

Standing by the Twelve
Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23
Wake Forest Baptist Church
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Sermon writing is always both painful and enjoyable if and only when I am honest about my writing. So is my response to my vocational and ministerial call. I try to respond to the call with openness and eagerness, and it brings me constant joy and also pain. I have to be honest and open, because there is a desperate need of grace for unbrokenness: there is a desperate need to make a point or expose a point or draw attention on some issues. And today's sermon writing was no exception.

The forerunner of the liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez remarks that a discourse of faith, of God, comes only after the contemplation, practice, and commitment of living the faith; it has to do with the following, walking, talking and standing with Jesus. So have the twelve disciples, whose call was exclusively initiated by Jesus. They had done more than following and standing with Jesus. They dropped everything that was familiar with behind them, including their families; the call of Jesus demanded a complete break with the past. The call therefore affected their whole existence.

And you can imagine it was never easy to follow Jesus with His radical ministries, which constantly brought conflicts with the religious leaders and authorities. Up to the point of today's text, Jesus was doing his usual healing, feeding and teaching.

Suddenly, Jesus here takes a radically different line perhaps grasping a deep truth about the way humans are. Today's passage describes well how difficult it must have been for the disciples to understand and interpret Jesus' ministerial practices, which seems utterly impossible and ethically irresponsible. He not only refuses to go along with the purity codes, but refuses to be quiet about it. We have no idea if the disciples stopped eating and ran to the river to wash their "defiled hands" when Jesus was accused of not following their tradition.

Nevertheless, the author of the Gospel of Mark, especially, does not spare the 12 disciples. Marks' chapters 8, 9 and 10 describe well the disciples' total inability to understand what Jesus was saying, even when he told them exactly what was going to happen, when it was going to happen, and how it was going to happen, as faithful as they must have been.

Whatever their shortcoming was, and there were many, they remained alongside Jesus at least through the Last Supper and going into Gethsemane. Even Judas Iscariot remained alongside Jesus with an expectation that Jesus should be a different kind of Messiah than what He actually seemed. They sought after glory for the one to come. They wanted Jesus to be splendid, transfigured and glorious. Jesus, on the other hand is not glamorous at all, is a son of a carpenter, who speaks with country-side accent of a

small town Nazareth, who hangs around with the sick, the poor, the widows and the tax collectors. How can a person who has been judged by authorities guilty of blasphemy and subsequently condemned to death be their long waited Messiah?

So the betrayal on the part of Judas Iscariot can be seen not simply as a betrayal; it could have been his effort to manipulate Jesus to be what Judas wanted Jesus to be, whatever everybody else wanted Jesus to be. But they repeatedly misunderstood Jesus; so deserting Jesus in the decisive hour one of the disciples denied, one betrayed, and the rest of them fled, hiding in Jerusalem in John and Luke; fleeing to Galilee as Mark and Matthew do. Theologian McClendon even suggests that there should be 13 crosses but the Twelve declined the honor. Jesus' own disciples deliver him over to the world, to his death. And Jesus died on the cross, despised and rejected by men. It was over. Their discipleship dissolved itself into nothing.

The only factor that energizes the disciples back into a kind of fearless faith happened in conjunction with the appearance, the confrontations, with resurrected Jesus. I emphasize on "confrontation" because they were initiated from the side of Jesus and they were not the kind of experiences which the disciples had or did not have. They were encounters that they did not anticipate at all. And it is by this confrontation with the resurrected Jesus in Galilee that finally led the disciples to move to Jerusalem and to risk their lives for the Christ. For this reason, discipleship is a radical way of life; radical also in obedience of the will of God as it is interpreted to us through Jesus, but not according to our own interpretation that will fit in within our comfort level. We are told that the discipleship is an act of obedience, not a confession of faith in Jesus.

Today the WFBC confronts a series of serious but interesting and almost exciting issues, which has been rather anticipatory; searching for a new minister, possible relocation of the church site, education and mission issues, who knows, even renaming the church. I have been with the church almost 3 years; the church has been introduced to me to be inclusive, diverse, hospitable, sit wherever you please, and no one will aggravate you to move closer toward the front. While I was at the Div School here, although I was one of the odd balls, we, the students in general, had some questions about the identity of this church; does the church belong to the University? Are the members related to the University? Or is it an independent church? If it is an independent church, how can outsiders, meaning non-WFs, feel invited to this huge church that sits within this prestigious campus? What is the name of the church, anyway? Why do they interfere with our special programs at the lower auditorium and they get to use the auditorium and we get to be kicked out to the third floor? How come do they occupy one of the best sites of the Wingate Hall? In one word, we the students were rather critical with our opinions of the church, not only because we wanted more space, but also because its identity was rather ambiguous to outsiders. At least that was the perception I had.

Now this church faces the transition, this transition period looms up and digs up and stirs upside down many issues and that brings each one of us to think about the identity, tradition of the church and its ministry.

When we accentuate our identity through the particulars of our own tradition and heritage, we tend to become irrelevant of the problems of the present day. When the church over-invests itself in addressing the problem that characterizes the world in which we live at the moment, the church loses its identity. When it loses its identity because of its over investment in relevance the question comes, why participate in the church at all. So between the 60s and 70s, when the social ministries began to be emphasized, there were many ministers who eventually resigned their pastorhood and invested themselves in various social agencies that would work for the benefit of those who were in need. They by and large did not continue to participate in the life of the church.

