

What does it mean to be a disciple / follower of Jesus – today?

Following Jesus has never been a path to worldly popularity... or to personal comfort and ease. As disciples of Jesus, ours is a call that takes place under the sign of the cross. It is a call to proclaim the same words that Jesus proclaimed... to do the same things that Jesus did—to join Jesus in his way of life and ministry. It is a call in which we can (perhaps should) expect to be ridiculed and discounted... because of the One we follow.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus talks quite seriously about *the reality* that those who join him in his work / mission will likely be recipients of the same kind of hostility and rejection that he, himself, experienced. Some of the leaders had already branded Jesus as “Beelzebul” (= the “*Prince of demons*”)... so “*how much more will they malign those*” who work for me, Jesus says. But then, in his next breath, Jesus tells his disciples: DO NOT FEAR—3 times!

- DO NOT FEAR because *God’s purposes will be revealed* (vs. 26-27).
- DO NOT FEAR because *God has control of your future* (vs. 28).
- DO NOT FEAR because *God also has control of your present* (vs. 29-31).

Isn’t NOT FEARING more easily said than done?! FDR famously declared, “*The only thing we have to FEAR is FEAR itself.*” BUT who among us can turn FEAR off when it has us in its grip?

FEAR is a pervasive and powerful motivating force—that can impact / control our words... and our actions. From the moment we are born, it seems, we learn to FEAR the world around us (especially the stranger... sometimes even those closest to us). Our political leaders use the power of FEAR to make sure we conform to the structures and systems of this world, even when doing so does NOT serve our best interests / the best interests of the whole.

Well... Jesus recognized that FEAR will also get in the way of faithful discipleship. His disciples had left the security of their homes / families to follow him; BUT before long, they would know and ultimately would bow before the power of FEAR.

To do what Jesus calls his disciples to do—to be faithful to the proclamation and practice of the gospel / to the coming of *the kingdom of heaven*—puts his disciples on a collision course with the powers and ways of this world.

Why? Because *the kingdom of heaven* / **God’s rule and way** disrupts things. **God’s rule and way** upends the world’s ways of being / thinking / living. **God’s rule and way** calls into question the rulers and systems of this world that promise “peace”—but do so by wielding a sword of “power” / forced allegiance. Simply put, *the kingdom of heaven* / **God’s rule and way** is, more often than not, in opposition to the ways of the world!

This is Jesus’ truth-telling at its best—no sugarcoating, whatsoever. Believing in Jesus—by that, I mean really listening to / absorbing what Jesus teaches and commands / what Jesus stands for—and then living it out in our lives—that’s risky business. Some relationships will change. Some relationships may even end. That, in part, is what Jesus is saying here. When you stand up and speak out for what Jesus teaches and commands—people will notice... and not everyone will like it. You can anticipate being unfriended.

Jesus encourages his disciples, “*Don’t be afraid of what others will say about you! Don’t be intimidated. Don’t be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. You are on the side of the Father, who knows and cares for the sparrows that are sold “two for a penny” ... who knows even the number of hairs on your head! If you FEAR, don’t FEAR the presumed powers of this world; save your FEAR for God, who holds you entire life—body and soul—in his hands. It’s time to proclaim a better way... a higher power... another kingdom.*”

I am sure Jesus' disciples were inspired by these words; but I can also imagine the FEAR that they still held onto. They wanted to put their whole faith and trust in Jesus. But what if they were wrong? Couldn't they still hold onto some "pieces" of this world that could protect them from potential pain / suffering?

We can certainly understand their plight. We, as Jesus' followers, want to be so secure in our faith / our relationship with God that we live this life with boldness, naming the evils of this world.

We want to stand up to and speak out against the powers and principalities of this world that divide and hurt, tear down and destroy. But we find that, more often than not, we are wishy-washy and hesitant to speak out or act on what we know is right... out of pure FEAR.

We want to give our full allegiance to God; but we are AFRAID of what we might lose if we do! Even though we know that God's power is greater than the powers of this world, we are afraid to let go of the "security" that we think this world offers us.

We don't even dare to *talk* about things like refugees, homelessness, healthcare, systemic racism, white privilege, or politics at social gatherings, much less to our community leaders, for FEAR that we might be labelled... or that others might disagree with us. Even when we know that there is injustice, we hold back... we resist the nudging of the Spirit.

