

Disciples Take Their Faith Public

Part 11 of Sermon Series:

What Disciples Do

a sermon based on

Isaiah 65:17-25

and delivered on

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at

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For almost three months, I've been preaching on the theme *What Disciples Do*. I'm going to wrap it up this week and next. As far as a sermon series goes, I know that the link is sort of tenuous – not really things that build on the previous weeks. Instead it's been a series of things related to discipleship – or living out our place in God's kingdom as a follower (i.e. disciple) of Jesus Christ. That word *disciple* is important here. Too often, Christians forget that Jesus never sought *believers*.

Think about it. In Scripture, how often do we hear about Jesus and his believers? Anyone? None. The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, does it say “Go therefore and make ***believers*** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to ***believe*** everything that I have commanded you.”? No. It says, “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, and teaching them to ***obey*** (or to act on) everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (*emphasis added*)

Disciples are those act out what they believe by following the example of their master or teacher. Whenever we hear the disciples address Jesus in Scripture they do so saying, “Rabbi” (or teacher) or the call him “Master.” They're not looking for intellectual knowledge about God so that they can get a reward after they die. Instead, the look to him as the one who can lead them in the way of experience the kingdom of God in the world. Not just for their own sake, but for the sake of the world.

Remember the messianic hope was not that individual Jews or Israelites would be saved, but that Israel would be restored in the world. That the values of the Torah would be those by which people would live.

Speaking to that hope – not just for Israel but for creation – that the prophet Isaiah speaks the words that we hear today on his own accord but on behalf of God Almighty (forgive me for skipping around),

“¹⁷For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; ...

“²⁰No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, ...

“²³They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity;...

“²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;” (Isa. 65:17-18a, 20a, 23a, 25a)

When Scripture speaks about our salvation – when Scripture speaks about our relationship to God – it is never private but it involves the whole world. As United Methodists we hear the evangelical call to a personal faith – a personal relationship with Jesus – a personal acceptance of what he taught and the instructions we have in Scripture for living righteous and holy lives. I'm not dismissing that. I'm not saying that being a believer is a bad thing; but it is incomplete.

Believing is private. Discipleship isn't. Disciples take their faith – their belief and trust public. All of them, every disciple does that. Hearing that might sound intimidating. Hearing that might sound like we're all supposed to be like Billy Graham and his crusades or the guy preaching on the street corner or making sure we pepper every conversation with “Can I tell you about Jesus?”

How do we do that? Is it like trying to woo a love interest? Do we need the right pick up line? Those always work well. Right?

Even if there wasn't gravity on earth, I'd still fall for you.

Did it hurt? When you fell out of heaven?

Is your name Wi-fi? Because I'm really feeling a connection.

Are you from France, because Eiffel for you.

That cheesy stuff doesn't work with dating. It never did for me, anyway. But what does work? Being decent and living out our values wherever and whenever we are.

As disciples, we are invited to join with God in making the new kingdom that he is establishing a reality. Taking our faith public means living toward that promise for the world. Taking our faith public means that we live in ways that will give children a chance to live long healthy lives. It means living our own lives in such a way that we don't poison the environment. It's God's creation and he entrusted its care to us. It's actually God's first and second command - to raise children and to take charge of creation. (Gen. 1:28)

When we take our faith public, we answer God's invitation to establish peace between people and people's so that even those so diametrically opposed as a wolf and a lamb, or a lion and an ox, might be able to live side by side without fear.

So, here's where I get to tell you how to do that... And I'm going to fail. I can't tell you how exactly to make that kingdom a reality in your discipleship. I can't tell you how to do that anymore than I can tell you the perfect (not pick up line, but) evangelism line that will give words to your witness. It's not even my place or even your place. When Jesus was talking to the disciples about opportunities to testify, what did he say in the passage that we heard today? "So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." (Lk 21:14-15) Notice that he didn't just promise words but wisdom? Wisdom is lived out.

The danger I fear – and maybe holds me back at time in the pulpit – is becoming “too political.” By that I mean promoting what could be seen as partisan policy. I know that sitting in this room are people who in 2016 voted for Hillary Clinton – people who voted for Donald Trump – and people who even voted for Gary Johnson. I know that in this room there are Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. That's okay.

When a younger colleague – serving his first church – mentioned that he was conflicted when the church told him that they didn't want him to preach politics (What does that mean?) I offered my interpretation of what it means. I cannot not preach politics unless I encourage you to become hermits. Politics by definition is how we live our lives in relation to one another. Life is political. But what I've heard – and what I shared with my colleague – is that people don't want to hear their pastor preaching about his or her partisan policy preferences. Does that make sense?

If I'm going to help anyone be a disciple, I have to preach politics. If I'm not, then I'm encouraging a private faith that teaches people that it's all about their personal salvation instead of God's love for each and every human being.

What I don't have to do is to expect you to agree on the exact means of making the kingdom of God visible in the world. Taking faith public means being political and insisting that children deserve to grow up in a healthy and safe world. It means insisting that every single person have the opportunity to provide for their need for food, shelter, clothing and rest (remember that's a commandment). It means insisting that violence is never a final solution.

Discipleship means taking our faith public in such a way that we live for those ideals in our personal and public relationships. Discipleship means standing up for those values by ceding our own preferences or political ideology, to the wisdom that Jesus himself promised to impart. Only a small part of that is how we approach the ballot box, most of it is how we decide to live each day with an eye toward the new creation that God invites us to build in our midst. AMEN.