

Repent and Be Baptized

Acts 2:14(a), 36-41

Good Morning Friends,

It is good to be together this morning. Good to gather in the still-present light of our Easter morning two weeks ago. Good to have space to encourage and build one another up.

Two weeks ago, I preached the story of the resurrection through the lens of Peter's story. It seems fitting to be then Peter is kicking off our new sermon series which will carry us to the end of June. The book of Acts, particularly the beginning, tells the story of the early Church. Jesus has risen, appeared to numerous people in "many convincing proofs" over 40 days, and then ascended to heaven in front of the disciples. Before departing, Jesus tells his disciples not to leave Jerusalem, because the baptizing of the Holy Spirit will come to them in not many days, and his Holy Spirit will give them power to become the witnesses of Jesus and his new culture to the "ends of the earth"

At the beginning of Acts chapter two, this Baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs in what we now call Pentecost. There's a lot that can be said about Pentecost, but for our purposes this morning, I'm just giving a very brief recap. The Holy Spirit descends on the believers in a rush of wind and tongues of fire rest over their heads. And in that moment, the believers begin talking in multiple foreign languages; God saying to his

people, I'm giving you everything you need to tell my story to every tribe, every tongue and every nation. The believers flood into the street and it's bedlam. People on the streets are confused, maybe a bit fearful or curious of what exactly is happening. Someone calls out, "They're just drunk!"

Peter stands near the front of this pack of people, raises his voice and proceeds to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth-delivering the first Sermon of this newborn church. He's preaching to the Jewish People, the crowd on the street, telling them that Jesus is the Messiah they had been waiting for, and they crucified him. But he didn't stay dead-HE is risen! God has exalted Jesus the Messiah and he now sits at the right hand of God. Which takes us to the verses that Ed read for us this morning and I'll read again here, "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers,^[a] what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added."

Now, from a storytelling perspective, wouldn't it be great if the book of Acts ended there. "And that day about three thousand persons were added and they lived happily ever after." To be sure, it is an amazing conversion story, and we still hear stories of this kind

of light speed growth of the church, like in the stories Nancy shared with us last week from Thailand. Yet the story of the Christian Church doesn't end there, conversion, that moment where a person says Yes to God, and yes to living in God's ways is the first step, and really, what follows from that point forward is what fills almost the rest of the entire New Testament- that is Christian Discipleship, the formation of one's self, body, mind, heart, and soul, into a follower of Jesus. Christian Discipleship is the topic that we're going to be exploring together over the next couple of months.

The root word of Discipleship is, of course, disciple. So, let's talk a bit about the Jewish Tradition of Discipleship, of what it meant to become a disciple. In the first century, at the time that Jesus lived, boys around the age of 6 would attend a school of sorts to learn the Torah, which is the first five books of the Old Testament-Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They would study the Torah, learn the Torah, memorize the Torah. And by age 10, they would have those first five books memorized. This stage of Torah education was called Bet Sephar. After age 10, most kids would finish their education and return to learn the life of the family. But the best of the best would keep going to the next stage called Bet Talmud, and they would spend the next three years learning and memorizing the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, so Genesis-Malachai. At this point, the boy would be about 13, which was the age of adulthood in the Jewish tradition. And all but a slim percentage of kids would be done with their education. They would go home, learn the family business, start their own families, contribute to their communities, and so on. But the best of the best of these best, would have the chance, the urging of their teachers to enter in Bat Midrash, which was

learning to be a Rabbi. A student who wanted to enter Bat Midrash would go to a Rabbi, one they admired, valued, wanted to be like, and would apply to become their disciple. Which Rabbi to apply to wasn't a basic decision, you know, one Rabbi is as good as the next. It was an intentional choice, by choosing to become a Rabbi's disciple, you were saying, "I want to know what the Rabbi knows, I want to be like the Rabbi, I want to do what the Rabbi does." Following a Rabbi meant leaving everything, it meant devoting your entire life to being like the Rabbi. This is what it means to be a Disciple- leaving no stone unturned in our lives, our relationships, our communities in our pursuit to being made into the image of Jesus.

I love the way that the Message paraphrase of the Bible expresses this idea, in Romans 12:1-2 "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you."

