

Theologian Emilie Townes reminds us that a good translation for disciples is “learners.” If we are to be disciples of Jesus, particularly as it applies to processing this week’s text, or any other text for that matter, we need to start from a place of listening: “What is it that Jesus, however distorted through time and the redactions of ancient editors, is trying to tell us? And how will that message be applied in our individual and collective faith practices?” (Townes, 164).

Townes also reminds us to distinguish between disciples, those who are seeking to learn from a teacher, and apostles and messengers, those who are sent and commissioned to deliver specific messages. Townes believes that our task as readers and hearers “is not to deliver the teachings of Jesus, but rather to pause and learn from Jesus who we are to be, what we are to say, and how we are to communicate with others.” (Townes, 164-165).

So...this morning, may we listen to Jesus in order that we might better follow him.

As with last week, we find ourselves confronted with a rather long text, with even more content to process. What we have before us is a passage about learning what it means to be obedient. And the first two verses hit us square between the eyes:

A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave to be like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they align those of his household. (Matthew 10:24-25).

If we pay too much attention to what tradition teaches us, and if we try too hard to proclaim this message rather than to learn from it, we can get ourselves into a whole lot of trouble. Where do I begin?

Webster’s Dictionary defines obedience as being submissive, compliant, conformable, law-abiding to authority. And the western world tends to view power dynamics in a vertical way. Therefore, our understanding of obedience most generally results in relationships where subordinates hold most if not all of the accountability but are denied most if not all of the responsibility and privilege given to leaders. The subordinate’s standard is to do what is required, to do the

leader's bidding. And all too often, leaders are not held to their supposed standards: to ensure the welfare of those whom they lead.

So what happens? You get teachers who are more concerned about squashing challenges to their authority than generating an environment of collaboration and learning. You get masters who are more concerned with dominating others than being in partnership with their laborers to better the estate. You get egomaniacs in every century who think that "being like" a leader is to follow, obey, and regurgitate orders, even those that are at odds with God's intended creation. You get justifications for slavery, and for white supremacy, and for patriarchy, and you get monuments, some cut in stone, others codified and stilled in historic documents to dole out a sick and twisted sense of law and order. And you get that because people insist on being apostles and messengers, rather than being disciples.

I wish, more than anything, we could remove some of these metaphors of slave and master from our texts – I think they've caused a whole lot of trouble over the years, and particularly since 1619. I think their inclusion in today's text is unfortunate at best. I don't want you to hear me say in ANY way that Jesus is condoning the owning, or subordination of human beings, or the lessening of anyone's value. I think Jesus uses two common forms of authoritative relationships in his first-century context to help illustrate his point. I also know, from everything I've read in scriptures about Jesus, that he didn't believe in vertical relationships. He believed in lateral ones.

Here is one who washed the feet of his students. Here is one who taught his students all he knew, and then, in the text we read last Sunday, commissioned them to use their own skills, gifts, and talents to do the same healing work that he had done. And here is one, who in the Father found a lateral and collaborative partnership – a Creator, who lived as created, in order that creation might become whole.

So...what I hear Jesus telling me this morning, is that the student who is like the teacher, the slave or servant who is like the master, the follower or supporter who is like the leader, is not one who does as he or she is told, a robot held powerless and voiceless to fate's demands, a piece of property used to facilitate a

task. Instead, the like-minded one, is the one who acts with a partnering spirit, facilitating mutual accountability, responsibility, and respect for individual and communal relationships. If we are living as God intends, we are not living in zero-sum-gain relationships where superiors have everything, and subordinates have nothing. Instead, in God's intended creation there is enough for everyone to be enough, without anyone having to give up the things that make them enough.

We belong to a Creator that is vast and complex, and yet is humble and attentive enough to be mindful of the affairs of sparrows, and even count the hairs on our heads. And yet we marvel at presidents who make personal phone calls, or CEOs who remember the first names of factory workers, or celebrities and athletes who respond to fan mail.

