

Living as Disciple

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Challenge of Discipleship

Do you ever feel resistant when you hear the Gospel? The word gospel means good news. As a community we have so much respect for the authority and truth of the Gospel that we stand when it is proclaimed. After the reading we all respond, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ." Why, then, would we ever feel resistant when we hear what we profess to be Good News?

There could be several reasons for our resistance. One is that we might simply misunderstand the reading so that we think it is saying something that it is not saying. To become a disciple of Jesus Christ we are not asked to turn our backs on our families.

Another possibility, however, is that we feel resistant because at some level we do not agree with the truth that is being taught. To accept the truth of the reading would make it necessary for us to undergo a deep conversion. The reading might challenge an unexamined presumption we have that we do not want to examine. It might challenge our life style, the way we spend our money, or the way we spend our leisure time, and we don't want to be challenged in those areas.

Discipleship is not simply a one-time decision. We who have already chosen to be disciples are in a constant process of conversion, of turning away from blindness and selfishness, and turning toward Jesus. The more we live as disciples the more we will find ourselves confronted with a constant challenge to grow even more in love.

Parables

Jesus was very accustomed to teaching a resistant audience. In fact, that is the very reason that Jesus so often taught in parables. A parable gets around people's resistance because, as they listen to a parable they don't realize that the story is about them. Not knowing this, they pass judgment on the characters in the story. It is only in hindsight, on reflection, that they realize that in passing judgment on the people in the story they have unwittingly passed judgment on themselves.

In order to interpret a parable, then, we must put it into the context in which it appears in the Gospel. The parable will be the middle of a conversation that Jesus is having with a person or a group of people. Someone in Jesus' audience will have said something that clues Jesus in to the fact that his listeners have misunderstood something basic about discipleship, about the kingdom of God. Jesus then tells them a story that appears to be about other people.

However, the people to whom Jesus is speaking are just like someone in the story. Without realizing it they see something about that other person that they have been unable to see about themselves. On reflection they understand that the parable has challenged them.

When we hear the Gospel proclaimed, the same dynamic is working within us. The Gospel appears to be about other people. Without even thinking about it we pass judgment on the characters in the story. When we side with the person whom the story criticizes, we feel resistant. Our resistance is something we should note very carefully. It may well mean that we are being called to self-knowledge and conversion. That, of course, is a very uncomfortable place to be. However, if we want to live as disciples of Jesus Christ we will do our best to understand and to convert.

The Parable of the Vineyard Workers

One parable to which many of us feel resistant is Matthew's parable of the vineyard laborers (Matthew 20:1-15). First, let us recall the parable. As we go over the story notice your reactions to it.

Jesus begins by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." Then Jesus tells a story in which a vineyard owner hires workers at different times of the day. Early in the morning he hires some all day laborers and agrees to pay them the usual daily wage. All through the day he continues to hire, even hiring some workers for just the final hour of the workday.

At the end of the day the vineyard owner instructs his foreman to pay the workers in the opposite order than they were hired. The one-hour workers are given a daily wage. On seeing this, the all day workers think that they should be paid more. When they are not they are angry with the landowner. The landowner points out to the all day workers that they have been treated fairly. He asks them, "Are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15b)

On hearing this parable many of us side with the all day workers. We agree that they should get more than those who worked only an hour. It is true that they got the agreed upon daily wage, but it still doesn't seem fair. Of course part of the context that we bring to this parable is our American free enterprise system. Laborers should be treated fairly. Those who work longer should be paid more.

Jesus is not talking about free enterprise. He is talking about "the kingdom of God." Notice, the parable begins, "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." Matthew uses the expression kingdom of heaven where Mark and Luke say kingdom of God. Matthew does this because he is writing Jews who are in such awe of God that they refrain from naming God. However, the kingdom to which Matthew is referring is not just the place one goes after death, but the kingdom of God that Jesus is establishing.

What is Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God through the parable of the vineyard laborers?

This parable is part of a conversation that Jesus is having with his disciples about who will enter the kingdom of heaven. Peter has said to Jesus, "we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matthew 19:27) Jesus hears behind Peter's question a presumption that is false. Peter has as much as said, "We have left everything to follow you. What have we earned?" It

is this presumption, that we earn the kingdom, rather than receive it as a gift, that Jesus is challenging.

Notice that none of the laborers in the parable earned the right to go into the vineyard in the first place. Each needed an invitation. The laborers who were idle were idle not because they were lazy but because they had not yet received an invitation into the vineyard. The all day laborers did receive the agreed upon daily wage. No one got less than he earned; the problem is that some people got more. This parable challenges Peter's, and our, sense that people should get what they earn.

The Kingdom is Not Earned

Why is it a dangerous mistake to think that one earns the kingdom? This misunderstanding puts us in entirely the wrong posture when it comes to the spiritual life. The people who most represent this mistaken spiritual posture in the Gospels, are the scribes and the Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees are legalists who think that they are earning a right relationship with God by their obedience to the law. Instead of being full of gratitude to God for the gifts that they have received, they feel self-righteous and judgmental toward others. This attitude results in an inability to love. Jesus came to establish a kingdom that no one has earned, but that we enter by invitation. Everyone is invited. Of course, one must say, "yes," to the invitation; but it is still an invitation, not something that any human being could earn.

Through the parable of the vineyard workers, Jesus is teaching Peter, and us, that we have not earned the kingdom. We are invited into the kingdom because God loves us. Our role is to accept the invitation with hearts full of gratitude.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Another parable to which many people feel resistant is the parable of the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11-31). Again, as we recall the parable, try to notice your own reaction to it. The lesson is found in the interaction of the story with the audience who is hearing the story.

