

SERMON
 September 9, 2007
 Proper 18 C
 “Disciples: Apprentices”

I’m going to say a word,
 and I want you to let all the associations you have with this word come to mind,
 the thoughts and feelings associated with this word.
 The word is “Christian.”

I hope some of the associations you have with this word are positive.
 I hope you think of people who are Christ-like,
 people who are loving, generous, forgiving,
 people who serve others,
 people who have high moral standards,
 people who are spiritual, and so on.

But I wonder if you also have some negative associations
 with the word “Christian.”
 I know I do.

When I think of the word “Christian,”
 I immediately begin to wonder, “Are we talking about mainline Christians,
 or evangelical Christians,
 or charismatic Christians, or born-again Christians?”

So often I hear the word “Christian” used in some political context,
 like the “Christian right” or the “Christian vote” or a “Christian candidate.”

The word Christian has become so over-used
 that it hardly seems to mean anything any more.
 It’s as if the word has become a label
 that people slap on things they’re trying to promote.

How about another word?
 This word I’m thinking of is from today’s Gospel.
 It’s the word “Disciple”.

What comes to mind when you hear that word?
 It’s probably not used as much as the word “Christian”,
 but it’s more clearly defined.

A “disciple” is a student, or learner or apprentice,
 who has attached himself or herself to a teacher.

So a disciple is someone who has made a decision
 to take the teachings of their master as their own.

They’ve decided to accept the world-view of their teacher,
 and they’ve decided to become like their teacher.

For instance, my wife Katy is getting her PhD.

When you enter the PhD program, they assign you a faculty advisor.

Your advisor guides your progress,
 helps you decide what classes to take,
 what grants you apply for,
 and what kind of research you should do.

You become a teaching assistant to your advisor,
 and your advisor critiques your dissertation
 and helps you with the deadlines.

When you finish your PhD,

you’re not just someone who has learned some job skills to be put to use,
 but you’ve been transformed into an anthropologist.

You see the world from the point of view of anthropology,
 and you see yourself as an anthropologist.

Your identity has been changed.

That’s what it means to be a disciple of an anthropology professor.

A disciple of Jesus is a student of Jesus,
 an apprentice of Jesus.

A disciple is a person who willingly puts himself or herself
 at the feet of Jesus to be transformed into the kind of person Jesus is.

A disciple of Jesus willingly takes on the values
 and attitudes and behaviors of Jesus
 in order to become like Jesus.

Becoming a disciple isn’t something that happens overnight or all at once,
 but it’s a process, a journey.

So we have two different words: “Christian” and “Disciple”.

The word Christian to me has become a label,
but the word Disciple has drawing power.
Being a Disciple is about transformation.

You might notice in the Gospel that Jesus never uses the word “Christian.”

He doesn’t say, “Go make Christians!”
Instead, what he says is, “Go make disciples.”
There’s a big difference.

Jesus isn’t interested in labels;
he’s interested in transformation.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus says to the crowd,

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate mother and father,
wife and children, brothers and sisters,
yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

These are pretty strong words,

and it may seem like Jesus is asking the impossible.

After all, what kind of person would hate their family
or hate life itself and still be a healthy individual?
What is Jesus doing here?

It may be that he’s trying to thin out the crowds
and gather a hard-core cadre of devoted followers
by setting a very high standard.

But I think what he is really saying is this:

If you’re going to follow me,

I want you to be a disciple.

I want you to be willing to listen to me and imitate me
and take on my values and my worldview.

I want you to be willing to give up your old self and become like me.

You can’t do that if you insist on being your mother’s son for ever and ever.

You can’t do that if you still see the world as a fisherman
or a tax collector or whatever you start from.

You have to be willing to be transformed by your association with me.

All of us are disciples.

We may be better or worse disciples,
we may be further along the path of discipleship or maybe just starting,
but we're all disciples.

In our baptism we've become apprentices of Jesus,
we've willingly put ourselves at the feet of Jesus to learn from him
and be changed by him.

We are learners, students.

We are clay,
waiting to be molded by the hands of Jesus.

I suppose we all have teachers that we model ourselves after.

I had a number of professors in seminary
I suppose you could say I was apprenticed to.

The professor of Moral Theology was a raving maniac;
the professor of New Testament was an intense bookworm;
my professor of Liturgy was an ancient owl-like figure
who might have taught in Hogwarts School in the Harry Potter books.

But Dr. Charles Dubois was the professor of Pastoral Theology,
and he was the one I learned most from.

He was slightly formal and a little dry,
but he had a wealth of wisdom from years of parish ministry,
and he was a kind man in the simple sense of kindness.

He had a heart for ministry
and he knew the foibles of parish life.

If there is any professor in seminary I model my own ministry after,
it is Charles DuBois.

I hope that I will become a priest like him.

Charles DuBois was a model of Jesus for me.

And so we also ought to be teachers and disciplers for each other.

As we read the stories of Jesus in the Gospel,
and as we remember the death and resurrection of Jesus
every week in the Eucharist,
we make ourselves apprentices of Jesus, disciples, students.

He is a Good Teacher.