

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
“IT TAKES COURAGE TO FOLLOW JESUS”  
Mark 1:14-20  
January 22, 2012  
9:00 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the Church. Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the cost of discipleship, it was not an original idea that he was putting forth. Discipleship is costly. Therefore the reason Bonhoeffer got our attention was not because he wrote about costly discipleship, but because he paid the price in full.

At his hearing, he stood erect and unbroken before the Gestapo; imprisoned, defenseless and powerless, he refused to recant his faith in God. He defied the Gestapo machine by openly admitting that, as a Christian, he was a relentless enemy of Hitler's National Socialism and its totalitarian demands toward the citizens. He defied it, although he was continually threatened with torture and with the arrest of his parents, his sisters and his fiancée. He could have taken the easy way out, but cheap grace was no grace at all for him.

Discipleship is costly and Jesus never suggested any other kind of discipleship. He urged his hearers to “*count the cost.*” He called his disciples to “*come and die,*” and they did. It takes courage to follow Jesus.

We may not always see it, but the call of Jesus has a radical dimension to it. He is not merely asking us to be well-behaved. He is challenging us to be revolutionaries. We must abandon our old lives and place the kingdom of God above all else, whatever the cost.

Discipleship is life in continual transition. Following Christ means no longer following former leaders and values. When you say “**Yes**” to Christ you are saying “**No**” to your old masters and priorities. It takes courage and wisdom to change directions and follow Christ into new life.

In the course of a person's life major changes are required. Managing these changes requires at least a bit of courage. The first day of school, for example, is not as easy as it looks to an adult. Even when we are confident that the change is important we may have apprehensions. Christian discipleship falls into this category. Think of the first disciples and what a change in their lives following Jesus involved.

In a book called *The Odyssey of the Self-Centered Self*, Robert Elliot Fitch insisted that the self is not known subjectively, but objectively. The self is not found through introspection. It is found in our extroverted interests, loyalties, and loves. These are located in other people, in humanity, in nature, and in God. **“Where there are no such interests and loyalties and commitments, there simply is no self.”** Fitch wrote this in 1961, and today it is clearer than ever that he was going against the cultural grain. The past fifty years have seen greater awareness of the benefits of psychiatric medicine, but also the popularity of recreational drug use, and an ever-growing infatuation with feelings, phobias, neuroses, and addictive substances.

Fitch was a Congregationalist minister and a professor of Christian ethics. He was also concerned with **“false loves,”** the worst of which is love of the self (egotism, selfishness, pride). He saw Carl Rogers and Erich Fromm as fostering a scientific **“cult”** of self-love. He held that the self's interests and loves should not be directed to itself but to objective interests, activities, and loves. Today Fitch's work is dated and generally thought to be somewhat over-reactive, but its warning about a growing preoccupation with subjectivity and inwardness is worth considering. It underscores the importance of keeping a balance between subjectivity and objectivity.

How well did Jesus keep this balance? Jesus did not give his followers exercises in introspection and self-awareness. He taught them to live in openness to God, but he did not recommend endless self-assessment or self-examination. He taught them to pray and encouraged their conscious reliance on God. He focused their attention on the world of suffering people and made human need a priority for them. When the time was right, as we read in today's Gospel, he said to them, **“Follow me.”**

Disciples were not as uncommon in the first century as they are in the twenty-first. Somewhat similar to apprenticeship, discipleship was a way of learning from a master. In the absence of colleges, universities, and trade schools, teachers were found in the daily life of the world. John the Baptist had disciples, for example, as

did many gifted, learned, or skillful teachers. Discipleship was often costly. In order for a disciple to learn a discipline, it required taking time away from regular work or leaving it altogether. Jesus' disciples appear to have left their work and even their families to follow him. What they hoped to gain seems to have varied from person to person. Far more than they realized, however, their lives were beginning to change. And they would change far beyond anything they could have possibly imagined.

In ourselves and in our world we look for permanence, for a fixed state of being, for an unchangeable reality, but change seems to rule all things. In 1543 Copernicus expressed his frustration to Pope Paul III: **“Among the authorities it is generally agreed that the Earth is at rest in the middle of the universe, and they regard it as inconceivable and even ridiculous to hold the opposite opinion.”** Copernicus proved correct, of course. Now the scientists say that **“nothing is constant but change! All existence is a perpetual flux of ‘being’ and ‘becoming.’”** (Haeckel) A child is a complex combination of *being* and *becoming*. The child has a fixed identity, and will never be another or different person. Yet the child is always changing. Some of these changes are painful for everyone! But the goal is for our children to become all they are meant to be, to become who they really are, fulfilling the Creator's intention for them. Human life is **“a perpetual flux of ‘being’ and ‘becoming.’”**

Discipleship is not a static state, but a process. Discipleship is not a state of being, but a process of becoming. It is not a destination, but a journey. Some miracles take time, and the miracle of becoming is one of them. Following Jesus is a journey that lasts all our days, and more. The first reason for this is that it is a journey into God. Alfred North Whitehead said **“the worship of God is an adventure of the spirit, a flight after the unattainable.”** The true saints of our faith have all concurred on one thing: The more one knows of God, the more one knows that one does not know God. Faith in God is not a task for a Saturday (or a Sunday!) that you dive into and finish so you can move on to other things. John Killinger said **“it is so easy to settle down where we are, and to allow the stream of our ideas to become frozen and fixed, so that even the God we pursued goes off from us and we are left to worship only our memories of the last time we saw [God], stirring the trees on distant hills.”**

Discipleship is an ongoing, unending journey for a second reason. Following Christ is a journey into Christ-likeness. The Incarnation is not only the revelation of God in human terms. It is the revelation of what God had in mind when creating you and me. This certainly does not mean we can become like Jesus

Christ in anything more than the vaguest approximations, but we can see in him the vision of God for the human creature made in God's image. In seeing Christ, and in following him, by the grace of God, someday someone may see in one of us a resemblance to the One we have tried to follow.

Whatever lies behind us as a part of our past, we have the opportunity to change our course and move in a different direction. Created in God's image, we possess the freedom to choose. God will never coerce us, but calls us to take the paths of right living and Christ-like loving. The decision is ours day by day to choose life by walking in the footsteps of Jesus. It takes courage to follow Jesus and it is invariably costly. The testimony of generations of the faithful is that more is gained than lost.

If you have the courage to follow Jesus and you're open to his invitation, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.