A man has two sons. The older son is very obedient. He does everything his father asks. The younger son is every parent's nightmare. He asks his father for his share of the inheritance so that he can go off and live a life of dissipation. After wasting his inheritance he finds himself in dire straits. He realizes that his father's servants have a better life than he now has, so he decides to return home. He plans to tell his father that he had sinned and no longer deserves to be treated as a son. He wants to return as a hired worker.

His father sees his son coming from a distance. Because he loves him so much he rushes out to greet him. The father tells the servants to kill the fattened calf and throw a big party, "for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" (Luke 15:24)

The older son, dutifully working in the fields, returns to find a party in progress. He is told by a servant what has happened, and he is angry. He refuses to enter the house. The father, who loves both sons, again goes out to meet a son. He asks his older son what is wrong. The older son says, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" (Luke 15:29-30)

The father tries to explain to his older son why he is rejoicing at the return of his prodigal son. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:31-32).

On hearing this parable many of us sympathize with the older brother. We agree that it is very maddening to do everything the right way, at great sacrifice, and then to have someone who has broken all the rules prosper as though he hasn't done anything wrong. This, too, seems unfair.

Once again, if we do react with resistance to the parable it is important to acknowledge that this is true. Once more, we will have an important lesson to learn, a lesson that will help us live as a disciple of Christ. What is the lesson?

To understand what Jesus is teaching through the parable of the prodigal son we will once again have to put the parable in context and ask, "To whom is Jesus speaking? What were Jesus and whomever he was speaking with talking about?"

Luke tells us that, "the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable . . ." (Luke 15:1-3).

The parable that comes next is not the parable of the prodigal son, but the parable of the lost sheep, and then the parable of the lost coin. Finally, in response to the Pharisees and scribes' criticism Jesus tells them the parable of the prodigal son.

Next we want to ask ourselves, "Whom in the parable do the scribes and Pharisees compare?" The scribes and Pharisees are just like the older brother. They too have obeyed all the rules and object when they see Jesus treat sinners with compassion rather than rejection. When they first hear this story the scribes and Pharisees would undoubtedly identify with the older brother. He is their kind of person. He has been obedient, and because he has been obedient he thinks he has earned something. He feels self-righteous and judgmental toward his younger brother. These feelings are so strong that he is incapable of treating his own brother with love.

While the story begins with the younger brother being the obvious sinner, it ends with the older brother being in the wrong because he doesn't love his brother. We never learn if the older brother goes in to the party to celebrate his younger brother's return. He is certainly invited. His

father loves him and wants him to go in. The only thing excluding the older brother is his own self-righteous and judgmental attitude.

The Pharisees are acting just like that older brother. Through the story Jesus is teaching them that their self-righteous attitude is causing them to sin too. Like every other sinner, they are still invited into the kingdom, but they have to first realize that they too are sinners. When Jesus spends his time with them he is spending his time with sinners. The scribes and Pharisees must repent of their sins and grow in love before they will want to accept Jesus' invitation to the kingdom.

If we side with the older brother in this story it means that we bring to the story the same fault that the scribes and Pharisees have. It means that we too have been obedient, and rather than being grateful, we have become self-righteous and judgmental. We are unable to rejoice at the return of a sinner. However, Jesus loves that other sinner just as much as he loves us. To live as disciples of Jesus Christ we, like the scribes and Pharisees, are challenged to grow in our ability to love sinners, including ourselves.

The Parable of the Wedding Guests

Still another parable to which many of us feel resistant is the parable of the wedding feast. In this parable Jesus tells the story of a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. Those who had been invited to the feast refused to come. When the king's servants went out to urge the invited guests to come they killed the servants.

Since the invited guests would not come the king told his servants to go out to the highway and invite anyone they found. "Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests" (Matthew 22:10). When the king came to meet his guests he saw one person who was not dressed properly for the occasion. "He said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?'" (Matthew 22:12) The guest did not respond at all; he remained silent. So the king threw him out "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 22:13).

On hearing this parable many of us sympathize with the poor guest who came to the wedding at the last minute, at the insistence of the servants, and so didn't have time to dress properly. Why would the king throw him out? This seems completely unreasonable, and even cruel.

Once again, if we use the method of parable interpretation that we have learned the message will become clear. We need to first ask, "To whom is Jesus speaking?" In this instance Matthew makes it very clear that the parable is addressed to a particular audience because the verse immediately preceding the parable says, "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples . . ." (Matthew 23:1).

Our next question is: "What were Jesus and his audience talking about right before the parable?" Jesus was having a very acrimonious discussion with the chief priests and the elders who had come into the temple area while Jesus was teaching (see Matthew 21:23). They have questioned Jesus'

authority to do what he is doing. Jesus tells his critics two parables before the parable of the wedding feast. He also tells them that, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom” (Matthew 21:43).

The chief priests and elders compare to the guest who has been invited to the wedding feast but who refuses to respond to the king’s question. The scribes and Pharisees may think that they have said, “yes,” to God’s invitation to the kingdom, but in fact, by their lack of response to Jesus, they are refusing the invitation. In the end they will find themselves excluded from the kingdom, not because they are not invited, and not because they are not present, but because they have refused to respond whole-heartedly.

Living as a Disciple

Living as a disciple of Jesus Christ is a lifelong endeavor. First we must realize that it is God who takes the initiative in our spiritual life. God has loved and has chosen us. We have not earned an invitation into the kingdom. Once we have said, “yes,” to Jesus’ invitation with grateful hearts, we will find that we are on a life long journey of conversion.

One way to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ, to become more faithful disciples, is to allow Scripture to be a living word in our lives and to watch our own reactions to this living word. When we feel resistant we know that we are being challenged to still more conversion in our lives. The more we are converted the more we will become like Jesus. Over the years, as faithful disciples, we will become more and more able to love

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