Our FEAR leads to partial allegiance to God... and half-hearted devotion / commitment to God's kingdom... God's rule and way.

The question that we are reluctant to answer is the one Jesus posed to the rich young ruler: "*What does it mean to love God with one's whole heart, soul, mind, and strength?*" That answer is the very same answer to another important question: "*What does it mean to pick up one's cross and follow Jesus?*"

In both cases, what Jesus has to say about *commitment* ... doesn't make sense to those who want to live a safe, less-than-costly, risk-free "when it fits" form of discipleship.

* * * * *

One of the best illustrations of this... is a story that Clarence Jordan tells—of a conversation that took place between his brother Robert and himself.

In the early 1950s, in the heart of the upheaval of the civil rights movement, Clarence approached his brother Robert (later a state senator and justice of the Georgia Supreme Court) asking him to legally represent Koinonia Farm. ******[Koinonia Farm is an intentional Christian community located in Americus, GA. It was founded in 1942 by two couples: Clarence and Florence Jordan and Martin and Mabel England. Their "mission" (through their common life together) was [and is] to live as a "demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God"... to strive to demonstrate the way of Jesus as an alternative to materialism, militarism, and racism. They are well known around the world for their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and as the birthplace of several organizations, including: Habitat for Humanity and the Fuller Center for Housing.]

Robert refused Clarence's request by trying to explain: "*Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represent you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got.*" "We might lose everything too, Bob," Clarence answered back.

"Well, it's different for you." "Why is it different? I remember... that you and I joined the church the same Sunday, as boys. I expect, when we came forward the preacher asked me the same question he did you. He asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' and I said, 'Yes.' What did you say?"

“I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.” “Could that point by any chance be—the cross?” “That’s right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.” “Then,” Clarence said, “I [have to question if you’re really a disciple of Jesus... or just an admirer of Jesus.]”

****You see, in this case, Jesus did bring a sword that set brother against brother.**

* * * * *

The level of COMMITMENT that Jesus calls for... provides a reality check for us... to see if we are “admirers” of Jesus... or “disciples” of Jesus.

It’s not likely, in this part of the world anyway, that we will be *persecuted* for our faith. Yet even here in this “safe” context, the walk of discipleship is not an easy one. Most of our talk of the life of faith conveniently “leaves out” language about the *cost of discipleship*. We want the benefits of life with Jesus... without the sacrifice or pain that can come with it.

Yet Paul reminds us that in baptism, we share in Christ’s death. **If we take a stand** for the sake of equality / justice for all people, we may risk the disapproval of those who embrace the status quo... or the exclusion of “certain individuals / groups.” **If we confront** the wrongs we see around us, we may risk being ostracized / ridiculed by those involved—even by family members and friends.

Amid the risks and losses of life, God assures us that we will not be alone. Baptized into Christ’s death, we share in his resurrection—not only in the world to come, but in the newness of life that breaks into our everyday lives... now.

Jesus tells his disciples, *“What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.” It’s time to tell the world about God’s kingdom ways. It’s time to proclaim the good news.*

Dear friends, **it’s time** for today’s disciples—for us... to put away our FEAR of what the world might say.

- **It’s time** to stand up and speak out against racism, sexism, and classism... and all the other “wrongs” of our society – no matter what our families or friends might think.
- **It’s time** to live out our love for / allegiance to God.
- **It’s time** to believe that God cares for us enough to know the hairs on our heads and the burdens in our hearts.
- **It’s time** to share the good news of Jesus Christ with a world that needs to know a better way.
- **It’s time** to combat evil and injustice and oppression, in whatever forms they present themselves.
- **It’s time** to tell the good news in the light... and proclaim it from the rooftops.

What Jesus is saying to us today is this: *“The world may make fun of you and put you down—try to crush your spirit. You may even be hated... or suffer hardship or broken relationships for following me. But don’t be AFRAID! I have walked this path before you. I will now walk with you as you go. And I will walk with you into the future God is making ready. I know it won’t be easy, but when you take up your cross... and lose your life for my sake, you gain a life held by God... a life that is eternal.”*