

WE MAY GAIN THE WHOLE WORLD BUT LOSE OUR SOUL

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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In his impudence, Peter lashed out and rebuked his Lord and Master Jesus. Responding to that affront, Jesus said; “Get behind me Satan!” Such an intense drama played out that day. What was going on within those two men? Peter knew deeply and with certainty that Jesus was indeed the one who was to come; the king the prophets had spoken of who would be descended from David as the Messiah, the liberator of his people. And so, to hear Jesus speaking of his suffering and death was an assault to his senses; it was an affront to all that he knew, and so he lashed out.

Before he lashed out at his master, his Lord was having an inward battle himself. He was struggling to accept and face the pending pain and suffering that he knew was to be his father’s will for him. And so, hearing Peter’s rebuke, he lashed out at his blind disciple: “Get behind me Satan. You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s.” After venting his frustration on Peter, Jesus turned to the rest of his disciples and said: “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?” Jesus knew that these dear friends were teetering on the edge; courting with the world and in danger of losing their souls.

Peter and the rest of the disciples were longing not for God’s will for them, but to receive the glory that they expected to find in Jesus’ coming kingdom. They wanted to gain the whole world, but were in danger of losing

their souls. These first disciples had established a dangerous pattern of listening to Jesus, but never understanding; of looking, but never really perceiving. A pattern that would be repeated time and time again by many of Jesus' disciples down through the centuries.

The Fisher family were among those kinds of disciples; teetering on the edge. In 1999 I had moved my family to Scott City, Missouri where I accepted a call as the pastor of Memorial Wesleyan Church. It was a loving faith community that had been started decades earlier as a Bible study in the home of Mrs. Fisher, the family matriarch, and the matriarch of the budding church.

By the time of my arrival, Mrs. Fisher was in her 80's. One of her daughters played the piano, and her son Mark was head of the church board. The Fisher's had deep roots not only in that church, but also in their Christian faith; having attended Sunday services every week, Bible Studies on Sunday and Wednesday evenings, and Vacation Bible School every summer. They were model disciples of Jesus Christ.

But beneath the surface, and somewhat in plain sight, a pattern had developed within the Fisher family; a pattern very similar to that of Jesus' first disciples; a pattern seen in many other disciples through the centuries. Mrs. Fisher's long-deceased husband had been an alcoholic before finding sobriety. His daughter, the church pianist, still struggled with her drinking. Another married Fisher daughter was having an affair, and Mrs. Fisher's eldest son Mark; the head of the Church Board; had been an alcoholic with anger and control issues. The alcohol was now gone, but not the anger or the controlling behavior. It turned out that the entire Fisher family had a vice grip on the control of the church. How could all these unhealthy issues

and behaviors be present in an entire family who were such devoted, faithful, disciples of Jesus Christ?

But their story, though different in details, is the same pattern seen among many disciples who are of the clergy and the laity; even within the highest ranks of the church, the popes and other leaders of various Christian denominations. It is unfortunately way too common for the church of Jesus Christ to have many faithful, devoted disciples who attend church and participate in various discipleship program where they study the Bible and learn the catechism, and watch *The Chosen*, and learn about the traditions of the church, but still are not living transformed lives in Christ. They are listening but not understanding; looking but not perceiving.

We can learn a lot from those very first disciples who were the first to establish the pattern of learning and growing, but not really being transformed. Those men walked side-by-side with Jesus; listening to him, watched him, patterned their lives after his, went from town to town two-by-two to heal and teach God's Good News. If we would have asked what a genuine disciple of Jesus looked like, we would have pointed to those men who had walked with Jesus for 3 ½ years; Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, and Judas, and the rest. They were our model of a genuine disciple; students of Jesus.

But even those exemplar disciples still had problems with control and a desire for status and recognition. They said things like; Master, let me and my brother sit on either side of you on your throne in your Father's kingdom; Lord, call down fire from heaven to destroy those Samaritans for not welcoming you; oh no, Lord; we forgot to bring bread along with us! And then there was Peter the rock of the church who in today's reading

rebuked Jesus for talking about his suffering and death. Why were those first disciples not living a more transformed life?

Author Ruth Haley Barton touches on the answer in an article she wrote, titled: “Why Discipleship is not Enough.” She writes: “Much of what we call discipleship today emphasizes activity, information, and participation. We measure attendance, Bible knowledge, volunteer hours, and leadership development. While these things are important, none of them necessarily tells us whether a person is becoming more loving, more surrendered, more attentive to God, or more like Christ.” Ruth zeroed in on the problem in the church’s training programs; people who are learning more and more about Jesus and the Bible and the foundations of our faith, but who are not becoming more like Christ; not growing more loving, more surrendered, less controlling, less angry.

Ruth continues: “I asked Dallas Willard once whether he used the words *spiritual formation* and *discipleship* interchangeably. ‘Not when I’m being careful,’ he responded. ‘They are closely related, but not the same.’ ... But he also cautioned: ‘Discipleship can be practiced in such a way that spiritual formation in Christ does not occur.’ Even under the perfect teacher, discipleship by itself did not guarantee transformation.”

Interestingly in the scriptures, the word disciple is never found after the four gospels. Not until the arrival of the Holy Spirit in that upper room did a new language develop to refer to the followers of Jesus. The ultimate goal of the Christian life was no longer about being a disciple, but being conformed to the image of Christ, being transformed into the image of Christ, or, “become participants of the divine nature.” Ruth then concludes her article: “The New Testament never assumes that discipleship automatically produces transformation. The goal is not simply to make

disciples who know more, serve more, or participate more faithfully. The goal is that the very nature of Christ would be formed in us. Discipleship matters profoundly—but only insofar as it opens us to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.”

The ultimate goal of your life and mine is not to know more, serve more, or participate more faithfully, but to be transformed into the image of Christ in our inner being. Now, what Ruth doesn't say in this article, but what I think she will say in her upcoming book, is that inner transformation requires more than head knowledge; it requires an open heart that is soft and tender and responsive to the movement of the Holy Spirit within.

Thankfully we have many examples of disciples of Christ who, over the centuries, have developed open hearts to deep inner transformation. We see how that transformation occurred in Peter's life after the fire of the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the others in that upper room. He became a new man, a deeper man, a more transformed man.

Foundational discipleship programming is necessary for our lives of faith. We need more than Sunday attendance to grow deeper. Discipleship that transforms our lives combines head knowledge with heart openness to the Spirit which is where deeper inner transformation occurs. I am thankful that our parish focuses on this inner work of transformation and openness to the Spirit.

Let me end by praying for you the prayer the apostle Paul prayed for the church in Ephesus: “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, [God] may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the

power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”