

Once, not so long ago when I was stranded in San Francisco for a night while waiting to fly standby to Calgary and on to Saskatoon, I had an Epiphany. Of course, I was upset and angry and frustrated. But while I paced my hotel room in agitation, I became more and more calm and interested in what was going on on TV. Every channel that I flipped to was covering the events of the day. And all the news of the day was good.

You see, that Monday when I was stuck in San Francisco was a national holiday. It was Martin Luther King Jr's Birthday. You remember Martin Luther King Jr? He was a pastor and preacher, a husband, father, and civil rights leader. He may have been afraid, but the message that he preached was all gospel...and the dream was the kingdom of God.

Martin Luther King's message was an act of faith and of nonviolent civil disobedience. It defied conventional "white" culture, it caused families to split apart, it caused a whole mess of deaths and persecution and exposed hatred...and ultimately, he was killed for his influential leadership, his statements about love and God's justice and his faith.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr would have been 94 years old on Monday. And today – many churches in the United States celebrate "Beloved Community Day."

What a beautiful name for a commemoration. That night as I paced my hotel room, I vicariously, via the TV, witnessed volunteers building a house for Habitat for Humanity – in honour of the dream. Doctors volunteering their services – for free – in honour of the dream. Mothers and daughters, fathers, and sons, African, European, Middle Eastern, North and South American Indigenous, and Asian people, Republicans and Democrats walking down the street together peacefully – singing hymns of praise to the One who directed the dream.

If we think that the Kingdom of God hasn't yet begun – we have our eyes closed. Here again we witness the amazing power of God that transforms a people who are occasionally humble enough to acknowledge and repent of their sins.

Now, we know that all is not well – and, like the terrible day after thanksgiving when, despite all our gratitude for the simple life of family and good food of the day before, we still line up at midnight to get the best deals on that 82 inch TV – we know that racism and sexism, and classism, and all sorts of other isms still exist and whether we like it or not, and whether we claim it or not God still knows what's in our hidden hearts. But for one day, it's so nice to live as though that glorious day of the kingdom of God were here.

Another special day coming up is called Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday. It is a Sunday that celebrates the anniversary – this year its the 498th anniversary - of the first Anabaptist baptism – a baptism of an adult upon confession of faith - held in Zurich Switzerland. Conrad Grabel was baptized by George Blaurock (and many followed suit). Their re-baptism was an act of faith. They were baptized upon their confession of faith – knowing full well – but likely not completely – what they were getting into – but doing so because of their love for God. It was an act of civil disobedience – you see, baptism, at the time, was not at all an act of faith and new life but rather an institutional mechanism for determining how much to tax. If you had more people in your family – the more taxes you had to pay to the church.

Anabaptists defied this. Their saying baptism should be given upon confession of faith was an act of faith and civil disobedience. This new church which refused to pay the tax of the church, which reclaimed baptism as an act of faith, which said, “no, we will not continue to fatten the coffers of the church with our taxes while the poor are hungry and dying.” And “No, we will not fight your pithy territorial wars but will instead follow the way of Christ” defied conventional religion and social customs. These actions and statements caused families to split apart, caused a whole mess of deaths and persecution and it exposed hatred. All those who participated that day were killed for their influential leadership, for their statements, and for their faith.

Why? Why would anyone risk so much as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and the Early Anabaptists? What is the point?

Our scripture today comes from the gospels of Mark and Matthew – and, if we were here all afternoon and evening – I would read to you all of Matthew Mark, Luke, and John ...and then start in with Micah and Amos and Isaiah...Hosea, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Judges...1 and 2 Corinthians Romans and cap it off with a good dose of 1, 2 and 3 John and Revelation.

Why would anyone risk so much? What’s the point? Today Matthew and Mark give us some hints – see if you can find the common thread:

Mark 1: 14-20

Now, after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God’ kingdom and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the good news!”

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen.

And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people!” And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

As he went a little farther, he saw James and his brother John, the sons of Zebedee, who were in their boat mending the nets.

Immediately he called to them;
and they left their father in the boat with the hired men, and they followed him”

Matthew 23:8-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples “you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.

And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.

Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

The greatest among you will be your servant.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled,

and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

What is a common thread in these scriptures?

Discipleship.

