

Sermon for Sunday, June 26, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Every vestry meeting, at the very beginning
we do some sort of bible study.

This is an important part
of our work together.

Because while the legal role of the vestry
is “to represent the parish with regard to all matters pertaining to its corporate property,
and the relations of the parish to its clergy,”
the role we commission the vestry for
is to seek [God’s] glory
and promote the mission of [Christ’s] Church.

Bible study
is one of the things that helps us to understand
what the mission of Christ’s church
is.

For the last couple of months at vestry
we’ve been focussing on the gospel reading
for the next Sunday.

So last Monday night
we read
our gospel
for today.

And at first, when we began to talk about it
there was an awkward pause.

Not so much I think, because it was too hard to understand,
but because it seems so demanding.

"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay
his head," says Jesus.

"Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

This is Jesus
at his most demanding.

So what does it mean for us?

It might help
if we look back
at what has been happening.
Last week's reading, set on the other side
of the Sea of Galilee
from where Jesus spent most of his time,
was the healing of the crazy man
living among the tombstones with the pigs.
He wanted to follow Jesus,
but Jesus told him to go home
and tell what God had done for him.
And the townspeople -
they wanted Jesus to leave.
He presented too much
of a challenge
to them.
So Jesus got back in his boat,
and went home to the western shore, the region called Galilee.

But in between then and now, as the gospel of Luke tells it,
a lot has happened.

When Jesus got back to his home side of the lake,
the crowds welcomed him.
He healed Jairus' daughter,
and the woman with the hemorrhage,
and then sent out the twelve disciples
to proclaim the kingdom of God
and to heal.
With the advice that if they were welcomed in a village,
they should stay,
but if they were not welcomed,
they should leave.
There was plenty to do
without getting stuck with the people who didn't want them.
And the disciples traveled all over the region,
teaching and healing.

Meanwhile, Jesus was becoming so popular
that King Herod heard of him,
and began
to worry.

When the disciples came back from their travels,
they found Jesus as popular as ever,
surrounded by crowds.

Send the people away to get food,
because it's getting late.
"You feed them," said Jesus,
and he took two fish and five loaves of bread,
blessed them, and broke them,

and there was more than enough to feed the crowds,
five thousand man, let alone the women and children,
with twelve baskets of food
left over.

Not long afterwards,
Jesus asked his disciples,
"Who do you say I am?"
And Peter blurted out,
"You are the Messiah, the Christ of God."

Jesus response?

"The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief
priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'

And then came the kicker.

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross
daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose
their life for my sake will save it.'

A few days later, Jesus took Peter and James and John
up the mountain to pray.
And there he was transformed,
shining white,
and Moses and Elijah appeared with him,
and a voice sounded, "this is my Son, my chosen one: listen to him."

And coming back down the mountain,

Jesus healed a boy
 who was apparently possessed,
 and then began to talk again
 about his death.

Meanwhile,
 his disciples began to argue among themselves
 about who would be the greatest.
 And Jesus
 sat a child beside him,
 and said, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever
 welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the
 greatest.'

But then the disciple John continued the contentiousness.
 "We saw someone healing in your name, and we tried to stop him."
 And I imagine Jesus sighed. "John, whoever is not against us
 is for us.

Backwards and forwards, pulling and pushing,

What does it mean to follow Jesus?
 To crowd around.
 To be healed.
 To be fed a meal of bread and fish.

To go preach the gospel.
 To take up your cross.
 To lose your life.
 To listen to Jesus.
 To welcome the least.

And then, then we get to today's reading.
 Jesus has predicted his betrayal, predicted his suffering, predicted his death.
 And knowing all that,
 he says,
 it's time to go.
 Time to leave the safety of Galilee.
 Time to go
 to Jerusalem.

And the question is,
who will go with him?
Because the crowds love him.
There are plenty who want to join him.
They are loud in their declarations of commitment.

But Jesus knows
that this will not be
an easy journey.
There will be times
when they'll get to hang out together,
and talk long
into the night.
But there will be times
when it will be frightening,
when their lives will be threatened,
when all they will want to do
is leave.

So we get to our reading today,
and already
there is a taste
of what is to come.
They started the journey to Jerusalem,
going due south.
It wasn't the usual route;
most people travelled by the Jordan Valley
to avoid contact with the Samaritans,
people who practiced a slightly different version of Judaism
based not in Jerusalem
but on Mount Gerazim
in the mountains about halfway between
Galilee
and Jerusalem.
Samaritans and Jews
were not
the best of friends.
But for whatever reason,
Jesus choose that route.

And it was a very different experience from Galilee,
where the crowds had welcomed them
wherever they went.

And it was probably no surprise
that at least one Samaritan village
did not welcome them.

And while James and John - appropriately nicknamed
the sons of thunder -
asked Jesus if they could ask God to destroy the village,
Jesus wanted no part of it.

His mission wasn't to destroy
but to give life.
Even if
it cost him
his own life.

And then they come to another village,
and now they are welcome
And people begin to ask again
to follow Jesus.

And that's when
he says those challenging things.

"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay
his head."

"Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

He's being realistic.
He is going to die
And anyone who joins him
has to be ready
to do the same.

What does it mean to follow Jesus?
To crowd around.
To be healed.

To be fed a meal of bread and fish.

To go preach the gospel.

To take up your cross.

To lose your life.

To listen to Jesus.

To welcome the least.

To have no permanent home.

To leave your past behind.

To keep looking forward.

This is
a total commitment.

In 1937, the German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book called
“The Cost of Discipleship.”

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”

Bonhoeffer knew what it cost to follow Jesus.

He believed
that the Nazi program
was counter to the gospel,
and actively opposed it.

On a visit to the US in 1939, he had the opportunity to stay in safety,
but he chose to return to Germany,
where he was forbidden to speak in public or to publish.

He continued his resistance efforts,
and was arrested in 1943;
in 1945

he was executed for his part
in a plot to kill Hitler.

Costly discipleship.

That's what Jesus calls us to.

To risk stepping out of our comfort zones.

Or as the vestry members said

at the end of our study on Monday,
following Jesus

is very very very very important.

Being Christian isn't easy. You can't divide your attention.

Consider it well. Don't take it lightly.

But know

that if you do,
if you are willing

to take the risk

to follow Jesus

no matter what the cost,

that God will bless you with grace

far beyond

your imagining.