

[NOTE: This sermon was presented in three parts, as were the scripture lessons, rather than one continuous message. The scriptures were presented as dramas.]

Part I

Jesus is tested before he starts his public ministry. This time of testing ensures that he is ready, that he is prepared for the difficulties that he will face. Is it so **God the Father can be sure that Jesus is ready? No. It's so Jesus knows that he is ready**, so that Jesus will have the confidence to do what must be done and be who he must be.

The first challenge is to go into the desert alone—limited solitude is one thing, but 40 days alone, with no one to talk to, no one to keep you company—and fast from food. The number 40 is symbolic in the Bible for a long time period, a complete time.

We remember Moses and the Israelites who wandered in the desert for 40 years before being led into the Promised Land. And here Jesus spends 40 days in the desert and fasts. Fasting is a spiritual discipline. It is a private discipline, almost an internal one. The challenge is to overcome your own body, your own desires and when those desires rise, to be reminded of the fast and why you are doing it.

Fasting or 'self-denial' reminds us to surrender to **God's agenda for our lives**, and leads to being filled with the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. This life-transforming relationship with **God, knowing God's guidance and finding God's strength, is the 'reward'** that Jesus promises to those who fast (Matthew 6:18).

Do you long for a deeper walk with God? Do you hunger to become more like Jesus? Do you thirst for the joy of a Spirit filled life? Then you should seriously consider developing the habit of fasting or abstinence.

In the course of Jesus' fasting, the devil tempts him. Some understand this literally. Others see the devil as a literary figure representing the dark side of human nature—**either way, it is the temptations and Jesus' response that are the focus of the story.**

The first temptation is directly linked to Jesus fasting—**"Turn these stones into bread."** The temptation is to give up on self-denial, give up on discipline.

"Who needs the character formation and self-control that comes from spiritual disciplines like fasting?" (McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 92). After all, no one will know if he breaks his fast. It would be a private indulgence and really, **what difference does it make, there's nothing wrong with eating bread**, with enjoying the pleasure of food. He could have it all, indulge, use his power—**it's his to use after all**—and no one would know. But how would he have endured hardships, including his arrest, trial and crucifixion, without using **miraculous powers to avoid them if he couldn't even keep his fast?**

The second temptation—Jesus is offered the entire world. A short-cut to influence, a short-cut to power.

All Jesus has to do is worship the devil, all he has to do is give in to worldly power. All he has to do is admit that **“self-seeking power, not self-giving love, reigns supreme.”** (*Ibid.*)

When that doesn't work, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, to the top of the temple, the holiest place on earth. And rather than asking Jesus to turn against God—like in the second temptation—now the devil suggests Jesus turn to God. **“Throw yourself off the top of the temple and God will send angels to protect you so you won't even stub your toe.”** **“Go ahead, prove you are the Messiah!”** **“Prove you are God's beloved!”**

Imagine the attention he could get, the crowds at the temple would see the miracle.

His identity would be established. What a show! What a dramatic entrance into ministry! No one would be able to challenge his right to teach in the temple, to rule.

But shortcuts are not Jesus' way. And he doesn't need to prove his identity. He knows who he is.

And faith that is based on showmanship, based on a show of miracles, is no faith at all. So Jesus does not use the shortcuts of spectacle over substance or quick fame over building relationships.

The path Jesus would walk, and that he invites us to join, is “not driven by a human lust for pleasure, power or prestige, but empowered by the Spirit.

. . . if we want to join Jesus in his great work, we must face our own inner demons and discover the same Spirit-empowerment,” (*Ibid.*) through discipline, staying in love with God and remember who and whose we are.

Let us continue our worship.

Part II

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus read a passage from Isaiah that speaks of the Spirit anointing someone to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, healing to the blind and freedom to the oppressed.

Today—not in the future, not partially, but today the scripture is fulfilled. And that requires something of the listeners. **They can't just sit and listen but it requires action, “deep rethinking and radical adjustment,”** says Brian McLaren and the same is true for us.

McLaren compares Jesus' statement to a prophet today saying:

“It's time to dismantle the military-industrial complex and reconcile with enemies! It's time for CEOs to slash their mammoth salaries and give generous raises to all their lowest-paid employees! It's time for criminals, militias, weapons factories, and armies to turn in their bullets and guns so they can be melted down and recast as trumpets, swing sets, and garden tools. It's time to stop plundering the earth for quick corporate profits. . . not someday, but today.”

