

“How We Begin the Journey of Faith Matters”

John 12:20-33

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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A number of years ago I attended a conference at Ridgecrest that was technically part of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention’s Key Leaders Conference, but I’m not sure who knew we were there or what we were doing. It was a group that brought in carefully selected speakers to address topics others did not want to name and we alternated between Baptist voices and non-Baptist ones. This year we heard from a significant leader from our part of Baptist life.

In the first session, he talked about all the things churches in our culture must do to stay on the map, to keep attracting new members. He named an array of programs for children and youth and their families, the facilities and staff implications of these and a number of other innovative approaches to meet people where they are. He acknowledged the competitive nature of church work in our culture, the fact that families may visit five churches and compare notes, sometimes even have a parade of clergy from those churches come to visit in the home. But he said that’s the way it is. So, we have to keep up.

In the second session, he talked about the nature of Christian discipleship as a life of sacrifice and service to others. He talked about how challenging it is in our materialistic and self-absorbed culture to even speak of sacrifice and self-denial, but he insisted that this is what Christian discipleship is all about. Following Jesus is not a self-centered venture driven by what is best for me. Rather it is a journey of looking to the needs of others and seeing how I can help address them.

Both presentations were met with interest, but I will never forget what a colleague said during the dialogue time following the second session. He said, “Dr. So-and-So, I appreciate what you have said in each of these sessions, but I am struggling to put them together. How do we connect the two presentations? I mean, how do we begin with the assumption that we must meet every whim and desire of a selfish age

and ever get around to the radical concept of following Jesus in a life of self-giving love?” Our leader was taken off-guard. He said a word or two about meeting people where they are, as Jesus did, and then helping them to grow, but he didn’t really answer the question.

It is one of the most important questions for churches to ask in this age. How are we presenting the church? What are we saying about who we are, what we believe and what we have to offer? Does where we ask people to begin the journey connect with where we want them to go or do we advertise one thing and deliver another? How we begin the journey of faith matters because it shapes our entire experience.

The early church understood this, and thus, candidates for baptism spent months in some settings, years in others, preparing for baptism. Our baptismal candidates should be thankful that we do not try to emulate the early church at every point. For in addition to engaging in a personal study of texts, prayer and devotion, and service to others, candidates for baptism had to have their demons removed by exorcists and their friends and family had to confirm that their lives had changed because of their faith before they could be baptized!

Yet the spirit of the early church’s approach is something we need in this day, the spirit of taking seriously what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The early church knew that how we begin the journey shapes our experience of it. It is rather difficult to demand commitment to sacrificial service if we begin thinking faith is but an exercise in self-indulgence, a way to guarantee our comfort, a vehicle for getting the things we want.

That Christian discipleship is about more than this is revealed in many parts of scripture including the passage we have read today from John 12. This passage marks a major transition in John’s Gospel. If this were a film, the music would change to a minor key, the lights would dim and we would know that the plot is about to thicken. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem to a festive welcome we mark as Palm Sunday and thus his public ministry is drawing to a close. Some Greek people, probably Gentiles, come in search of Jesus, signaling the reality that his life and message concern more than any one people.

The Greeks approach Philip who is from a region friendly to Gentiles and he and Andrew take the request to Jesus. It is not clear whether the Greeks actually get to see Jesus. From this point forward, they are not mentioned. They are like the expendable extras in the original *Star Trek* episodes, members of the crew we have never seen before and will never see again, casualties on this mission.

The Greeks are not necessarily casualties, but we do not hear from them again because Jesus announces that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. That is, the time for his death on a cross is at hand. He develops a simple metaphor about grain falling to the earth and dying so as to produce more fruit, underscoring the redemptive nature of his suffering and death. It is for the good of others that he dies.

Then, lest there be any doubt about whether suffering in the way of the cross is only for Jesus, he says this. “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, God will honor.” So much for the way of self-indulgence, individual comfort and personal benefit! Discipleship is about following Jesus all the way to the cross.

We have heard this message before this Lent and we will hear it again. It is a recurrent theme in the Christian Testament. But contrast this view with the perspective of popular religion. Tune into television preachers and you will find example after example of two things. First, there is the equation of faith with cognitive assent. Just say you believe that Jesus died for your sins, sign on the dotted line and pray the sinner’s prayer, and you are done. Second, there is the power of positive thinking coupled with the prosperity gospel. Think positive thoughts and good things will happen to and for you. Give something to God, through this ministry, of course, and God will bless you personally in tangible ways, i.e. your financial portfolio will grow!

Notice the emphasis upon you; upon me, myself and I. Faith is all about me, making my life better, easier, more comfortable, more blessed, and on the right side of the ledger in eternity. Where is the cross in this thinking? Where is the giving of life for others? Where is service and following Jesus which he says brings God’s blessing?

There is nothing wrong with seeking personal contentment. All of us do, and the more content we are, the better equipped we are to reach out to others. But if all we do is seek our benefit, not only do we live selfish lives, we don't really experience contentment, because our Creator has made us to share with others, to give of ourselves and to find true contentment in giving. Thus, the beginning place of faith is not acquiescence to our most pressing desires, but confrontation with the radical truth of who we really are and what we really need deep down.

