

Church on the Mall
March 22, 2015
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill
Jeremiah 31:31-34
John 12:20-33

“5 Easy Steps to Discipleship”

I’m a Facebook user, which means I periodically, throughout the day, will check the social media site to see what my friends are posting. For those of you not on Facebook, you have your own page with pictures and what you like, and you have friends with their own pages, and you can see each other’s pages. The main activity with Facebook is that you post things – newspaper articles, comments about what’s going on in your life, pictures of your cute cat or grandchildren, things like that.

It used to be that people just “posted” what they were doing or pictures, but lately more and more, people are sharing articles from other websites – some from cnn or huffington post or blogs or websites you’ve never heard of. People share articles about parenting, dieting, current events, and general life issues. Lately, as more and more articles compete for your attention, they all begin with a cute or clever teaser, hoping to lure you in to clicking on the link that will take you to the website with the article. More often than not, the teaser includes a number. More often than not, you are made to feel incompetent or lazy or careless if you don’t click on the article’s link. For example:

The one question every parent needs to stop asking their child.

Well...how am I not supposed to click on that? Nine out of ten times, make that 99 out of 100 times, the article is poorly written and totally lacking in substance. But with a headline like, “3 Ways Every Church is Turning Away Young Adults”, how can I not click on it?

This strategy is not new, of course, magazines have always been trying any way possible to entice us into flipping open its glossy cover with headlines like “10 Ways to a Better You” or “5 Foods You Should Never Eat” or “3 Simple Tips for Easy Weight Loss”. So, in an effort to keep up with the times, I’ve devised my own list: “5 Easy Steps to Discipleship”. You’ve essentially already clicked on this article because you’re all here, so here we go:

1. Believe in God and that Jesus Christ is God incarnate.
2. Sense his call in your life and decide to be Jesus’ disciple.
3. Put all your trust in him.
4. Lose your life, take up your cross, and follow him.
5. Figure out what numbers 3 and 4 look like in your everyday life.

It’s that easy! Ok...It’s not that easy. When articles swear by easy answers to hard problems, we really know better, even if we can’t help but glance through the pages.

These articles promising easy weight loss, simple parenting, or easy ways to find inner peace, are usually based on false assumptions or tell you to do something really unrealistic.

So my 5 Easy Steps to Discipleship will disappoint – because if there’s something we learn from reading our Gospel lesson week after week, if there’s something we know for sure in this vast landscape of mystery and divinity it’s that discipleship is really hard work. It’s hard to believe some of this stuff. It’s hard to integrate it into our lives. It’s hard to hate our lives, and give away all our money to the poor, and take up our cross and follow Jesus. It’s hard to love our enemies and turn the other cheek, and pray for people who hate us. It’s hard to really feel God’s mercy when we’ve made a mistake. It’s hard to believe in New Life when we are trapped in situations of death and darkness.

We have reached a turning point in our Lenten journey, as we leave Jesus and his public ministry behind, and walk with him during his hour that has come. We are finished with the miracles, the healings, and the teachings, and will go with him to the Upper Room, to the garden, to his arrest, to the cross. We will hear again friends betraying him, friends denying him, friends walking away from too much pain, too much suffering.

In our Lenten scripture passages, we have made our way through some theologically dense stories in John’s Gospel. Jesus has put forth some pretty deeply spiritual, deeply challenging proposals as we have contemplated how to set our minds on divine things and take up our cross and follow Jesus. He drove out the money changers in the temple with a whip, he was admonishing Peter for trying to thwart him from his divine mission, he was telling all of us to deny ourselves and follow him, he was telling Nicodemus that he is the light of the world and invited us to reveal our

darkness to his light. Spending so much time in John's Gospel, we got tongue tied with hating life but loving life, with losing life yet gaining life. Our Lenten journey with Jesus has challenged us to deepen our understanding of our mysterious, yet gracious God and deepen our commitment to following the way of Jesus Christ in our own lives.

So many paradoxes of our faith: a Savior who proclaims God's reign yet dies on a cross. An invitation to hate our lives and love a life Jesus offers instead. The promise that the hour has come for God to glorify the Son yet we know that glorification involves a shameful death. This is not simple or easy. Sure, it is easy to say words; we can make a statement of faith, proclaim Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Savior, if we are "churched" we know the right things to say. But to really believe – to trust in the promise of New Life when our lives have been crushed by grief, loss, and hardship. When you're in the thick of it; when your life has been turned upside down and every day is a Good Friday and the hope of Easter is nowhere in sight. To really trust that when we follow Jesus Christ he will give us the strength and hope to endure – to stand up for the voiceless and speak-up when injustice occurs; to risk our emotional safety for something we believe; to risk our physical safety for the benefit of God's kingdom and believe that Jesus Christ will nourish us and strengthen us along the way. To really feel in the pit of your stomach, or in the inmost part of your heart that God forgives you. Whatever it is – God fully and abundantly forgives you – and to really feel that...