What do I hear in the first part of this passage, and what do I learn from Jesus? If I want to model right relationships, I need look no further than the ones our Creator fashioned for us, and the ones Jesus modeled for us, not to the examples so many of our privileged ancestors distorted and depicted. God lives in loving partnership with God's people; Jesus loved others as God loved and loves him and us. Real, obedient, covenantal, lateral relationships follow that model.

There is a second part of our text, another provocative statement. Jesus says, "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth, I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Then follows a list that upends traditional relationships we hold dear: children and parents, in-laws and outlaws, enemies and neighbors.

Well, I know these words and images are jarring and harsh, violent, even. So let me prompt us again to learn from this text, before we presume to proclaim it, or act upon it, or even wield a sword. Just as the scriptures tell us that Jesus lived in lateral rather than vertical relationships, they also tell us that he didn't use a sword, or guns, or chariots, or armies, or tanks, or explosives, or nuclear weapons to do his bidding. Jesus did not equate violence against others with obedience to God, nor did he call us to violence.

But we need to be careful not to confuse Jesus' insistence on peaceful means with passivity, nor his ministry as one that avoided controversy, or sought to maintain

the order of vertical authority. Jesus would not have faced persecution and eventually crucifixion if his message was benign.

I believe that when Jesus says he's come with a sword, he's telling us he's come to mow through the systems that give us a false sense of peace. In other words, Jesus didn't come to affirm the authority of Caesar, he came to turn authority on its head.

Jesus tells us that choosing to be obedient to God, that is living laterally, is gonna put us at odds with so many of the people we long to please and jeopardize the relationships we long to maintain. Sometimes, maybe even lots of times, doing what God requires is gonna be at odds with what mamas and daddies and teachers and pastors and city leaders and politicians and employers and other authorities want us to do. Because not everybody wants everybody to have enough -- hashtags, sustainable wages, equitable schools, fair housing, labor and hiring practices, equal justice, reparations and apologies, name changes and monument removals, even seatbelts, helmets, face masks and six feet of distance can be a bridge too far. For too often, those in positions of privilege and power have viewed the subsistence and struggles of their neighbors as a necessary cost for peace, a necessary sacrifice to ensure their excess.

Jesus made a habit of dying to his excess in order that he might live into the abundance of God's enoughness. In so doing, he strained the relationships, systems, and customs of his community: Nazareth didn't want his healing or fame to leave town; his siblings didn't want his unseemly behavior and controversial statements to upset his parent's good name; the local clergy didn't want him working on sabbath; the disciples didn't want him preaching to Samaritans; the temple authorities didn't want his piety disrupting their honeypot; and one has to believe his daddy wasn't thrilled to have a contributor to his household pursue itinerant ministry over the building of family wealth through marriage and commerce. And this is to say nothing of his stances on politics, the economy, theology, and law. Jesus protested, and persisted, and dissented, again, and again, and again.

And what do I learn from Jesus in this second part of the text? Jesus, always, I think, reminds us, as do Micah and other prophets, of what it means to be

obedient disciples. But this morning, Jesus reminds us that our obedience to God will often be in conflict with our obedience to the little gods in our lives. And I think what I'm learning from Jesus this morning is that I am often too eager to seek obedience in the form of finite peace – to fight for the pleasantries of relationships rather than work for the enoughness of my neighbors.

Ryan Newson, who joined us on Wednesday night for a discussion about Confederate monuments, and how we can use theology to disrupt their meaning, also made an observation about learning and listening. I'm paraphrasing, but he posited that every generation has the opportunity, responsibility, and accountability to accept or reject the teachings and expressions of prior generations, to determine the soundness of their systems. And he goes further – he says that they do actually do this.

I pray that we at Sardis, might learn from the things that Jesus has to tell us, and that we might one day find the courage to change those things that stand in stark contradiction to his teachings. I pray that we might one day value the fullness and freedom of our marginalized neighbors over and above the awkward approval of our powerful neighbors and the privileges that approval affords. I pray that one day, we might be a people who live laterally, who change willingly, and who love endlessly.

May God give us the strength, fortitude, and creativity to make it so. And may it happen soon.

Amen.

References

Townes, E. (2011). Theological Perspective: Year A Proper 7. (David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Ed.) *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A* (Volume 3), 164-166.