Franciscan Richard Rohr puts it this way in his book *Simplicity: The Art of Living* (p. 136).

Paul tells us that the word of God is a perfect mirror of freedom. I believe the first task of God's word is to confront us with ourselves, with our truth. And this confrontation will lead, we hope, to changing our lives, to building our lives on the great truth Jesus calls the 'Reign of God.' It seems to me that only after we've changed our lives does the Gospel promise comfort. In my opinion the great danger facing a prosperous Christianity is we have exactly reversed this process. We let ourselves be comforted first, before letting the perfect mirror of freedom confront us with ourselves.

Indeed, this is the danger facing a prosperous Christianity like ours.

So, discipleship begins with a confrontation with our true selves and a calling to sacrificial service, but this is not an easy path. In fact, Jesus struggles to walk it. In our reading from John, he says, "My soul is troubled." It is a reference to his impending suffering and death on a cross and the fact that he is not exactly thrilled about all of this.

He quickly goes on to say that this is the purpose for which he has come into the world. John's Jesus does not seem to experience the depth of inner turmoil Mark's Jesus does in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36). He always seems to walk very lightly with his feet barely touching the ground. Nonetheless, his soul is troubled, he does struggle, the way of self-denial and self-giving is challenging even for Jesus.

And the people around him struggle too. His disciples repeatedly try to talk him down from his plan and in this passage, when God speaks a word of blessing not just on Jesus, but on his journey to the cross, the crowd doesn't realize it is God. They think it is thunder or an angel or perhaps they just don't like what God is saying. Everyone in the story struggles with the way of cross. Why wouldn't we?

I had a friend in high school who visited the campus church I attended in college, then disappeared. The next time I saw him I was in seminary and he was in med school. We met late at night at a fast-food burger joint. I was getting burgers for a youth lock-in, he had been out with friends drinking and, to use the old lingo, they got the munchies.

It was good to see him and catch up, I had no agenda, but he had a need to explain why he had disappeared. "There were nice people at your church," he said, "They were just too intense for me, almost cult-like." I wished him well, but left scratching my head. What was it about our church that made him uncomfortable?

We were a fun-loving group, we were not rigid in our beliefs, but we did have Bible studies, and we did an enormous amount of service in the community. I had a little brother I mentored. For some people, indeed, many people in our culture, just that much is too much. It is little wonder that any mention of the way of the cross can be a turnoff.

So, what do we do, acknowledge our calling and the fact that we fall short and leave it at that? Note that we are swimming upstream in this culture, most people want religion that makes them feel better, and when push comes to shove, so do we? I don't know. I don't have any easy answers. And it is not my style to browbeat people, especially when I am not sure that I am living by a standard to which I would hold others; yet, nor can I get comfortable with giving up on growth.

The more I reflect on it, the more I believe that sacrifice offers as much to the giver as the recipient. The Jesus way is not some kind of dysfunctional, self-serving masochism. It is a genuine path of helping others which provides us with a deep sense of fulfillment.

Think about it. Is there anything we can buy or do, anywhere we can go and anything anyone can give us that makes us feel better than we feel when giving someone else a gift, serving someone in need,

setting aside our wants to make someone else happy? No, there is no greater joy we experience than that found in service.

Consider our experience visiting homebound members, friends in the hospital or people we care about who have lost a loved one. Is there not a deep sense of fulfillment shared in the experience? Or consider work done on a mission trip, time spent building a Habitat House or a night spent with Family Promise partners, weekly service offered in the clothing ministry and at Backpack Buddies or special events like Toy Joy and the Dental Bus. Do not all of these activities have a reward that cannot be quantified because we know we are helping others?

I'm not sure these activities are sacrificial. We are not suffering like Jesus on a cross. But we are following his way of doing for others, giving of self, laying down life if not death. That's where discipleship begins, where it ends and where it is everywhere in between.

In a sermon based on the narrative of John 12, Barbara Brown Taylor says the purpose of Jesus' death is to lift up the power of redemptive suffering for all (*Lectionary Homiletics*, April/May, 2003, p. 5). Jesus preached and taught in a way that led to danger, she says. He threatened the powers that were until he reached the place where he had to choose between self-protection and self-offering. His hour came, and when it did, he chose to sacrifice himself, like a grain of wheat falling to the ground so that it could bear greater fruit. Thus, through his example, we learn that suffering does not have to be avoided at all costs. It is not always a bad thing. It can be a powerful tool for transformation. And the tool is to be used not only by Jesus, but by all who follow him.

"Sin met its match in Jesus," she says "not because our sin debt was paid but because the power of redemptive suffering was released in the world... Jesus died to fill the world with wheat, with so many sons and daughters of God that no one would ever want for bread again."

I like that image, but the key is that we recognize our calling to be wheat, to be grain that is willing to fall to the ground, to be followers of Jesus who are willing to lay down life for others. Since this is our calling; since this is our goal, our destination on the journey; it makes no sense to begin anywhere other than at the foot of cross.