

“Discipleship”

John 1:43-51

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The Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke
The House of hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

The Second Sunday in Ordinary Time Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Weekend

Prayer: In the quietness of these moments, O God, teach us what we need to know, and show us what we need to do, to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Ok, it's not one of the most riveting passages in scripture. And for all the signs and wonders the fourth Gospel is known for—for its miraculous assertions, its less-than-subtle insistence that Jesus is the Messiah, what happens in the calling of the disciples seems rather ordinary.

“The next day, Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said, ‘Follow me.’ And they went off and found Nathaniel.”

But I would propose to you that despite this passage's lack of detail and drama, it was a defining moment for both Philip and Nathaniel. Because something happened that caused them to follow Jesus. They weren't sure where he was going to take them. They apparently didn't have to ask trusted family and friends what they thought of the idea. They just decided to accept Jesus' invitation to completely alter and reorder their lives.

What would prompt someone to do such a thing—to act so impulsively, like that? A failed career perhaps? A wrecked marriage or relationship that put one in a place of needing to start over? Maybe it was a poor job market—the same thing that sends many to graduate school these days instead of endlessly searching for a job that doesn't exist?

But I've also seen how a boredom with the status quo—the same thing day in and day out with no prospects for anything different—I've seen how that slowly eats people alive making them willing to jump at any interesting or new offer that comes their way. Maybe it was a deep longing for a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives that had been missing? Maybe Jesus called those disciples out of situations like that. And maybe no one had ever before offered them an opportunity for something new?

When Jesus called out to Nathaniel, he wondered how Jesus knew who he was. Jesus told him, “I saw you sitting under a fig tree.” In other words, “I've been watching you and I have plans for your life. And if you think it's remarkable that I have plans for your life, then come and follow me and you will not believe the things you will see.”

That's essentially it, I think. “Follow me.” It's an invitation and a promise. At least it was a speaking, burning bush that got the attention of Moses. Here, however, it's a simple invitation. And beyond my speculation, all we really know is that a calling came their way and they responded to it. And it would prove to be a defining

moment in their lives as they would never again be the same. Answering the call to follow Jesus—to really follow him, is a defining moment for any and all who say yes to that call.

But the call to discipleship is not as easy as it sounds here. And neither is it as easy as many claim it to be. There has been a real domestication of Jesus that has completely obscured his message, I think. Jesus has been the victim of packaging and marketing. Step inside any bookstore that calls itself “Christian,” and you will encounter a pretty one-dimensional Jesus in there. Through books and DVDs, you will be introduced a Jesus who is your buddy and life coach. You will meet the Jesus who will help you through rough times. You will discover the Jesus who will serve as your personal organizer and help you prioritize your life. WWJD...What Would Jesus Do? You will find plenty of books in there that will tell you exactly what he’d do and therefore what you should do in the same situations.

In many ways, Jesus was a gentle shepherd who loved and healed and encouraged people, especially the poor. But that’s not what got him executed at the hands of the state. And what you are not likely to find at the “Christian” bookstore, is the demanding Jesus. The one who challenged the rich and the powerful of his day. Or the one who told his followers in no uncertain terms to pick up crosses of their own and follow him, even unto death. You’ll have to go looking for the Jesus who complicates your life because of the demands and sacrifices he places on his disciples. It was far easier to make the movie “Passion of the Christ,” that depicts Jesus as an innocent victim being bloodied up and beaten for two and a half hours, than it would be to make a movie about the counter-cultural revolutionary Jesus casting his lot with unpopular causes and undesirable people.

So when those disciples signed on as his followers, my hunch is they had no idea where he’d be leading them. And sometimes I wonder if any of us ever really knows where he is leading us?

Because ultimately, discipleship is best understood as a life changing direction—a new set of priorities and a whole new orientation and outlook on life. It is life lived intentionally and in a different way—a way that does not exist for the self, but for others. It is a way of life that sacrifices the self for the sake of the least and the last, the poor and the powerless—for the ones Jesus cared so much about. And that is a tall order because our natural tendency is toward self-preservation. It is to protect what we have and not give it away. It is to avoid controversy by remaining on the sidelines and not advocating and working for justice. And any critic who claims that people need Christianity because it somehow makes their life easier, just don’t get it because the opposite is actually true.

It is only appropriate that we pause annually as a nation and remember and honor the late Martin Luther King, Jr. like we do this weekend—someone who certainly took discipleship seriously. In many ways his “I Have a Dream” speech was a defining moment for him and for this nation. We recall the setting—a sweltering August day in our nation’s capital. The Mall was packed and tensions were high. Millions were watching and listening to this modern-day prophet—this leader who spoke from his heart and challenged a nation.