These are the challenges of discipleship. And it is hard. When people tell me that living a life of faith is easy, I don't believe them. Because forgiveness is hard.

Sacrificing your life for discipleship is hard. Following Jesus wherever he goes is hard - because he goes into drug-ridden streets, to war zones, and mental hospitals. He goes to dark street corners and hopeless jail cells and cancer wards. He goes to deep pain and agonizing grief. Loving people who have done you wrong is hard. Believing God loves you enough to send you his Son is hard. There are no easy steps here. And the amount of doubt or insecurity or questioning of our faith is not a sign of faithlessness; it's a sign of honest, realistic struggle. There are times when our faith might even whittle down to that one, solitary mustard seed...thankfully, that's all we need...

Our prophet Jeremiah – we have such a beautiful reading this morning. I just melt reading the words. In the midst of exile, when all their culture and ritual and security and comfort and peace has been decimated, God comes to them and promises a new covenant. And I love this – you don't need to teach one another anymore, because I will write my law upon your heart. You don't need to get it perfectly. You don't need to understand perfectly. It's okay that the mystery of faith is hard to comprehend. God is going to come to them and be written upon their hearts.

There is such release in this passage. This community is in Babylonian exile – the survival of their culture and faith is really in question. It's so important to hand-down their faith and tradition but it's so challenging living in exile; the anxiety and fear of survival is palpable. And God comes to them and tells them not to worry. This isn't all about you. This isn't just your responsibility. There is a bigger picture here, and God's glory is going to be revealed; God's kingdom on this earth is coming. You don't

need to understand it perfectly, you don't need to teach it perfectly. I will make a new covenant which will be written upon your hearts, etched in your souls, God tells them. There is a bigger picture of God's kingdom that is coming.

Jesus gets that big picture (of course) and tries to explain to his disciples that God's glory is about to be revealed in his death. He talks about wheat and soils and growth that takes place in the dark depths of the earth and wide-spread New Life that only takes place when death happens first. He talks about the breadth of an impact that can happen when New Life conquers death and darkness. We hear a loud voice from heaven, and everyone interprets it differently – no one knows what's going on here; everyone is confused. Things seem a bit out of control, there's an unknowing, a powerlessness – anxiety, fear, insecurity. His hour is coming, Greeks are knocking on his door, the authorities want to get rid of him, he's supposed to be their king, and none of this is adding up.

As this passage gets more and more intense, or at least confusing, hating life, loving life, voices from heaven, it's Jesus' last words are where I want us to land today. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." In the midst of their real-time confusion; in the midst of our theological head-spinning, in the midst of our spiritual wilderness and wanderings, these words of hope reassure us. We don't need to understand completely. We don't need to make sense of all the paradoxes. We don't need to figure it all out ourselves and make all the pieces fit together.

God has come to us in the person of Jesus. He is going to draw all people to himself. God is going to get so close to us that we don't need to teach one another but God's covenant will be written upon our hearts. God will be in our hearts. There is release and warmth to this truth; that in the midst of our own spiritual discovery, we are hemmed in by God's presence. Whether it is Luke's Gospel, with angels popping up all over the place telling us, "do not be afraid," or the prophet Jeremiah telling us that God is writing on our hearts, or John's Gospel, with Jesus telling us that God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son – our journey of discipleship is surrounded and immersed in God's presence and grace. Even as we take on these challenges and seek a deeper understanding of God, we do so with God's love and mercy a constant, reassuring presence.

We are about to head with Jesus into Jerusalem, waving Palms next week and praising our king. We will go with him to the Upper Room with his disciples, we will watch Judas betray and Peter deny. We will hear our voices shout "Crucify!" But even in the midst of these harrowing events, God's grace and love surrounds us. Jesus will wash our feet. Jesus will give us a new commandment – to love one another just as he loves us. Jesus will share his Bread of Life and his Cup of Salvation with us. Jesus will plead on our behalf: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. God's grace and love will surrounds us.

So, let us go to Jerusalem and see this thing that is about to take place. I invite you to join the parade next week, to get close to our Savior, to stand by and witness the

grace and love God has for us. And even when we don't fully understand, God's presence will be made known. Even when we don't have all the answers, God's grace and love will be with us. Even when we still wrestle with our own demons of guilt and anger and shame and uncertainty, God's grace and love will hem us in. Even when we know the idols of power and money and popularity are really close, are really close, God's grace and love will seep in. Even when we feel we lack the faith to really deserve all of this, God's grace and love will not leave us.

I'm going to try to resist clicking on that Facebook article that promises "One Way to Improve Your Life Now". Instead, I hope you'll join me in coming back next week and the week after that, and the week after that, ready to do the hard work of discipleship that isn't easy or simple, but is surrounded by God's grace and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.