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Do you realize that almost every gospel appointed to be read during the season of Pentecost is concerned, one way or another, with discipleship? How would you define the word disciple? Do you think of yourself as a disciple? Should you think of yourself that way? If not, why not? Maybe I should just sit down now and let you mull over those questions on your own and then debate the question among yourselves. I know that the results would be very interesting. People here aren't the least bit bashful about that sort of thing. However we can do that some other time. I am not about to give up the chance to preach when I have a captive audience!

So let's talk about disciples and discipleship. My dictionary has several definitions of the word disciple. Here are two: one who accepts and assists the spreading of the doctrine of another; or one who follows a certain school of thought or a particular individual. And aren't those definitions exactly what we promise when we make our baptismal vows? "Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit?" To which we answer, "I believe." And "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ?" And we say, "I will, with God's help." And when we ask ourselves how well we've kept those promises, what is our answer? For most of us the answer is probably, "Not terribly well." We mean well. We do try. But for the most part we fall short of the goal.

Jesus was very honest about how difficult it would be to be his disciple. Not only would it be hard work, but it could even be dangerous. Now most of us don't mind hard work, but most of us don't much like anything dangerous. And to be truthful, most of us seldom consider that the practice of our religion could possibly be dangerous or that we might have to suffer in any way for our faith. Twenty-first century American mainline Christians are a pretty comfortable, complacent lot. The idea of suffering or danger is not something we generally explore. In fact, when something untoward happens in our lives, we're far more likely to say, "Why me?" than to say, "Why not me?" Yet that untoward happening is really what we as Christians ought to be prepared for. All the time. "Why me?" should only be our response to God's grace in our lives. But somehow, we have it turned around most of the time. We accept all of God's gracious gifts to us--our lives, our well-being, our fat-cat existences as our due--something we deserve-- but look upon hardships or sorrows of any kind as something that has been foisted on us, something which is unfair and surely undeserved. We really have it all backwards here.

Three times Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid. And he was speaking to all his disciples including you and me. First, because truth will always triumph; second, because there is no earthly punishment that can compare to the ultimate fate of one who denies God; and third, because God truly cares for us, God's own people. Yet we "know" from our earthly wisdom that truth seldom seems to triumph. We may not be thrown into the arena with the lions, but we are frequently thrown into the arena of public opinion where labels matter more than anything else. And few of us spend much time contemplating sin and judgment--well, except during Lent. And so, we spend a lot of time feeling afraid because we are more in touch with the world and its ways than we are with God and God's ways.

And that means that we are less truly disciples of Jesus and far more disciples of our culture. It's very easy to convince ourselves that the American way of life is identical to the Christian way of life. But the two are not--can never be-- identical. When we promise to follow Jesus, that means living our lives as he lived his. And it means all the time, not just when we feel like it or when someone else is looking or when it suits our purposes or when it feels comfortable. And then it often means doing something we'd rather not do or not doing something we'd really love to do. It means saying something difficult when we really don't want to stick our necks out. It means being willing to stand up for someone or something when it doesn't feel at all comfortable or safe to do so. It may even mean disrupting our own family life. Maybe even alienating a loved one. That's what being a disciple is all about. And it isn't easy. Even Jesus said it wouldn't be easy.

So why should we even bother? Is it really worth our time and effort? That's a question which can only be answered individually. And the answer must come from the heart. It isn't even vaguely an intellectual question, but entirely a spiritual one. No one can be forced to become a disciple of Jesus and live a life of continuing discipleship.

Yet we, who are gathered here have taken the first step to answer Jesus' call to become his disciples through our baptisms. We undoubtedly run the gamut of degrees of discipleship and our discipleship probably runs a lot hotter on some days than it does on others. Yet we are here because we do think it's worth our time and effort, however weak that effort may be at times. And we know in our heart of hearts that to bother with this thing called discipleship is really what it's all about both now and for eternity. AMEN