

This Sunday marks the beginning of my 32<sup>nd</sup> year of ministry here at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church. Wow, where has the time gone? In looking back, as I rejoice in looking at our future together, I don't recall any man, woman, youth, or child ever leaving this congregation...or the Church in general...because they discovered being a disciple of Jesus just too easy. No one has ever said to me: "Being like Jesus? There's nothing to it! I quit!"

I have, though, witnessed people leaving this congregation and/or the Church because they find the biblical truths we preach and teach simply too difficult. I've shared before about the Grace family that terminated their membership here and, when I sought an explanation, told me: "We don't want to belong to a church that tells us how to live our lives!"

This experience of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century disciples is described in our Gospel lesson this morning. As Jesus seeks to teach the people, and reading vs. 60 from The Message, many of his disciples said: *'This is tough teaching, too tough to swallow.'* If ever you are told that being a faithful disciple in this unbelieving world is clean and simple, you are being told an untruth. Jesus, 2000 years ago, told disciples of every generation: *'Take up your cross and follow me.'* Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor executed earlier last century under the Third Reich, wrote: *'When Jesus calls a man to follow him, he calls that man to die.'* Being Christian...following Christ faithfully day to day...is difficult and demanding and not for the 'faint of heart'. Discipleship cannot be achieved partially. We're either 'all in' or 'all out'. Jesus put this another, very succinct, way, saying: *'You're either for me or against me.'*

I recently read about David Livingstone, a Scottish Presbyterian medical missionary in Central Africa, born in 1813 and died in 1873.

While he was serving in this difficult, daunting, and demanding place, he received a communication from a missionary society, asking: *'Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send other men to join you.'* Livingstone wrote back: *'If you have men who will come only because there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all.'* In the school where our daughter serves as Executive Director, there are wonderful quotations displayed on the walls throughout their many facilities. One I recall says: *'If you cannot find the way, make one.'*

Every disciple throughout history has experienced difficulties during their days. We are to live in this world, but---as Jesus said---not *'of the world'*. We are daily bombarded by messages and promises that contradict the truths of God's Word, convincing and tempting messages that result in [at best] brief, temporary enjoyment. This is illustrated as Jesus speaks about God feeding the Israelites *'bread that came down from heaven'* during their difficult journey to the Promised Land. Jesus clearly states: *'Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.'* [Jn. 6:58] What God, alone, provides us will last forever. What the world has to offer is temporary, at the very best! What has been called *'dust and rust'*!

Yet, countless people have opted...and are opting...for the temporary over the eternal...the quick fix over the everlasting promise. As we spoke about in adult Sunday school last week, one primary reason people do not accept the truths of Holy Scripture is because, if they do, their lives are forever changed. Life, as they presently know it, will be transformed into life as God alone provides it. We're all for *'progress'*, it's *'change'* we strive to avoid.

As we read the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of St. John's Gospel account, it seems Jesus is determined to drive away as many followers as possible from his ministry. Contrast today's reading with the opening of John 6

where the crowd is so large that Jesus asks where they would find enough money to feed this hungry mass. Now, as the chapter closes, Jesus no longer has a multitude following him, but only twelve followers. This is hardly a textbook example for today's church-growth-experts. Jesus, however, gives his remaining disciples an opportunity to walk away, asking: *'You do not want to leave too, do you?'* This is not so much an invitation to walk away, as it is a call to commitment...a renewal of commitment...a statement of faith!

This same call to commitment is evidenced in our OT lesson in which Joshua says to the assembled tribes of Israel: *'If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.'* Leading, then, by example, Joshua testifies: *'As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.'* [Josh 24:15] Day after day brings to us a 'make up your mind moment'...opportunities to decide!

Witnessing a miracle or two is one thing. I mean, who doesn't like a good miracle from time to time? Unreserved obedience and commitment to the miracle-worker? Now, that's an entirely other matter! Many welcome the miracles, but reject the Master. When the truth that is Jesus Christ confronts us, we respond either by accepting or rejecting him. Discipleship will test us, but discipleship must never be tentative. The truth is that the truth is always true, whether or not the majority accepts it!

With boldness and certainty, Jesus asks his followers if they...like the earlier-gathered crowds...want to leave him. May we, now...today...answer as did Peter on behalf of those first disciples:

*'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.'* [Jn. 6:68-69]

Amen.