That would shake things up. And when Jesus said it the people were impressed. It amazed them. It spoke to their need and their situation.

Being appreciated, being liked can be captivating—so much so that it is tempting to not rock the boat, not upset people, even if that is exactly what God is calling you to do.

And we see that in Jesus—that calling, the calling to say what needs to be said **but which isn't popular**. Jesus went and reminded them that God cares for people beyond Jews. That Jews were **not the only ones to benefit from God's grace and God's promises**. And the crowd in the synagogue was ready to kill the traitor, the heretic who would say such things.

Imagine if our Bishop, when he comes in March, tells us that Jesus came for Muslims and atheists and Hindus. Not just us and we cannot claim any preference or any privilege.

Or if the Bishop came and said that while this building is beautiful, it isn't our church. Imagine the Bishop comes and tells us that "our" building belongs to the community.

That it should be used NOT for our benefit, not for OUR congregation, but for the community, for those who are NOT members. That the building is really for them. We may not throw the bishop off a cliff but that message would not be well received, **I don't think**.

Adoring fans and furious critics—Jesus faced them both. He needed his preparation in the desert and he needed to face the temptation of easy popularity and the threats from worldly power so that his mission—declaring **God's kingdom—God's mercy and grace and justice—**was clear in his head. Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the **year of the Lord's favor**.

His followers are called to do likewise. UMC.org says: "United Methodists insist that faith and good works belong together, such as freeing oppressed. What we believe must be confirmed by what we do. Personal salvation must be expressed in ministry and mission in the world. We believe that Christian doctrine and Christian ethics are inseparable, that faith should inspire service."

And that is based, at least in part, by how Jesus himself described his ministry.

Part III

Jesus called the disciples to follow him. He told Simon, later renamed Peter, **I will make you a fisher of men. Or in our translation, "you will be catching people."** Jesus did not invite Simon to listen to him or to believe in him or to spend one day a week with him.

Jesus did not invite Simon to be a Christian.

He invited Simon to be a disciple. Being a disciple is not something undertaken lightly. When a rabbi, or a master teacher, took a disciple, the disciple left home and went with the master, followed the master everywhere. The disciple learned

a new way of life, new values, new practices, new disciplines, with the goal to learn as much from the master as possible—for Star Wars fans, it was a process not unlike being a Jedi apprentice.

Today we are much more familiar with the word Christian to describe a follower of Jesus rather than disciple. That is somewhat curious because Christian was **not a word that existed in Jesus' time**—he never called anyone to come and be a Christian. It was a term that was coined well after Jesus lived and it only **appears in the Bible 3 times. In contrast "disciple" appears more than 250 times.** And we lose a lot when we think the goal or the journey is about being a Christian instead of being a disciple.

Christian can mean anything from someone who is culturally Christian but not a religious person or person of faith, much like many Americans who celebrate Christmas and may seek out a church for things like weddings or funerals, but otherwise they are not influenced by Jesus or his teachings. Their days, their work, their relationships, indeed their lives are governed by worldly culture. Even among Christians in the church, it is worldly culture more than the teachings and values of Jesus that control their lives. Many Christians are more like the people who wanted to push Jesus off the cliff than like the disciples.

Methodists are particularly concerned about inviting people to experience **God's grace and to grow in their knowledge and love of God through disciplined Christian living.**

Historically, Methodists placed primary emphasis on Christian living, on putting faith and love into action. The emphasis is on DISCIPLESHIP. This emphasis on **what Wesley referred to as "practical divinity" has continued to be a hallmark of United Methodism today. That's why the mission of The UMC is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.**

As Brian McLaren concludes: "To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to hear that challenging good news of *today* and to receive that thrilling invitation to follow him . . . and to take the first intrepid step on the road as a *disciple*." (Id. at 94)

This week I invite you to spend time this week thinking about what it means to be **a disciple, know that Jesus is saying to you "follow me."** Allow that invitation to stir a response in you as you consider the cost and importance of being a disciple, of taking your faith, your religion perhaps to a level you never considered before. Even now, be in prayer, consider whether to offer yourself, even as we offer our tithes and offerings to God. Amen