

“Deep or Wide?”
Matthew 8:18-34
December 10, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

An important transition takes place in today’s passage. Jesus’ popularity has increased significantly after a season of healing miracles. So it is not surprising to read in our passage that a crowd has gathered around Jesus. Will Jesus content himself with growing popularity? Will his ministry be wide or will it seek to go deep? Since he came to reverse the sad effects of sin, he knows that he will have to go beyond reversing the symptoms of sin and address the problem of the sinner. Jesus will have to make disciples, a task far more challenging than healing diseases.

So this passage finds Jesus escaping the crowds in order to go deeper with his disciples. He seeks impact over popularity, and he knows that the impact he wants, if it is to be lasting, has to include making disciples. I like the images Frederick Bruner uses to describe the results Jesus is seeking in his efforts to make disciples. “Real disciples are the world’s healthiest reality and evil’s major antibodies. Real Christian people are the stem cells the world most needs.” Jesus wants to make of us antibodies to evil and stem cells for the flourishing of life. He wants to go deeper with us, making us his disciples and thus reversing the sad effects of sin in our lives.

I. Disciples Follow Jesus

Jesus makes it clear that following him is more than a casual act. It’s very different than saying, “I like Jesus. I would vote for him. I approve of him.” Rather, it requires an “all-in” commitment. His interactions with two different people show this. The first one is a scribe who pledges his loyalty to Jesus. **“Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go”** (v. 19). Scribes were Bible scholars and were viewed as important and influential people in this day. One would think that this was just the kind of person Jesus would need as his movement gained momentum. Having followers of this man’s stature would lend credibility to Jesus in the halls of power. It seems likely that this scribe regarded things in this way. Notice that he addresses Jesus as “Teacher.” Throughout Matthew’s gospel, only non-disciples address Jesus in that way. One commentator said that his statement had overtones of “Jesus, this is your lucky day; I have decided to be your disciple.”

Jesus responds to this man in a way that exposes his casual loyalty. **“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”** (v. 20). I detect something of a paradox in this. God

provides homes for the lowliest of his creatures, the foxes and birds, but not for the one who sits at the highest point of creation, the Son of Man. To follow him, Jesus says to this scribe, will require a willingness to let go of the strong desire we all have to find a place of rest and security in this world, a home. Jesus lived the life of a homeless man, and his followers must be willing to do the same. Rosemarie Miller puts her finger on it when she says that we all long for life that is like a canal instead of a river. In a canal, everything is calm and predictable, while the river is wild and dangerous. The follower of Jesus must be willing to launch out into the river.

The second man seems to be in a different category than the first. Notice that Matthew calls him a “disciple.” He is already a follower of Jesus but seems to be wavering somewhat. He wants to go bury his father first. Given the fact that burials happened within hours of death, it is likely that this man’s father has not yet died. What he is asking is to stay with his father until his father dies. In the Judaism of Matthew’s day, it would be hard to imagine a more legitimate request. Obligations to one’s parents were given priority over all other obligations except for the one reserved for God. That is precisely the point. Jesus is saying that loyalty to him is to be a higher priority than all others. He is due the loyalty that is reserved only for God.

I think it is important to remember that this man is already a disciple. So Jesus is calling one who is already a disciple to renew his commitment. Jesus knows how easy it is for us to pledge our ultimate loyalty to him but then to take it back. There is a sense in which we need to get up every day and recommit ourselves to give ultimate allegiance to Jesus.

Why is Jesus so rigid about this? Why can’t he just give people what they want? What would be so bad about God healing our diseases and making all of our plans successful, in return for our willingness to be on his side? What would be so bad about Jesus doing what the health and wealth gospels want him to do? Let me say a couple of things in answer to that. First, Jesus wants to expand our world, not shrink it. When we give up everything to follow him, we might think that our world gets smaller and more limited. It’s actually just the opposite. You can see that in a verse in the next section, where we find Jesus sleeping in a boat in the middle of a storm. This is the same Jesus who just said that he has nowhere to lay his head and who is now laying his head on a cushion in the stern of a boat in the middle of a lake during a severe storm. The whole world has become his home. Something similar happens to us when we follow Jesus. For example, Jesus requires a complete commitment of our time and money to him. You might think that doing so would limit your options, when in fact just the opposite happens. It opens up your options because you are no longer enslaved to those things. Life becomes more of an adventure of trusting God.

There's a second reason Jesus insists on our complete allegiance to him. He loves us, and knows that this is what we were created for. He knows that if all of your plans succeeded beyond your wildest imagination, but you still were not fully devoted to him, that you would feel an incredible emptiness, even to the point that you would want to kill yourself. On the other hand, he knows that if we lose everything in the world, including our health and our money, but still have him, that we will be filled with joy. He knows that there is only one good future for us, and that this future lies in knowing him, loving him and treasuring him above all else.

II. Disciples Follow Jesus Into Stormy Places – v. 23-27

To help us learn to be Jesus' committed disciple in the way he requires, Matthew presents two stories of those who followed Jesus. They are realistic stories in the fact that these followers are very much like us, which is to say that they are wavering in their commitment.

Jesus and his disciples are seeking to get away from the crowds and head across the Sea of Galilee to a more remote area. While in route, a sudden storm arises, the suddenness of which was not unusual for this body of water. It must have been particularly violent, because even the experienced fishermen onboard think they're done for. We are given an indication of how taxing Jesus' labors were when we read that he was asleep in the midst of this storm. His disciples had witnessed enough of Jesus' powers to know that he could do something about this dangerous situation. Exactly what they expected him to do is uncertain, because they are taken by surprise when he speaks to the storm and calms it. But they did know that Jesus needed to be awakened to do something. So they wake him up and scream three panicked words: Lord, save, [we] perish.

