

Last week Andrew spoke to us about discipleship. He spoke to us about how the heart of discipleship is about 'being with Jesus', hanging on to Jesus' every word, on learning what it means to live from Jesus and more challengingly being with the people that Jesus hung out with – the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the prostitutes, the sinners, the tax collectors, the lonely. He even went on to concretely challenge us to live out this calling to be with Jesus and those Jesus chooses to be with by coming out to our Community Lunches sitting with the people who come to eat and hearing their stories, or perhaps coming out to one of our other ministries which connect with our community. In a word discipleship is as easy as encountering Jesus as we form community with those he chooses to spend time with; discipleship is learning from the feet of Jesus, as Jesus goes out into the world, it is learning at the feet of Jesus as a Church engaged in loving, serving and being with the communities we are found within. It is as simple as that. Full stop. Might as well end my sermon right there because you all understand how simple and easy it is to follow Jesus.

Except it isn't.

It might seem easy to follow Jesus, it might seem like a simple thing to come and worship, to be a nicer person, to pray more often, to read the Bible more faithfully; it might even seem simple enough to just be with Jesus and be with the people he is with: the poor, the lonely, the stranger, the refugee, the person who is radically different from ourselves. But the reality is that in general, we don't want to be with the people that Jesus was with, in fact we are uncomfortable and turned off by the very thought of the people that Jesus spent his time with. After all he hung around unsavoury people. He hung around: the diseased, the outcasts, the possessed, sinners; you name it he hung around the people that no one wanted to be around, he hung around the people that were cast off by their communities. Very few of us would jump for joy to be around them, very few of us – myself included – are not a little scared or put off by the company Jesus kept.

There is something which blocks us from keeping the company of Jesus, there is something that blocks us from enjoying the company of the people that Jesus hung out with. There is something that stands in the way of following Jesus, of being his disciple, on hanging on his every word and deed. That something is Sin.

Sin is an obstacle to community: community with God and community with one another. Sin holds us back from truly being able to follow Jesus, it is what holds us back from dwelling with the people that Jesus hangs out with; Sin is the root of our prejudices, sin is the root of our self-protective behaviour, sin is the root of our fear and discomfort with people who are different than us. Discipleship, following Jesus, hanging out with Jesus requires us to recognize and confront our Sin head on, we cannot side step it – we cannot sweep it under the rug.

In our Gospel reading today we heard Matthew's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. After Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan he is driven out to the desert, tempted by the devil and today we hear the passage that follows: that from the desert he went to Galilee and began his public ministry by proclaiming "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." And immediately following that we are treated to Matthew's account of the calling of Jesus' disciples. It is no coincidence that the story of the calling of Peter, Andrew, James and John is framed by Jesus proclaiming repentance because discipleship and repentance go hand in hand. Discipleship, following Jesus requires a reorientation of one's life, a reorientation of one's thinking, a reorientation of one's priorities and expectations. The word 'repent' means to re-think, to be radically reformed or converted, to have a change of mind or a change of heart.

To be disciples of Jesus we must be ready to have our lives be changed by Jesus, we must be ready because radical reformation and conversion will happen. We must be ready and willing to change our thinking, to confront everything in our lives that presents as an obstacle to relationship with God and our neighbour. We must not let the fear of change paralyze us from doing what God wants for us, from experiencing the transformation that he has in store for us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Following his call to repentance we hear Matthew's account of Jesus calling of the first disciples. Jesus encounters Simon and Andrew casting their nets into the Sea of Galilee because they were fishermen. He calls to them, saying 'Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.' Jesus is inviting them into a radical reorientation of their lives, he is inviting them to change their heart and their thinking. The disciples in our Gospel story likely had fear of the unknown, fear of losing their livelihoods, fear of leaving their families and communities behind. There would have been nothing inherently wrong with the disciples saying "no thank you, not today Jesus we'd much prefer the security of the familiar, the security of the life we know", but then their lives would not have seen the transformation as a result of being with Jesus, of knowing the Son of God, hanging on his every word and hanging out with the people. In both the case of Simon and Andrew and James and John they respond immediately, whatever fears and obstacles were in the way are overcome by the presence and invitation of Jesus. In a very simplified way they had to experience repentance, they had to experience the radical conversion of their hearts and minds from one way of life to a life of following Jesus, a life of being with God.

