

“Daring Discipleship”
United Church of Christ at the Villages
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Scripture: Micah 6:1-8; Luke 14:25-33

Envision Jesus, walking from one town to another, on his way to Jerusalem. He is surrounded by his apostles and closest followers and then behind him is this never-ending, ever-growing stream of people which the gospel refers to as “the great crowds”. We don’t know anything about “the great crowds” but we can guess that they probably included: people who were curious about Jesus and what he was saying, people who had heard of his healings and hoped to see a miracle, those who were sick and wanted to be healed, those who were considered outcasts, maybe some that someone else had just dragged along with them. Maybe some had just joined the group...maybe others had been travelling for a while...probably quite a varied and diverse group of people.

At some point, Jesus turns to this multitude and he says some surprising things....not very uncommon for Jesus because he always said surprising things, but very radical for the group of people at that time that was following him.

Jesus tells them that they will need to hate their family....yes that is the word Jesus uses....”hate”; they will need to carry a cross and they will need to give up all their possessions.

Can you just imagine the looks on the faces in the crowd as Jesus is speaking, the hushed or maybe not so hushed comments. Can you imagine what may have been going through the minds of “the multitudes”? What is he saying? I have to ...what...hate my family...and carry a cross,...and give up everything I have...this is too demanding...let’s just turn around and go home. This is too much of a change, this will be inconvenient, I can’t do that!

At first glance, the language that Jesus uses is very harsh -- language that would scare away all but the most courageous of those potential followers. People who met Jesus knew there was something very “different” about him and his message. During his journey from town to town, Jesus extended invitations to for people to follow him, but this is a different invitation– this one is more radical and shocking.

Jesus used this language to exaggerate his point, to get people to notice that what he was calling them to do as disciples was a radical departure from how they had

been living. He was asking them to leave the safe, the easy and the accepted way of doing things.

He was asking them to question everything that they valued in their tradition – family relationships, their possessions and even their own life. He was asking for a total level of commitment – an all or nothing proposition. He wanted it to be very clear that being a follower.... A disciple was not going to be easy!

Can you just see this crowd vanishing before his very eyes?

I can.

So what is Jesus getting at here? Why was such a serious level of commitment so important?

Without coming right out and saying it, Jesus was trying to get the message across that he was introducing a new way of thinking and – oh by the way--- it is radical and revolutionary. The Kingdom of God is about justice and peace, it is about doing what is right, and it is about caring for strangers and outsiders, the poor and the socially unacceptable. Jesus wanted to be sure that they understand the seriousness of the commitment—and he’s telling them it won’t be easy.

Let’s turn to the Old Testament Scripture that we heard earlier today from the prophet Micah. Micah lived about 700 years before the birth of Christ. He was from a town called Moreshet and was a prophet who was advocating social reform. Micah pulled no punches when he denounced the evils that had filled his beloved land. He was especially vocal about the ruling classes, who used their positions of power to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor. In his writings, Micah admonished his people to return to God. Micah reminded his people that the path that God wanted them to follow was "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God. This is the life of a disciple. Living life as a disciple involves paying attention to what is happening in our world, recognizing those who need our love and looking to God for the guidance to make it happen. This is the hard work that Jesus wanted his potential followers to be aware of before they “signed up”.

So what is “doing justice”?

Do justice, God says. Be a community of people who cares for each other's needs. Do justice, like God does justice -- in a way that shows compassion.

When I think of "doing justice", I think of fairness for everyone – a world where everyone has at least the three basics – food, shelter and clothing and has the means to provide for it for themselves. But in reality, our world is not fair for everyone. We live in a world of inequities. We live in an area, here in the Villages, where most people are comfortable, but not too far from this town, are towns where people live in homes with dirt floors and who struggle to make ends meet working at minimum wage jobs. In my heart, I know that God just could not have intended for some people to be ok and for others not to be ok. And here is what makes it hard -- doing justice and getting everyone on a level playing field seems like a daunting task—even with unlimited resources. People were being treated unjustly in the times of Micah, and still in the times of Jesus, and still now.

Rather than get discouraged, I have to believe (and I hope you do too) that every positive action, every step we make towards correcting the injustice, whether it be donating food, volunteering at a soup kitchen, making health kits, knitting prayer shawls, etc., all contribute to the building up of the kind of justice that God was referring to. Rather than offer God thousands of rams, God calls us to offer a thousand daily acts of love for each other and the world God loves.

And love kindness. Reflect and give to others the same love, compassion and grace that God has for us.

Loving kindness means that we should treat each person with respect. In Jesus, we see loving kindness at work, in the way he extends his hand to people who are in need, in the way he relates to his apostles when they struggle with their faith, and in his act of dying on the cross. Jesus was always keenly focused on watching for situations where justice was not being done and calling out those who were responsible. He chose to stand with and associate himself with those that were considered outcasts of society. He hung out with sinners, he shared meals with tax collectors, he touched lepers and he stood up to the people who blocked the poor from the temple. Jesus lived the message that speaking up for the poor and defenseless was the building of the Kingdom of God. He took it one step beyond speaking up for them—he sat with them, listened to them, made them feel welcome, extended his heart and his love.

Jesus was the champion of the poor, the oppressed, those who were the least, the last and the lost of the community. As disciples, we are the hands and feet of Christ. We are the face of love to those who are in need.

And finally, **“walk humbly with your God.”** Walk carefully and attentively with God. Keep your eyes always on the one you’re following and be willing to trust God to know the way better than you do. Let God call you back when you get distracted by the things of this world. Let God be your constant companion.

To walk humbly with God is to recognize and develop our relationship with God in our lives, to acknowledge its importance and priority in our lives. In other words, when we walk humbly with God, our lives are informed not by the world, but by God and how God requires us to live. The emphasis is on walking rightly with God, from which justice and kindness flow.

The work of following God is hard and that's why God doesn't call us to do this on our own. We're not called to walk humbly with God on our own. We are called to walk together as a community. We gather among people with the same call. And we gather so we can be people to strengthen each other as we try to follow God. As a community together, we can remind each other of who our God is and how much our God loves us when we forget. We can call each other back to doing justice and loving kindness and can teach each other how to do that. We can support each other when we stumble and encourage each other when we feel too weary to go on. In the midst of a distracting world where it's hard to follow God, we have our brothers and sisters in Christ to walk the way with us. We have a community to help us to do justice when we are too weak, and to love us when we have forgotten how....so that we can all be strengthened to walk with God and to help our neighbor to walk with God, too. God calls us to a simple, beautiful and daunting task of reflecting who God is to the world around us, a world that is desperate to know the love and the beauty of our God. And God keeps loving us, reassuring us, challenging us and calling us back again to the beauty we were made in. So that together we might do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

“What does God ask of a daring disciple? Your commitment to be just and work for justice, that you care about faithfully loving, and that you live out the covenant with God in daily life.”

Amen.