

“... called to freedom...”

“Follow me.” Jesus tells a man in today’s Gospel. “Follow me.” Jesus tells his disciples after Peter proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ. “Follow me.” Jesus says over and over again. In fact at every Baptism, we ask the candidate or the parents and sponsors, “Do you promise to follow and obey Jesus as your Lord?”

The technical name for following is discipleship. Part of our mission at Grace Church is to be a “school for discipleship and stewardship.” School never ends; there are no vacations. The school for discipleship is daily for our entire lives. We might ask ourselves each Sunday “What did I learn about discipleship last week? What do I need to learn about discipleship in the week ahead?”

Chapter 9 in Luke’s gospel is marked by major turning points, transitions for Jesus and the disciples. It begins with the sending out of the 12 disciples on mission. This is followed by Peter’s profession of Jesus as the Christ, the 1st prediction of Jesus’ Passion, the Transfiguration, and another prediction of the Passion. Today’s Gospel reading ends the chapter as “the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up” and as Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem”.

Today’s Gospel begins what commentators call “Luke’s Special Section”, 9 chapters narrating the journey to Jerusalem and Jesus’ teaching about discipleship with direct statements as we hear today and with many of the well-known parables of Jesus. For the next four months, we’ll be hearing the Gospel readings from this special section of Luke. I will be with you for three of those next four months. Last Thursday, I announced my retirement as Rector of Grace Church. Today’s Gospel has helped me to understand this decision as a lesson in discipleship, in following Jesus, for me individually and for our parish corporately.

Jesus teachings, as we see today, are always in the light of the cross, the way of love, the mission of God’s sacrificial love. My leaving Grace and moving from Alexandria certainly isn’t in any way like Jesus going to Jerusalem to suffer and to die. The key factor in both of these decisions, transitions, is love -- God’s love for us and our love for God as we love each other.

And so the specific lessons from today’s Gospel and from St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians will guide us in our future discipleship and as we live into this time of transition.

First, we see the temptations about the use of power. When the Samaritans reject Jesus and the disciples, James and John want to punish them. Jesus rebukes them. Retaliation as a response to rejection is not an option for Jesus. “Move on,” Jesus says.

We often hear about the “cost” of discipleship. We see this again with Jesus telling the first man who wants to follow him “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head ...” Discipleship means travelling light; not clinging to our possessions; practicing a kind of spiritual, emotional, and, at times, physical detachment.

To the second man who would follow after he buries his father, Jesus essentially says there can be no conditions placed on discipleship. We can’t define discipleship based upon our needs. We have to seize the moment, the day, the time. Make the most of each day, trying to proclaim the kingdom of God.

Finally, this teaching, this introduction to Luke’s special section, ends with Jesus encouraging us to look straight ahead. Focus, know where we want to go. Living in the past, looking over our shoulder, carrying past hurts and anxieties will not help us to hear Jesus’ call, will not help us to follow Jesus into the unknown future.

St. Paul sums it all up by writing “... you were called to freedom... live by the Spirit ... let us be guided by the Spirit ...” This is our work for the next three months, for the next three years, for the rest of our lives.