But Martin Luther King, Jr. didn’t descend from the heavens directly to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that day. And his dream was not a cozy, abstract idea floating gently along on the American stream of

consciousness. It too, grew out of struggle and stumbling experimentation—it grew out of bloodshed and peaceful marches that sometimes turned violent, all in an attempt at a more humanized America—an America that resembled God’s desire for and design of creation itself. It was how we are called to live together.

And so it was not the weaver of a gentle, sunny dream of freedom who was gunned down on the balcony of a Memphis motel. It was the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., a disciple of Jesus Christ—a minister of the Gospel with truth on his side and a disturbing warning for the would-be preserves of the status quo.

And just as there has been a domestication of Jesus, I think there has also been something of a domestication of Dr. King. I’m not sure you could find a copy of King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” at the local “Christian” bookstore. Because like the marketers of popular religion today who want to gloss over the harder characteristics and demands Jesus makes on his followers, so too, I think, have we done that with Martin. We forget, for instance how many people viewed him—that many white people were afraid of him. J. Edgar Hoover thought he was a threat to the Republic itself. And the tendency is to gloss over all of that and to view him instead as a noble dreamer. But he was first and foremost a disciple of Jesus Christ which led him to be an organizer and an activist with a Bible in his hand and a calling in his heart.

Today, he has become mainstream as most reasonable, thoughtful people embrace his dream. But I wonder if in our national memory we want that triumphant hero to stay put right where we remember him—static, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial before an adoring crowd. Because we’re more comfortable being lulled into the contentment of his beautiful words and their sentiments than we are actually standing in solidarity with victims of injustice today. And so we want to remember him there, on a pedestal preaching about his dream.

The poet, Carl Wendell Himes, Jr., who was only in his twenties when King was assassinated, writes eloquently about what he thinks we’ve done to Dr. King.

Now that he is safely dead
let us praise him, build monuments to his glory,
sing hosannas to his name.

Dead men make such convenient heroes:
they cannot rise to challenge the images
we would fashion on their lives.

And besides, it is easier to build monuments
than to make a world.

It’s not easy to make a world. But that’s exactly what Martin Luther King Jr. tried to do, and he did it because it’s what his Lord and savior Jesus Christ came to do, and all the prophets before them. Jesus was not merely a gentle healer and preacher of peace, and neither was Dr. King just a dreamer. They understood discipleship as something that required putting nothing less than their lives on the line. They understood that there was no

cost too high and no sacrifice too great for those who would follow God. And that is was far easier to dream about a world than it was to actually make one.

Karl Barth once pointed out that God wants each member of the human race to become a covenant partner with God in making the world new—in the creation of a society on earth in which justice, love, understanding and peace would prevail throughout the world. And if God's kingdom is ever to reign on earth as it does in heaven—if the world is to ever be made new, human beings will have to accept the call to discipleship—accept our role as covenant partners with God in the whole enterprise. But it's not easy. If it were, everyone would do it.

I said earlier that that day in August of 1963 and the articulation of King's dream of an America free of racism, was a defining moment for him and for the nation. It was historical holy ground. But in good Biblical tradition, whether it's Jacob's stone altar, Jesus' Mount of Transfiguration, or Moses' burning bush, all places of holy ground are places from which we move on—places from which we draw our inspiration and strength to continue the journey forward, advancing more deeply in truth, passion and courage. We don't build monuments and stay there, we move on from there. And the moment when those disciples decided for whatever reason, to follow Jesus, that too was holy ground from which they would move on and out into a complicated and uncertain world as they followed Jesus.

Sometimes our call to discipleship comes in dramatic fashion. But more often than not, it comes in those repeated, quiet, unassuming prods and nudges. Like when pastors repeatedly remind you that you are a child of God, loved unconditionally, and you begin to realize that that truth has implications for how you're going to live your life. It comes in the form of a special teacher who pulls you aside one day and startles you by telling you that you have special gifts. It comes late at night when your conscience is guilty and your passion is stirred. It comes when you are affirmed by others and recognize the way in which your God-given abilities and gifts nicely intersects with one of the world's great needs, and that when those moments happen, your heart sings for joy like at no other time.

Jesus invites us to follow him—to be disciples of the living Christ in the world. You may think you're not up to the task. You'd be wrong, but you may think that. You may feel as if you're too busy. You may think you'll get around to it someday. Here's what I do know: You will never make a more important decision in your life. You just won't.

Amen.