This idea of "well-formed" Christian maturity is going to inform my sermons and our worship over the next while. We'll talk about specific practices, callings, and a heavy dose of encouragement.

For the rest of our time here today though, let's talk about Christian discipleship is and isn't.

First, true, deep Christian Discipleship is not fast; it is a lifelong journey. A lot of my food for this series comes from this book "A long Obedience in the same direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society" written by the late Eugene Peterson. In the introduction to the book, Peterson contrasts the life of faith and what he calls the "world" or the influence of modern western culture and understandings and how that gets all muddied up with our understanding of our Christian life. He says, "One aspect of the world that I have been able to identify as harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. We assume that if something can be done at all, it can be done quickly and efficiently. Our attention spans have been conditioned by 30 second commercials (or I would add, by 10 seconds instagram reels and tiktok videos). Our sense of reality has been flattened by 30 page abridgments. It is not difficult in such a world to get a person interested in the message of the Gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain that interest. Millions of people in our culture make decisions for Christ, but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to have been born again, but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. In our kind of culture anything; even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes on the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; **there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of**

Christians would have called holiness.” Discipleship takes time.

Secondly, discipleship is not linear, it's more cyclical. Wouldn't it be lovely if growing Christian character, or Holiness was a straightforward process? You set a goal and then move steadily towards it until it's fully achieved. Not much in human life is linear, the nature of people is often about fits and starts, slow change. I'm taking an AMBS short course right now called Transforming Congregational Conflict with Dr. Betty Pries. One of the things she talked about in last week's lecture is the idea of a grand narrative, and the cycle within that narrative. Take for instance the story of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. In their story, the same pattern seems to happen over and over again. The people follow God, the people turn away from God, God calls them back, and the people return to God. It happens with almost maddening regularity when we read the Old Testament. I remember reading most of the major books of the Old Testament in Sunday School in grades 4-6 and even as a child, feeling like, "Good grief! Don't these people ever learn!" But Betty Pries frames this another way, instead of reading the story of Israel as God's people caught in an endless loop, we can read the story as Israel on a long, slow spiral towards the heart of God. Each time they round this spiral they're moving closer to God. Discipleship, moving closer to the heart of God, is not a linear process. And that's okay.

Thirdly, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we develop practices, we change our patterns and, in turn, our hearts are changed. The Reverend Dr. Will Willimon, a long-time minister in the American Methodist Church and Professor at Duke Divinity School

speaks about fulfilling the calling of the Christian life to doing the “right thing”, the Godly thing, the thing that Jesus has called us to do, even when we don’t feel like it. “Some people might think that sounds disingenuous or you’re just putting on an act. You’re just fulfilling a role to which I say, yeah, I’m a husband. And there are times when I don’t feel like being a husband and it doesn’t bring me huge satisfaction to be a husband. But you kind of go out and act the part and maybe there’s a sense in which you act the role in order more fully to assume the role. Like in marriage, you know, I had to stand up in front of a preacher who happened to be my wife’s grandmother, the first ordained woman in South Carolina. And she said, be faithful, forsaking all others, keep only to her as long as you both shall live. And I bet in the early days of marriage, I really had to try to act faithful. I had to be faithful. I had to think. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You’re married. You gotta be faithful. Well, then you wake up one day and suddenly you’re not trying to be faithful anymore. You just are. Faithful is who you have become by fulfilling that role that was assigned to you.” Certainly, being a Disciple of Jesus Christ is much more than a role, but what we can grab onto here is this idea that what begins as intentional choice of living in God’s ways, will, over time, become second nature to us.

Lastly, and I was debating whether or not this was the note that I wanted to end on, but discipleship is costly. The love of Jesus Christ and the call of Jesus Christ will change everything, should change everything. No part of our lives is separate from our new creation status in Christ. Sometimes that will feel like really good news and sometimes that will feel like really hard news. But that is the truth that is presented to us throughout

scripture. A comfort, at least for me, is to know we live this out in community; that when the cost feels too great, we have one another for encouragement.

In closing, dearest friends, we are all on a journey together, a journey of long obedience in the same direction. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news, tenderly, lovingly, asks us to turn to God, aim our whole lives towards living in God's ways. This is discipleship- to want to be like our Teacher, our Saviour and our Friend. Amen.