

Dangerous Discipleship

Year A – Sixth Sunday of Easter

14 May 2023

Acts 17:22-23; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

The title of today's sermon is *Dangerous Discipleship*. The title is redundant, which you'll soon see, but I think it's a good title because it's important to remember that it's dangerous to follow Jesus. I'd like to suggest this morning that it's dangerous to be a disciple; it will take every bit of courage you have. So this morning we're going to get a sense of how discipleship is dangerous, but we're also going to be encouraged that we don't have to face these dangers alone.

Last week Nate zeroed in on our lesson from 1 Peter as he helped us imagine ourselves as living stones, a community with Christ as our corner stone. He familiarized us with the persecuted audience of the letter: they were exiles of the dispersion, Christians who lived under the violent rule of the emperor Nero. Nate helped us see what it might look like for us to become a community of living stones whose life together is enlivened by Christ, our head corner stone.

Today we continue this conversation. And today we learn that suffering is a mark of the community that follows Jesus, which is to say, suffering is a mark of the church. We shouldn't be surprised by this because we worship a Savior who was crucified. There's often a disconnect here because we tend to think about Jesus's crucifixion abstractly. We think of Jesus's persecution, torture, and execution as part of some divine plan, far removed from our lives and discipleship. We explain it away and put it at arm's length by telling ourselves that Jesus died so we don't have to. Jesus suffered so we don't have to.

This is confused theology. It confuses Jesus's saving action with the character of God. In other words, it confuses Jesus's work with Jesus's person. Jesus's person, who he is as fully God and fully human, is a person who suffers. And this is why the church, a community of people who follow Jesus, will be people who suffer. If we understand this, we will live differently.

My friend Stan once shared a story about how his church responded to a member who tested positive for HIV. This was in the 90s, when HIV was a relatively new disease and conversations about it were steeped in fear. Popular thinking was unclear about how HIV spread – could you contract it by sharing a drink or kissing someone who was HIV positive? Popular thinking was also unclear about how deadly HIV was. In this context Stan's church considered how it's practice of Communion should change given their brother's diagnosis. And it was a big consideration for the church that received Communion weekly, with a common cup and a common loaf.

You can imagine several responses, options, and proposals. After studying the science and praying together, the church discerned that they should allow their brother who was HIV positive to receive communion first. They determined that his compromised immune system

gave him the least defenses to sickness, and so beginning that Sunday, he would receive Communion first and the rest of the church would follow.

In their response to their brother's HIV, and the fear of the day, Stan's church practiced exactly what the author of 1 Peter says, "Do not fear what they fear." Theologian David Bartlett states, "The exhortation 'Do not fear what they fear' is a quotation from Isaiah 8:12-13, where the prophet is told to take his cue from his faith and not from public opinion" (NIB, 731). I wonder what it would look like for our community of living stones to be a community that does not fear what the world fears. Based on our readings this morning, I'd like to offer three ways we might become disciples of courage as we *do not fear what they fear*:

First, we suffer together. Saying this frees us from the illusion that following Jesus means God will protect us from suffering. In fact, our reading from 1 Peter says just the opposite: "if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed." We are blessed for suffering for faithfulness. The author grounds this blessing in Christ's own suffering.

I'm drawn to the phrase in verse 17 that "it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil." We have ample evidence to see that God allows suffering, whether it be in God's own self or for us who seek to be God's friends. We are going to suffer, so let's suffer for doing good. We need to come to terms with suffering and face it head on. But the good news is, we don't do this alone.

Every Sunday we have the opportunity to suffer together, to share in each other's suffering. Two weeks ago, Kallie shared about her grandmother; weekly, Kathy prays for people who have cancer or who are in remission. We are a community that suffers together, which means that *you* don't need to suffer alone. So the first way we become courageous is by suffering together. By suffering *together*, we learn not to fear suffering.

A second way we become disciples of courage is by taking risks together. The parable of the talents is a reminder that burying your talent in the ground is not an option for those who would follow Jesus. Discipleship is training for adventure with God and it is the greatest adventure you could ever make. If you are risk avoidant, discipleship is going to be a challenge for you, but the good news is, you have a community of friends that can embolden you to risk.

