

## Sermon February 25, 2024

### At Cross Purposes

A pastor I know often referred to the disciples as the 'duh-siples.' Over and over again, they just don't seem to get it. As Jesus teaches the crowds, they pull him aside afterwards and beg him to explain what he is talking about. They just can't quite grasp what it was that Jesus was saying, doing or meaning. And they often get it wrong or at least not quite right.

Early on in Jesus' ministry, they misunderstood what Jesus had to say about witness, about ownership, about priorities, about... well, just about everything. It might make you wonder what Jesus... what God... saw in them to choose them to be the very first followers of the Way.

But, we have unfair expectations of them. We have the benefit of 2000 years of teachings and faith leaders to guide us, and we *still* struggle to get it. The earliest disciples were just simple people, working hard jobs in a poor land. They did not have the benefits of theological education or access to a diversity of opinions and thought. Their world view was specific to that time and place. They had the stories of God's covenantal promises... those same promises we are hearing again during Lent. They held tight to the promise given to Abraham and Sarah... they may be poor fisherman, but they were also some of the descendent that numbered more than the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the beach. They may live under the Roman occupation, but their feet still touched the sacred ground of the Promised Land. And like so many of their neighbors, they waited day by day for the Messiah to come and usher in a new Kingdom that would restore Israel to its political and military strength. They had faith that God's promises would be fulfilled, and they had a clear understanding of how those promises would play out in their lives.

So, when they decide to follow Jesus... when he talks of God's coming Kingdom... they understand his words from the perspective of their own culture and life experience. It's no wonder they struggle to understand his message of inclusivity and extravagant welcome that challenges their understanding of being the Chosen Ones, separated from all others by covenantal promises.

And don't we all do that? We hear the parts of the Gospel message that confirm what we already believe and experience and we either ignore or discard the parts that don't fit in with understanding. The Bible and the teachings that have followed have a wide variety of information and sometimes it is even contradictory. You can pick and choose the parts you

want and prove any point that you want. Slave owners did that for generations. But, it is more difficult to look for the overarching themes and discern how God calls all people to live with one another.

Today, we hear the moment that Peter gets his first glimpse of who Jesus really is and why God sent him to us. Jesus asks them a crucial question: Who do you think I am? And Peter blurts out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Even after getting so much wrong along the journey, after having misunderstood Jesus' intentions so many times... and even after having been occasionally reprimanded or corrected by Jesus... this time, Peter got it right. At least for a moment, he exhibited a characteristic of faith that we would do well to emulate.

But of course, like we all do so many times, that glimpse of the sacred begins to fade and Peter falls back into his old ways of thinking. As Jesus begins to teach them who the Messiah is -- about crucifixion and death, not military might and earthly kingship-- a horrified Peter pulls him aside: "Stop this crazy talk," he says, "you'll scare everyone off."

You can almost feel the disappointment oozing out of Jesus as he shakes his head and responds: 'You Stop it! Keep your eye on what is holy. It's not what you want – it's what God wants!' And then he turned to the crowds that were never far away and told them that 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'

Harsh words and an even harsher expectation. Jesus makes clear that the things people dream of – safety and power and wealth – are not what God envisions for us. Everything gets turned upside down and their dreams came crashing down. No one realized that in the light of the resurrection, the world is really turned right-side up.

But Peter and the other followers can't understand that. It hasn't even happened yet.

But this story offers a glimpse of hope. Peter often doesn't get it, but he never gives up. His progress might seem slow, but when the time comes, he rises to the occasion and helps bring about a Christian movement that still covers the globe.

So, I think we need to cut the disciples a break. Yes, sometimes they didn't get it, but they faced challenges with strength:

When they didn't get it...

When they face confrontation and persecution from the outside...

When Jesus himself corrected or scolded...

When one of their own betrayed them all...

They stuck to their faith. They were resilient... they persevered.

Accepting, adjusting, learning, and always moving forward... towards Jesus Christ, who calls us to follow him, even to the cross.

*The question for us today is – what is Jesus calling us to do today? What should we accept... how do we adjust... what can we learn?*

*What does it mean to follow the cross?*

Jesus asks so much of us. Choosing to follow is so difficult. But, he also introduces us to new ways of thinking and behaving... of turning the world right-side up.

Jesus said, "I give you new commands," and the new commands can be challenging and can confront old beliefs and old behaviors and old traditions. In Revelations, Christ tells us, "Behold I make all things new." And Paul tells the church at Corinth that if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation.