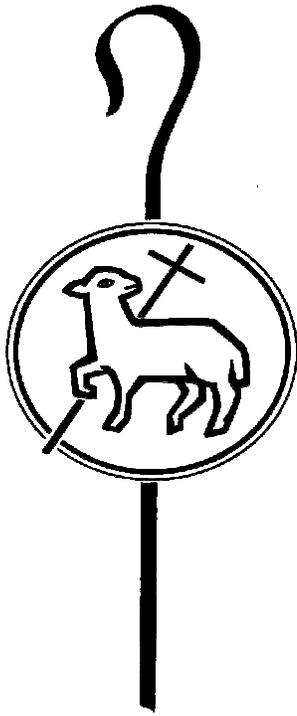


feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)

February 26, 2013

Dear Church Family,



“As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” This begins a 10-chapter section of Luke’s gospel as Jesus and his disciples are on this journey. We focused on the theme of discipleship this past Sunday, noting that the development of the disciples becomes very important in light of Jesus’ imminent departure when he is taken up to heaven. The reaction of James and John to the Samaritan village that does not welcome them reveals that the disciples still have a lot to learn. Their request of Jesus, (*“Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?”*) has Old Testament precedence with Elijah and the King of Samaria (2 Kings 1). However, it is the opposite of what Jesus has already taught them in chapter 6, *“love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”* Jesus’ teaching has not penetrated their fleshly perspectives and responses.

In 9:57-62 we read about three exchanges between Jesus and aspiring disciples. In the first encounter, Jesus stresses the point that to follow him will be difficult and mean a life of not being settled, not enjoying a sense of home that even animals have. This is truly sacrificing something that is good and healthy for human life. In the second encounter, a man asks to first bury his father before he follows Jesus. It is not clear how much of a delay this request entails, but first century Jewish funeral practices had two burials, a year apart. The man may well have been in this period of mourning. In any case, this was a task that a son was expected to perform to properly honor his father. It was an important task and by denying the request, Jesus is saying that proclaiming the kingdom of God is more important. In the third encounter Jesus appears the most demanding. Imagine disappearing to follow Jesus without even saying goodbye to your family. What would that be communicating in terms of your care and honoring of them? This is not a teaching that reduces the importance of family devotion, but rather elevates the importance of devotion to the kingdom of God. Interestingly, there is precedence for such a request in 1 Kings 19:19-21 when Elijah grants Elisha’s request (*“Let me kiss my father and mother good-by”*). Jesus may well be referencing this encounter, where Elisha is plowing, with his response about putting one’s hand to the plow and looking back. If so, the call to follow Jesus is more important and significant than Elisha’s call to succeed Elijah as prophet, which was a very significant role. The reference also highlights Elisha slaughtering his oxen and burning his plow, which meant there would be no return to his life as a farmer. This reinforces Jesus’ view that this man’s request was a potential distraction from single minded devotion to service in the kingdom of God.

These three scenes speak loudly against any notion of discipleship with Jesus as an add-on to one’s life. Discipleship does not fit easily into one’s life, but is rather disruptive and means the absence of life-sustaining things like a place to call home. With these disciples, following Jesus was concrete: it meant literally following him, leaving your current life and family and joining his homeless life which was on the road. How do we translate that to our lives of discipleship when it is not so concrete? We need to try applying some principles. One principle is that following Jesus is likely to require that we give up or forgo things that would be viewed as essential and nonnegotiable for a healthy life, like having a home. Also, following Jesus will re-orient the other honorable loyalties and devotions in our lives. This may well result in us being viewed as dishonorable in these areas by the world. Popular American Christianity focuses on how a relationship with Jesus will make someone’s life better. There is little talk or teaching on the sacrificial, take-up-your-cross, element of discipleship. Yet Jesus is very clear that this is an essential aspect of discipleship. Rather than hoping to avoid that which is sacrificial, seeking a way to keep it in our lives and still be a disciple, we need to be willing and even eager to discover those things that by giving them up, we experience more of the richness of life in Christ.

The significance of discipleship is reinforced by the sending out of 72 others (this does not include the 12) who are given the power to heal and cast out demons, just like the 12 were earlier. All disciples are tasked with the role of extending Jesus' ministry "*for the harvest is plentiful and the workers are few.*" The 72 return with joy because even demons submit to them in the name of Jesus. Jesus affirms their role of overcoming the power of the evil one in the world, but warns them, "*do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that their names are written in heaven.*" This means that they will inherit eternal life. Jesus then elaborates on this wonderful truth by stressing that they have not earned this at all but have been given this status because they are his disciples. Indeed, this is all part of God's plan to reveal the truths of salvation not to the wise, learned or powerful, but to those who are like little children, without status in the world.

We then come to the encounter between Jesus and the lawyer and the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. And we are prepared to understand why Jesus answers the lawyer as he does. We already know the answer to the question, "*what must I do to inherit eternal life*", because Jesus has just said that his disciples have their names written in heaven. And the only thing they have done to inherit eternal life is to be his disciples. So why doesn't Jesus tell this lawyer to follow Him? Because as a lawyer, he is wise and learned and we have just heard that the Father is hiding these things from the wise and the learned. Jesus is not going to give this man a straight-forward answer. Instead, he is pointing this lawyer back to the law so that the law will serve the same purpose as Paul explains in Romans 7, the purpose of making this man aware of his sin and his need for a savior.

So we should not understand this encounter as a key teaching on salvation. But it is a key teaching on discipleship because in this encounter we get Jesus' brilliant illustration of fulfilling the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Although no one can adequately fulfill this commandment to earn eternal life, we are all called to obey this commandment as disciples. So "*go and do likewise*" absolutely applies to us as disciples. We are to be a neighbor to those who we encounter who are in need. Jesus' use of a Samaritan character (someone who a Jew would definitely not view as a neighbor) removes any limits that would narrow this command to a certain group. The key quality of the Samaritan is that he took pity on the wounded man. This kind of love, this kind of compassion, is in competition with our concern with ourselves and our interests. For the priest and the Levite, they see the man, but his need does not take priority over their own interests, whatever those may have been. This understanding of what it means to love your neighbor as yourself is an expression of the sacrificial nature of discipleship that Jesus has been teaching about. A preoccupation with one's own needs or status is a stumbling block to obeying this command. Or, putting it another way, such a preoccupation renders a person unfit for service in the kingdom of God, since fulfilling this command is central to the kingdom of God.

Our final scene with Martha and Mary illustrates the central importance of listening to Jesus and one's relationship with Him. It also reveals that serving Jesus (which Martha is literally doing) can be more about our own agenda and interests than true discipleship. This is an especially good passage to meditate on as we engage the topic of time with Jesus in our homegroup time study.

From this section of Luke, we see that discipleship is a very high calling, extending the ministry of Jesus with the power to overcome the enemy. The significance of it means that everything else in our lives has lesser status. Nothing, not even a home or family, is exempt from being sacrificed in the process of following Jesus. It is natural for us to want to hang on to these precious life giving things in our lives. Jesus knows this and that is why he says things like "*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.*" What is needed is not so much a radical commitment to being sacrificial, but a radical trusting relationship with Jesus. Our relationship with Jesus is crucial not just to hear from him what we need to sacrifice, but also to be able to obey. Our obedience has to come from a place of trusting in Him for our welfare, because a call to sacrificial discipleship will involve a threat to that welfare. We entrust our lives to Him, not with the expectation that He will work out blessing for us in our circumstances in this life, but with the hope and expectation that we will go deeper with Him and find true life.

In Christ,
Bo

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