

COST OF DISCIPLESHIP – September 9, 2007

September 9th and our fall season begins. Wesley United and Friendship United, after a summer of worship together in one place or the other, now once again embark on two services. While we may have slight variation in our services with different hymns, the message and most of the readings remain similar. We worship God and follow our Lord Jesus Christ. We are still one Parish and we care deeply about the life of each of our congregation members.

Today I want to explore the common theme which arises from the readings. I title it the cost of discipleship. Perhaps the word “cost” is an odd one, but we know from experience that anything we hold dear causes us to do certain things or to act in particular ways. For example, there is a cost to being a parent – demands on one’s time and energy, dollar costs to provide a home, food and clothing and responsibility to be a role model for our children. Anything worth doing has some cost or another; some costs we resent and others we expend with pleasure.

If you stop and think about it, being a Christian can be fairly demanding. Some of us have friends and family members who think we are crazy for the time we spend on church or faith related activities or issues. They can not understand why we go to worship regularly or why we are willing to spend our hard earned dollars to keep up the church and fund the church activities.

It is a puzzle to many especially in Europe or North America as to how the churches maintain their strength and the loyalty of otherwise rational people. There are estimated to be 2.1 Billion Christians in the world. 33% of the world’s population is Christian

How does that compare to other religions. 33% are Christian, 21 % are Muslim, 14% are Hindus, 6 % are Buddhists and 6% are Chinese Traditionalists. 80% of the world follows these 5 great faiths. 16% of the world’s population is deemed to be nonreligious or secular and 4% is spread out among the smaller faith groups.

If 33% of the world is Christian, where are they? 27% or 531M Christians are in Europe, 26% or 511M Christians are in Latin America, 19% or 389M Christians are in Africa, 17% or 344M Christians are in Asia, and only 11% or 226M Christians are in North America.

Of the 2.1B Christians in the world, 1.25B or 62% of the total is in Latin America, Africa and Asia. These also happen to be the areas where populations are young. Here is where the church is growing with enlarged influence on the shape of the world church in the future.

As Christians, we need to be aware of these facts. The church is not diminishing but is growing fast in most of the world. Canadian citizens see the church through North American/European eyes and think the church is on the way out. But this is not the case.

What we do not know is the shape of the North American church in the future. We go forward in faith and trust that God has a role for our churches though they may be different from how we operate today. My personal faith is in God and I believe he will lead us into relevant ways to proclaim the gospel and gather for worship, song and prayer.

Our first reading this morning was from the prophet Jeremiah. In this passage, Jeremiah reflected on what he had witnessed at a potter's wheel that morning. He noted that the potter used his hands to fashion the pot. When it did not become the shape he had planned, he broke down the clay and began to fashion a new pot with the same clay. The potter's hands deftly shaped the vessel and now it was both useful and pleasing to the sight.

Jeremiah stood there and thought how like the potter was God. He had shaped men and women and yet the form of that shape had become twisted and ugly. God could as easily destroy his creation as build it up again. God the potter declares to Jeremiah that he will break Israel apart like the misshapen pot unless Israel listens to Jeremiah's warnings and returns to true worship and obedient living.

Here we see a picture of God and the cost to him of his creation in rebellion against him. Come back to me, he pleads, and together we will create something which is both new and beautiful. So it is that our God pleads with us as we busily go forth and forget our worship of thanks.

The letter of Paul to Philemon is a jewel in the New Testament. Here Paul puts the new Christian church to a tough test. Paul has sent this letter to Philemon and the local church. He sends the letter with a man named Onesimus who had been a run away slave. Paul sends him back to face whatever his master would do to him for this act of disobedience. However, Paul states Onesimus is a changed man, one who had accepted Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord. He had been so helpful to Paul who was in prison.

Paul, a man who is rarely subtle, asks Philemon and his fellow Christians to not only forgive Onesimus, but free him and accept him as one of their congregation. This was not easy for them to swallow yet Paul reminds them of their own journey. Before they heard Paul and accepted Jesus for themselves, they were lost and were prisoners of the wrong way. So, if they should feel Onesimus owes them any money, charge it to Paul and he would pay it. Again Paul reminds them of what Paul has done for them and asks for mercy, forgiveness and freedom for Onesimus.

Being a Christian has a cost Paul reminds them. That cost is throwing away the prejudices which view some people as more important than others. All humanity was created and is loved by the same God. In Christ Jesus we are changed, forgiven and given

the possibility of new enriched life. Paul would ask all of us even today to look at our prejudices which separate us from one another. In Christ, he reminds us, we are all equal before God.

The assigned Gospel reading from the Gospel of Luke, was Jesus' discussion with the disciples about possessions. As Christians, we are not to be slaves to our possessions. If we are, we should give them all away to follow Christ, our true possession. This is a tough topic for all of us. Jesus was not against people having things in life to give ease and comfort but he warned us to be their masters and not let these things master us.

My house is a good size but has only one bedroom closet and little storage space. Do you think I have culled my things to fit the space I have? Of course I plan to do so some day but still have not done so. I would say these boxes of things and clothing mean little to me. Yet why do I balk at culling these possessions and just give them away for others in need to use? Jesus and Paul hit us where we are weak and remind us that the things of this world are not all important in order to have a life of obedience and joy with God.

As we prepare to get back into the busyness of autumn, let us determine to keep our priorities up front. We are the church, called by Christ to go into the world to tell the story of his forgiveness and redeeming love.

Remember how popular Jesus was wherever he went. Was it not interesting to notice that when Jesus began teaching, the large crowds often broke up. Whenever Jesus' challenge went deeper than love your neighbour or healing of the needy, when Jesus began to talk of the cost of discipleship, then the crowds would start to thin. After Jesus spoke, he was often left with the sinners, tax collectors or grumbling Pharisees. Today people are very little different from the crowds of Jesus' day. We are not comfortable with the call to full discipleship and prefer to pick and choose his sayings.

However, as of old, God calls us to discipleship, into a closer union with him. Let me walk with you and together we will make the world a better place and in the process will assist others to meet God and to glimpse what life with God is all about.

33% of the world professes to follow the Christ. Think of what a force for good and change it would be if we all followed Christ's example of love and respect for one another and for respect of oneself as a child of God.

I end with these words of St. Paul to Philemon, words as fresh today as it was 2000 years ago.

“I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ.”

Rev. Gary Magarrell