In our reading today from Acts we stand with Paul on the Areopagus as he engages the Athenians. Paul and Silas have just escaped violence in Thessalonica, and then again in Beroea, so his work in Athens was dangerous. But Paul *does not fear what they fear*, and so Paul risks the threats of ruffians, mobs, attacks, riots, and prison in his address in Athens.

The risk I'd like to underline here is one of theological risk. Paul risks identifying the "unknown god" of the Athenians with the God of all creation. To be sure, Paul brings the theological content of the church to bear on this unknown god, but what's instructive here is to see the risk that Paul is willing to take to connect with the Athenians. Paul takes this risk in the conviction

that all people are God's offspring and that in God, "we live and move and have our being" (v.28). These phrases are famously Christian, but it's because Paul adopts these truths from the Athenian poets and philosophers.

Paul can do this because all truth is God's truth. Early Christians like Clement of Alexandria similarly taught the unity of truth. That truth is one means that Christians can take theological risks. In our theology, we need *not fear what they fear* because all truth begins and ends in God. And because we believe that God is truth, we can take similar theological risks, knowing that the road to truth leads to God.

There is nothing that outstrips the truth of Christ. We can non-anxiously and non-defensively engage and embrace people of other faiths, beliefs, and convictions without fear. This is what Jesus did, it's what Paul did, and it's what saints do. Saints courageously engage and embrace others regardless their differences, in the full assurance that God's truth and love shapes these encounters. Evangelism in this manner is not triumphant or arrogant, but rather gentle, and reverent, as described by the author of 1 Peter. Here's how he says it, "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (vv. 15-16). The word used here for defense is not about being defensive, it's about stating your hope, sharing your faith. Christians, then, need not fear theological difference, rather we can embrace the opportunity to share our hope in Christ.

A third way we become disciples of courage, *not fearing what others fear*, is by loving others. Love is the most courageous way to live in this world. If you're looking for a definition of love, you might think of the description Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 13. It's often used at weddings, but it's really about living as the church. This is what our life could look like if we loved each other: we'd be patient and kind. We'd reject any form of envy, boasting, arrogance, and rudeness. In our love, we wouldn't insist on getting our own way and we wouldn't be easily irritated or hold grudges. We wouldn't celebrate wrongdoing or fake news. We would only rejoice in the truth. We would be a community that suffers together; believing the truth for each other when it's hard for a friend to believe; we would keep hoping, and we would stick with our commitments even when things are really, really, hard.

Love is not for the faint of heart, and it needs to be tested. Just like the Psalmist helped us pray today: "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place." Through testing, we become disciples capable of loving consistently, on the long haul.

Love requires courage because love can get you betrayed, denied, and killed, just as it did to Jesus. Love is so dangerous that Jesus commands it – it's the greatest commandment for becoming a people who follow Jesus, who become friends with God.

Today, Jesus invites his disciples, he invites us, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Love is the greatest and sum of the commandments, and today Jesus invites us to have the courage to love.

It's heartening that we are invited to love together, as a community. Together, we can suffer, take risks, and love. But the good news is not merely about community. Without Jesus, community can be downright destructive. Community without the Spirit can be evil. No, the good news is that God, the Advocate, is with us. There are a ton of meanings for this Greek word for Paraclete, like Encourager, Comforter, and Advocate. For the sake of today's sermon, let's go with the Encourager, who gives us the courage to be disciples.

Whatever meaning we take for the Paraclete, God the Holy Spirit gives us the courage we need to suffer, take risks, make mistakes, love our neighbor, love our enemies, and love God.

The Spirit is what makes us living stones. Otherwise, we're just a pile of rocks. Jesus tells us today that the Spirit abides with us and is in us. We can have Communion at the table because we have communion with God through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is what makes it possible for us to be a community of courage that does not fear what the world fears because through the Holy Spirit we know a Love that casts out all fear.

With God the Holy Spirit with us, we have the courage to live and love dangerously in a world overwhelmed by fear. May we become a community of courageous disciples, capable of loving without fear and living forever with God.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our live we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (A Collect for Guidance, BCP 100)