

19 Pentecost Year B

September 17, 2006

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Discipleship. We hear this word so often, and yet what does it mean for us? We are followers of Christ. We are called and claimed in our baptism by God as his children. As God's children we are disciples. We are to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others through our words and our actions. As adult disciples we should try to regularly participate in the means of grace, the sacraments of baptism and communion, read scripture daily, know the creeds, Ten Commandments, and the Lutheran Confessions. We should try to apply Christian moral reasoning to everyday issues and decisions, and support the work of the congregation, synod, and the ELCA. If this sounds familiar...this is what Pastor Greg is teaching our 8th grade confirmands. The goal is to make our young people aware of their calling as a disciple for God.

Today's gospel text has many themes in it. Peter doesn't understand the first passion prediction and Jesus tells him to get behind him. Peter couldn't believe what he was hearing. Peter, one of the original twelve disciples, didn't want Christ to die. He took Jesus aside and rebuked him. We have no idea what Peter said to Jesus. I can only imagine that he focused on the suffering and death part of Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection.

I can identify with Peter. If someone that I loved very much told me that they were going to undergo suffering and death and be raised three days later, I wouldn't want it to happen. I wouldn't want the person that I cared about, the person that I believed in to suffer and die. I

would want things to continue as they always have. My initial reaction, like Peter's would be made by my human understanding and needs. This initial reaction can be typical when doing ministry. We may expect ministry to be easy since we are doing it for the kingdom's sake. Jesus challenges us about what it means to follow him:

He called to the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?"

Jesus challenges the crowd; he challenges us to think about what it means to be a disciple. Easily, as a disciple we are a follower. What kind of follower are we? The challenge that Christ sets before us is that we are to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. It's more than just following; it's taking up your cross.

Discipleship is not an easy task. In fact it is very difficult. It is something that pushes you outside of your comfort zone. What are things that we, the people of Saint Nicholas do as disciples? Calvert County Cares, Sunday school, youth and family activities, and social ministry concerns are just some things that we do. We have many wonderful ministries in the congregation and many more that we are anticipating upon the completion of the North Wing. What can we do to stretch ourselves outside of our comfort zones to be disciples? What can we do to deny ourselves and take up our cross for the sake of Christ?

It's easy to think about discipleship. It's easy to think about doing something good for others, but it can and is difficult to put into practice. There may even be times when we do try to put some new ministries in motion that we hit road blocks. Once these road blocks are in the way, we have options. One is to just stop. Another is to go around the block, and finally the third option is to address the road block head on. When we hit these road blocks it's easy to throw up our arms and call it quits, thinking that it's not worth it because we may be "suffering" in our ministry. It's also easy and tempting to avoid the road block and go around it, which in many cases doesn't solve the problem. It may just fix the road block temporarily. The most difficult thing to do as a disciple when we are following Christ, when we are doing ministry is to work with the road block. The road block will teach us something. When we work with a road block we need to pray and ask God for guidance.

Road blocks ministry can be and are discouraging. Sometimes it takes time to bounce back from those "set backs" and that's okay. During those times its okay to ask God why – why are things happening this way, God, please help me understand, please help me be patient as I/as we pray for a workable solution.

I've hit many road blocks during my ministry. One of the biggest road blocks hat I had to deal with was on internship when I began implementing my project. I felt called to youth ministry at this parish and prayed about what to do. In this large congregation the youth didn't know many adults. I started a mentor program so each confirmand had an adult mentor. Many were excited about the program. When the program was beginning to take shape it was met with great

resistance from a few of the 8th grade confirmands families because they saw it as another requirement with other changes in the confirmation program that had occurred before my arrival. At first, I thought I'd just do something else. Then I thought about going around the problem by just starting the mentor program with the 7th graders since everything was new to them. I didn't want to face the road block – I didn't want to have uncomfortable conversations. Eventually through prayer and conversations with many people who didn't want this program to die, I was able to have those difficult conversations with parents that didn't want this program to begin. As we talked together and the program began, healing started and after a considerable amount of time and many conversations throughout the year, the program was embraced by those who resisted it at first.

All ministries are a leap of faith. When one begins we don't know if it's going to be a success. It's faith that keeps us going. It's Christ's faithfulness to us that sustains us as disciples.

Discipleship is not an easy task as I've mentioned before. It is difficult and we each have different gifts to use. As I thought and prayed about the texts for today and this sermon I was reminded of a dear friend, a wonderful disciple of Christ, who taught me more about discipleship than anyone or any experience that I've ever had.

During my second semester of seminary, a very dear friend was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. Things did not look good for her. In fact, her prognosis was only a year. She could've given up her dream of becoming a pastor. She could've ended her seminary career at that moment and focused on other things that she wanted to do with her life, but she didn't. She

prayed and struggled with what she should do. After a few months she began taking classes again on a part-time basis. She completed CPE or clinical pastoral education and continued working at the retirement home where she did this field experience. She became a vicar last November at the retirement village and continued her ministry. She ministered to the residents there until she couldn't any longer, which was about a month and a half before she died. I learned what it meant to be a disciple in a way that I had never imagined.

I watched my friend struggle. She contemplated how to deal with the road block, the cancer, and eventually after time she hit it head on and continued to do ministry. It wasn't always easy for her, as she struggled with treatment options and decisions about her life, but she knew that God was with her and would give her the healing that she needed, even if it meant dying. God was with her in her ministry, even though it wasn't what she had planned when she began seminary. She was a disciple of Christ, sharing his love with others.

Discipleship is difficult. We are called to give ourselves to God. I'm not saying that we all need to be like my friend in the trials or ministry that we may face. How one reacts to road blocks is different for everyone and that's okay. I just hope and pray that we can pray to God and seek his guidance before throwing up our arms in defeat or going around the road block.

We are disciples of God; called and claimed in the waters of baptism to do ministry. We are called to deny ourselves and take up our cross. What will we do?

Now the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding be in your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus the Lord. AMEN.