Jesus wakes up and does something that seems a little puzzling. Before rebuking the wind and waves, he rebukes his disciples for their small faith. They were on the verge of sinking. Wouldn't you think that would be the most urgent matter? Had I been Jesus, I think I would first have calmed the raging sea and then spoken to the disciples about their lack of trust. But Jesus has different priorities for us than we often have for ourselves. He sees our faith as the matter of greatest importance. When we are assaulted by the storms of life, our first priority is for relief from the storm. If we lose a job, we first want another job. If we lose our health, we first want it restored. Jesus wants first for our faith to be strengthened.

So Jesus rebukes his disciples for their lack of faith. **“Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?”** What exactly did Jesus expect them to do? Did he expect them just to sit back and let the boat sink? No; they were right to wake him up and ask for his help. He rebukes them for their fear. The word used

there is one that has overtones of cowardice. It is not the normal word used in the New Testament for fear, appearing only three times. The last of those appearances is in Revelation 21:8. **“But as for the cowardly [our word], the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”** Jesus isn’t rebuking them for taking action by waking him up, but for their cowardly attitudes. And Jesus goes on to diagnose the source of their cowardice—their little faith. Faith gives us a courageous confidence that Jesus is equal to the need, even when he appears to be asleep.

The disciples discover in a memorable way that as long as they have Jesus with them, they can be full of courage. After speaking to the disciples about their cowardice, he speaks to the winds and the waves, telling them to quiet down. Immediately, the sea becomes as glass. Jesus has complete authority. I used to play some golf in my younger years. I was never very good at it, so I spent a great deal of time talking to my ball after I hit it and while it was in flight. If my shot looked short, I would tell it to hurry up. If it looked long, I would tell it to sit down. If it went far astray to the right, I would tell it to come back. Never once did my words have the least effect on my ball. Not so with Jesus. He speaks and even the winds and waves obey his voice.

The basis of our courageous faith is the fact that Jesus is in the boat with us. He has said to us that he will never leave us or forsake us. And the Jesus who promises to be with us has all authority. What situation in your life tends to produce the kind of panic we see in the disciples here? Where is it that your courage is failing? Maybe it’s a fear regarding your children. Or perhaps it’s an area of your health, your finances or your job. You need courage, and you get courage from remembering that Jesus is in the boat with you. He can sooner perish himself than let you perish. But he will not allow either of you to perish. That’s not to say that he won’t allow storms to arise. But in the midst of them all, his grace will be sufficient and his good purposes for you will always be accomplished. So see Jesus and don’t be afraid. There are times when the most spiritual thing you can do is just go to sleep, like Jesus did in this storm. It is the sleep of confidence and courage in the one who always cares for you.

III. Disciples Follow Jesus Into Evil Places – v. 28-34

They finally arrive at their intended destination on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. It is pagan territory, with a large Gentile population. Two demon-possessed men are there who approach Jesus. They are violent men, due to the influence of the demons possessing them. They have made their home away from normal society, in the tombs. Since taking up their residence there, no one else dared approach these tombs, due to the violent nature of these men. But the demons recognize the identity and authority of Jesus,

calling him the “Son of God.” They are not violent with him, but plead for their lives. They ask Jesus, **“Have you come here to torment us before the time?”** (v. 29). The time he means is the time of judgment, when Satan and all his demons will be cast into the bottomless pit. Again, we notice the orthodoxy of these demons, who believe both in the divinity of Jesus and the reality of judgment. But their case is that they have more time before that day of judgment. So they ask Jesus to send them into the herd of pigs, lest they be disembodied. He grants their request, and the pigs immediately rush into the sea and drown.

This story fills our minds with questions, many of which are unanswerable. So let’s focus instead on those things that are clear. One is that two men are released from bondage to Satan’s demons by the authority of Jesus. A second is that Jesus’ presence chases away demons. I think there is an application here for us. Jesus is present today through his people, the Church. Our very presence here in Altadena Valley has a way of chasing away demons. Your presence as a follower of Christ has a similar effect in your workplace and your neighborhood. Because we carry the name of Christ, we need not fear evil. They may snarl at us and hate us and threaten to destroy us, but they have no power unless Jesus gives them permission.

Another lesson here is to value people over pigs. When the herdsmen of the pigs report what has happened, the people all get together and ask Jesus to leave. They prefer their economic prosperity over the lives of these two men who have been delivered from the demons. So Jesus, unwanted here, leaves. Ironically, the Gadarenes, out of a concern for their economic well-being, drive away the one who has come to make them rich through his own poverty. We will learn later in Matthew’s gospel that the final cost for defeating evil will require more than the death of a herd of pigs. Rather, the death of the only perfect man, Jesus Christ, will be the price for that. And Jesus pays it readily, out of his heart of love.

CONCLUSION:

There is much encouragement in this passage. As is the case throughout the gospels, Jesus’ disciples are all a work in progress. We see them here filled with cowardly fear. And in the case of the man who wants to first bury his father, I think he loves comfort too much. But above all we see Jesus bearing with his far from perfect disciples with patience and gentleness. He will help them. He takes us as we come, even if we have very little faith. The important thing is to come to him. When we do, Jesus takes us and starts to work on us for his good purposes. Come to him for that today, whether it’s the first time or the one-thousandth time. Come and follow him.