

## **“In the Footsteps of Jesus”**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church  
A new church for a new day, forming from the merger of  
Niles Congregational Church, UCC, and First Christian Church, DOC,  
in Fremont, on Sunday, October 30, 2011, by the Rev. Steve Kindle.  
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Matthew 10:34-45

Today's sermon is the last in our series of eight sermons on the Eight Principles of Progressive Christianity. It is stated like this: By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.

Our primary biblical text this morning is one of the “hard sayings” of the Bible. Many have trouble understanding why Jesus would seemingly pit child against parent and sibling against sibling. There are at least two reasons why this is so difficult for us. The first is that we are 2,000 years away from the occasion of this saying and even farther removed from the culture from which it arose.

The second, and more pressing reason is that when we discover what this really means, even though we know the textual and cultural reasons behind it, we find its meaning daunting, even undesirable.

So, to the first reason, let me remind you of another hard saying of Jesus. When he called a certain man to his movement just two chapters removed, the man rebuffed Jesus with this reply. “I must first bury my father.” To which Jesus replied, “Let the dead bury the dead.” Whoa.

Today we think this is rather harsh, to forbid a son from going to the funeral of his father. But scholars point out that this excuse from the man is shorthand for, “I must stay with my family until my father dies, at which time I will be the head of my family and can then go with you.” So it is not a simple rebuke of a funeral request. It's a way of saying, “Your priorities are wrong.”

Jesus is underscoring the priority that his mission imposes on his followers. Following Jesus must become a disciple's first and highest priority; anything less is a betrayal of Jesus and the cross. If and when family issues come in the way of fulfilling that priority, one must choose for Jesus. So even when we know the cultural reason for this text, we don't like the outcome.

It is no wonder that Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Jesus calls a man, he bids him, ‘Come and die!’”

Christianity in those early days was not for the fainthearted. One put one's life on the line when they took up the cross to follow Christ. The very expression, “taking up the cross” is full of that meaning. Since the church overtook the Roman Empire and it has become the official religion of

the West, we no longer have to worry about persecution, at least not here. So I wonder if we have the same sense of commitment, the same sense of taking up the cross. When we hear Jesus, do we hear, “Come and die?”

One of the things we learn when we study church history is that the church, just as people, cannot be all things it’s supposed to be. So the church gravitates to one or another emphasis over time. In Richard Niebuhr’s *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, he showed how the various denominations were organized around certain emphases. Often these emphases were in reaction to deficiencies felt in the life of the church. One current example is the Pentecostal movement, born of the sensitivity that the Holy Spirit had been driven out of most churches and needed to be found again.

Mainline denominations such as the UCC and the DOC tend to be more devoted to social and political injustices and seek to redress the inequities of our day. One of the points that Niebuhr made is that the directions denominations take may seem simply like sociological phenomena, but from the perspective of church history can be seen as the hand of God moving the church into neglected areas.

So let’s ask ourselves, what was Jesus calling his disciples to do? What did it mean to take up the cross and follow in the footsteps of Jesus?

Jesus was very clear about his agenda. It’s spelled out unequivocally in Luke 4.  
*When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring **good news to the poor. He has sent me 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.**” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

Today, we would refer to these ministry emphases as economic justice, health care as a human right, healing the planet, and conferring dignity on all people regardless of sexual orientation, social status or ethnicity. I’ll repeat them for you [read bolded text].

Hear again the eighth principle of Progressive Christianity: By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God’s creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.

In the United States alone, 50.2 million people (up from 35.5 million in 2006), including 17.2 million children, are food insecure. They don’t have the money or assistance to consistently provide food for themselves and their families.

Here is where our denomination’s Mission 1 comes in. We can be God’s instruments of change. For the first 11 days of November (11.1.11 - 11.11.11), United Church of Christ congregations,

and related agencies, will join together in a collective mission campaign to collect more than 1 million food items for local food banks, raise \$111,111 in online donations for Neighbors in Need and \$111,111 for East Africa famine relief, and write 11,111 letters to Congress asking that U.S. foreign assistance be reformed to more effectively serve the world's poorest people.

Niles Discovery Church will participate in this national effort by:

- being a food donation site during the 11 days of Mission: 1 (our goal is to raise 1,111 food items during these 11 days) – food should be left on the stage in Ford Hall, where it will be counted and placed in our food barrel;
- encouraging 111 people to commit to donating at least \$11 online during the 11 days of Mission: 1; and
- receiving an offering of letters during coffee hour on Sunday, November 6 (Friend Raising Sunday).

All across America and in over 70 cities throughout the world, the Occupy Wall Street and similar movements are taking place.

If you remember Pastor Jeff's and my sermons earlier this year on economic justice, the outrage against 1% of America's wealthiest controlling 40% of America's wealth should not surprise you. What surprises me is that our churches are not leading in this struggle, for I am convinced that Jesus would be right there in the midst of them.

What does not surprise me is the tear gas, the concussion grenades, and the water hoses used against the mostly peaceful demonstrators. It's a reminder of who is really in charge of our world, what the writers of the New Testament called "the powers that be."

Hear these words of Jesus again: *'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

*For I have come to set a man against his father,  
and a daughter against her mother,  
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*

*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

Down through the centuries many people arose who, despite life-threatening opposition, challenged the powers and gave their lives in the process. In our own day we have Dietrich Bonhoeffer, himself, a martyr during WWII; MLK, Jr., and even Mohandas Gandhi who believed he was following in the footsteps of Jesus. And countless others whom we will never know by name.

You may be wondering what the text of Abraham's call is doing in the service of this sermon. It is a reminder that the purpose of Abraham was to be the father of a great multitude who would, by their service to the world, become the world's greatest blessing. We are the children of

Abraham and are expected to carry that mission to our world, as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

*Through Gates of Splendor* is a 1957 best-selling book written by Elisabeth Elliot. The book tells the story of Operation Auca, an attempt by five American missionaries including Jim Elliot (the author's husband), to reach the Huaorani tribe of eastern Ecuador. All five of the men were killed by the tribe.

The title of the book is derived from the fourth stanza of the hymn "We Rest on Thee". This hymn was sung by the missionaries before the men left for their last mission. The lines read:

We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender.  
Thine is the battle, Thine shall be the praise;  
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor,  
Victors, we rest with Thee, through endless days.

Jim Elliot's epitaph records his philosophy of life: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

*Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*  
"Come, and die." AMEN