Discipleship, the word, finds its source in ancient proto-Indo-European – that is, the language that is the root of Latin and Greek. Words that have the same root as discipleship include: to discern: to take in – as in learn, to seem to think to accept, to doctor, to dignify, to discipline (train one’s mind), discovery, dogma, doctrine...you get the point.¹

But discipleship it is more than learning – it is a changing – a growing or training of the mind to take in and learn something and make it become part of one’s life.

Discipleship is ACTIVE and not passive, and it requires action.

So then, what does it mean to be a disciple?

The gospel of Mark tells of four brothers who left their comfortable (however comfortable fishing is) life to follow a man and an idea of which they knew very little at the time but had a burning hope that they would learn.

The Gospel of Matthew reminds us that to be disciples we must submit to God...be submissive to God’s will. To humbly do what our instructor commands us to. After all – the best way to learn is by application – or doing.

But why? Why would we choose to follow? Why would we become a disciple? Why would we risk EVERYTHING – including our own lives to live as a disciple?

Because we love the teacher.

Jesus didn’t come as a royal prince born in a palace, but as a Messiah born in a barn in the backyard. He was the son of an unwed mother and trained as a carpenter. He walked the hot dusty roads of Galilee and the rough and rugged terrain of Judea.

Jesus’ command to his disciples —to be great, one must be a servant, to be a servant, one must be humble —it seems almost impossible to follow. But Jesus did not just spew words into the air. He lived those very words.

His was self-giving and self-sacrificing. And we, who claim to be his disciples, must stop denying that we are also called to do and be the same.

Maybe you are like many of us who have heard these teachings of this Jesus and what we have heard has spoken to our very souls; filling a void that we didn’t even know that we had until it was healed. And maybe this discovery within us has only whetted our appetite for more.

Or perhaps you have come to know Christ through your life – and have diligently studied and come to love his teachings and the way they stir through you.

¹ Harper, Douglas. “Disciple: Search Online Etymology Dictionary.” Etymology, 2021. <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=disciple>.

Regardless of the way that we have come to be disciples of Jesus – being a true disciple of Jesus requires, not only learning and accepting, but also active action. To, as it were, “Practice what you preach.”

You see, Jesus wasn’t meek and mild. Because of God’s great love for the world – and all it’s people, Jesus lived and taught in ways that made people feel uncomfortable – and are still making people uncomfortable.

He practiced non-violent civil disobedience by breaking the laws and healing on the Sabbath, touching the unclean, forgiving sins, and raising people from the dead. He disregarded propriety by feeding 5000 + people regardless of their political inclinations. He scandalized his whole world by teaching that the old way of doing things and the old way of thinking about things was about to be transformed and then he transformed them!

Jesus taught that because God loved us, we must also love others. And our love for others is fueled by our willingness to humble ourselves to God and serve unselfishly with joy because of our love...even when things get hard.

Jesus did not waiver in his love for the world – but stuck with it to the end...

And we know the rest of the story. The best story in the whole world. That God raised Jesus from the dead; that death and sin can no longer hold the followers of Jesus captive; that God’s mission and desire for wholeness for the world cannot be wiped out – by Pharisees and the Roman Government, by the religious and civil governments of the day, by racism and closed-minded bigotry.

Today, if we read his words, I hope it makes us uncomfortable too – uncomfortable enough to ask questions – uncomfortable enough to change the way we live our lives – to throw down our nets and follow this man, the son of God – to wherever he leads.

Are we willing to change the way that we do things because the old ways no longer make any sense?

Are we willing to let love of God the Father, the Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit permeate into every bit of our being?

Are we willing to learn, believe and do what the Great Teacher instructs no matter the cost – even though it could cause families to split apart, cause a whole mess of persecution, and expose hatred?

Like Martin Luther King Jr, like the early Anabaptists, like the disciples, like many people in our world today doing the little great things that are God’s love to a broken world – are we willing to learn the lessons he teaches?

Are we willing to go where he sends us?

Are we willing to give our life for the love of our Master?

These are daunting questions – our even pondering our own answers to them can be scary and absolutely uncomfortable. But the road of the disciple is never easy – and there will always be burdens to carry –

Menno Mennonite Church
January 15, 2023

The Cost of Discipleship
Mark 1:14-20; Matthew 23:8-12

Emily Toews

but trusting in God and opening ourselves up to the movement of the Spirit allows God to do amazing and wonderful things through us.