I want to share a personal story of this kind of confrontation between what God wants for us and our own sin and fear which keeps us from doing that. Last week I had the opportunity to fly to Southern California for a pastor and church leaders gathering put on by Team World Vision, a part of the larger non-profit World Vision. The trip was fully paid for and it provided me and other leaders across North America the opportunity to learn about a number of initiatives that World Vision has to provide clean water for communities in Africa, particularly through running endurance events like full and half-marathons. A number of World Vision staffers stood up to share personal stories in an effort to convince the crowd to partner with World Vision, and one of them as he was praying asked God 'that every person in the room would know what God wanted from them, that each person would know what it was that they needed to say YES to that day.' A period of silence followed as we were each encouraged to think and pray about that, and while I'm sure that their expectation was that each of us would be thinking about how we could participate in one of their various programs, what came to me was something entirely different. What came to me was the thought that I am not doing enough to connect with people who do not yet know Jesus, that I am not doing enough to share the Good News of God with those who haven't heard it; what came to me was that I am afraid of living out a calling God has given to me.

Ever since my own renewal of faith and my seminary training I have had a heart for people that do not know Jesus, partly because of my own time apart from knowing him and the joy I experienced when I finally found my way back to him. My seminary training was in some ways focused on learning skills, cultivating prayer and practices to engage communities that are 'un-churched' or don't know about the Good News of Jesus. And yet in my heart of hearts I don't believe I have acted upon this passion that God has placed on my heart: over the last 6 years I have found every excuse in my heart and in my head not to share the Good News of God with people, not to undertake evangelism. I have been afraid: I have been afraid of the vulnerable position that it would put me in, I have been afraid of the chance of failure, the chance of humiliation, the chance of saying the wrong things, the chance of doing more harm than good. You name it, my fear has kept me from doing what I am certain that God wants for me. That is Sin. That is an obstacle to me experiencing true fellowship with Jesus. That is me saying to God that I know better.

And so as I sat there in that banquet hall, along with two hundred other pastors, I was convicted that I needed to repent, I needed to repent of the ways of thinking and acting that have kept me from going out into the world, that I needed to repent so that I could be with the people that Jesus hangs out with, that I needed to repent so that I might have the chance to be with Jesus more fully once again.

I share this story, not because it is a story of victory or of great faith – because to be honest the fear is still there for me, and I still am not sure how I will respond – but rather, I share this story to highlight how each of us has these obstacles in our lives that keep us from fully following Jesus, each of us has a need to repent to change our thinking, to have our lives thrown upside down by the call of our Lord Jesus to follow him.

Each of us here is beloved by God, each of us here is called to be a disciple, each of us has a life that is ready to be continually shaped and formed by hanging on to every word and action of Jesus but each of us here has to heed the call of repentance, has to be ready and willing to confront the Sin and Fear which stops us from being fully with Jesus, stops us from being with the people that Jesus hangs out with.

Churches have these obstacles too: we can be afraid of the unknown, afraid of what God might be calling us as community to do, paralyzed by the thought of God calling us out into our neighbourhood, into the midst of people we do not want to be with and places we do not want to be. It feels safe to be with the people and in the places we know. Churches need to repent too. We as a community need to be ready for our common life together to be transformed, radically converted, reoriented towards God. We need to be ready to let go of old patterns of behaviour: patterns which give us security, patterns which are rooted in fear of change and the unknown. We need to be ready to truly welcome people who are different than us: for example inviting them into your conversations and fellowship during coffee hour and not ignoring them. We need to be ready to take risks both in terms of time and treasure as we come to know and serve our community through food and friendship. We need to continue the healing of old wounds and differences, we need to forgive one another, laugh with one another, love one another so that we might love our neighbours as we love ourselves. We need to be ready to take risks to share the Good News we have heard with our neighbourhood, being with people who do not yet know Jesus and sharing the joy that is within us.

The Good news is we are not alone in our endeavour. We will have one another to encourage each of us on this journey of repentance and transformation and more importantly we have the promise that through it all, God's love will not waver, that even while we are held back by Sin and Fear God desires to be with us, Jesus beckons to us to follow; God does not abandon us but continues to extend grace upon grace, that we might experience the joy of his transformative love. Let us continually choose repentance, let us continually overcome our fear as we follow Jesus, as we spend time with him and get to know what it is like to live in his kingdom here on earth.

Let us pray.