So when you move into the issues as to what a church should be doing it often times cuts across social and political issues, so how to address those issues without destroying the unit of the church becomes significant. So this transition period is a rather critical moment in shaping our church's future.

The Transition Team members have been pouring extraordinary amount of time, energy and creativity to gather the open and honest opinions and support from the members of this congregation. Every one of us needs to partake in this historical period of the church's transition time, seriously and honestly and with openness reevaluating and reexamining the values that represent our church's historical and traditional standing, as well as look into seriously our individual calls as members of this church, as the followers of the teachings of Jesus, and further, as Jesus' disciples, reflecting on how might we best participate in the activities of God's Spirit in this world. How radically and fearlessly are we willing to partake ourselves to fulfill our churches mission?

Jesus' sarcastic remark, "Beautifully do you set aside the commandment of God in order that you may establish your tradition" was ringing in my ears while I was writing this sermon.

When we claim that we are inclusive and diverse, for instance, what exactly are we talking about; diverse and inclusive in what extent, in what degree? And how do I as an individual member actively involve myself to maintain and strengthen this inclusiveness and diversity that characterizes this church?

Somehow, I feel so close to these failing disciples these days, because there is no question that there is a missionary impulse to Jesus' instruction to the Twelve; there is some sense of urgency to spread the Good News of Jesus. Don't we sense that somehow we inherited Jesus' and the disciples' mission? But who knows just as the Twelve, we may be slow to get to the point, slow on the uptake.

We may be focusing on our tradition and identity and tend to avoid the much deeper challenge of the Gospel, the challenge to the human heart. Perhaps I reduce discipleship to the level of my own human understanding, retaining the right to dictate on my own terms. Why do I sympathize with the rich young man who returned to his home feeling sad, because he could not bear to let his fortunes go.? Is there still room enough in me that dares to accept discipleship, placing myself in new situation, and new existence?

Perhaps it is a good time that we go back to the basics of the scripture and seriously engage ourselves with the texts. I am not really into any form of organizational or administrative issues; those are neither my favorite subject, nor which am I good at. My interest, if I may, is dealing with people who feel hopeless and in dire needs. So let me elaborate my issues a little further.

Liberative readings of the scripture generally follow a trajectory of approaching the Bible from the perspective of the marginalized and the oppressed. Who are the marginalized and oppressed? They are those who hunger and thirst, who go naked, strangers, the sick, those in prison, those who mourn, who are weighed down by a real burden. Also they are those despised by the ruling society, those who are either constantly kicked out of the main stream society, or forced to adhere to the rules of the dominant culture, those considered sinners, the simple minded, the little ones, the least, those who carry out despised tasks, those who have been victimized by prejudice. We need to pay attention to the suppressed voices of these oppressed people from the readings of the scripture.

From the readings of the scripture we can prepare and understand the true meaning of being marginalized, even further, being marginalized Christians, such as, how to be a female and Christian, how to be an African American, Asian or Hispanic and Christian, and how about being Gay and Christian, poor and abused and/or old, lonely and Christian, who are all trying to find their places in the scripture to find glimpse of liberation, hope and comfort, or at least a sigh of relief; they are looking deeply and anxiously for themes that affirms and sets them free.

When I try to sort out and openly and honestly claim myself as an advocate to the diversity and inclusiveness, is my opinion on the same level as the person sitting next to me? Do I just tolerate and do not criticize or wince? Welcoming but not affirming, or I simply don't make it an issue. Do just I pretend that those issues do not bother me, because some part of my life refuses to surrender? Or is my heart committed to the mission of seeing and demonstrating the radically inclusive love of Jesus, somehow, or do I really want to embrace each and everyone's individuality as created in the image of God, and love the one sitting next to me equally as well as the one at the back alley of the streets of the W-S who is homeless and in fear lest the weather might turn nasty tonight? Do I help them to find a seat at the table? Do we not know that the need to be a part, to be conformed and accepted in a community is a powerful human need? Julia Druin states in her book, *Quitting Church*: "One of the top reasons people give for leaving churches is loneliness; the feeling that no one know or care whether they are there." The statement is sad, shocking but understandable. Our greatest commission should be "to go out and make disciples of the nations, not of whom we choose."

When an inmate of mine who has been converted during his time in prison and was released after 42 months, and asked me to introduce him a church around Winston-Salem, why did I hesitate to invite him to my own church. Am I afraid that the members might feel uneasy and uncomfortable, and say that there she comes bringing in more problems to this church? This ex-offender has been set free to return to the community

where our families and neighbors live. There is no way of telling whether he has returned to the free society for the better or worse; to the society that does not forgive and forget his sins. What is so terrible about discrimination is that it not only rejects a person's behavior, it rejects a person itself.

Recently, more than ever, there are many days when I feel that God is the mountain that I have to climb. Then I rather lean heavily on Jesus, who is an actual, miraculous, painful and joyous reality. Toward this reality of Jesus, least we can say should be, I will try so that the least of those who are members of your family will receive the attention to their needs for justice and hope. Jesus still laments as he recites the Judean prophet Isaiah, "the people honor me only with their lips, in vain they worship me, their hearts are far from me."

The mission of the church almost always initially takes hold with those of underside of the history because they can smell it, and because that is where God is found. And those who are on the upper side of the history, they have the ability to flush the commode. On the underside of the history – let us share Christ, recognizing that we are still developing our tradition.

In the great name of Jesus, Amen.