a good understanding of our discipleship that involves self denial and taking up our cross. So much of our Western understanding of the gospel is about our relationship with God in Christ improving our lives. Could it be that we, like the disciples with Jesus being betrayed into the hands of men, are missing out on what God wants to do in and with our lives because we have not grasped this aspect of discipleship? Let us at least learn from the disciples and not be afraid to ask Jesus this question with a commitment to listen carefully to what he says.

Pastorally Yours,

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<http://www.christourshepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)