

“Final Instructions” • Psalm 31:1-5, 19-24; Matthew 5:1-2, 7:15-29
Sheth LaRue • May 21, 2023
First Presbyterian Church of Benton Harbor

This morning we return back to the mountainside where Jesus has been teaching his disciples and all who had ears to hear about how to *be* disciples. He informs them that the reign of God turns upside-down the reign of humanity, and the ones who have been marginalized are valued, the ones who have suffered will find relief, the ones who remain committed will be claimed by God.¹ The disciples are to remain committed to the heart of the faith, which is love, and they are to work for the rewards of heaven.² They are to share the good news of Jesus Christ with their neighbors in deed and in word, and are to discern who and how they are to share.³ And here at the end of the seventh chapter we witness Jesus closing out his sermon with what I like to imagine is a very brief but important commencement speech. It’s like the disciples have just completed the first level of their training and they’re graduating from the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus is making his concluding remarks on being a disciple. Let’s listen to that speech:

[read Matthew 5:1-2, 7:15-29]

I’ve often complained to fellow believers that when we share our faith in God with others, we far-too-often leave out a really big truth about this journey with Jesus: this discipleship thing is *hard*! We’re really good at telling people how great our life with Christ has been and how meaningful it is to be in a community of like-minded folks, and we’re very eager to tell others about how great our potlucks are, but this passage here with the narrow gate? This stuff about good and bad fruits, about self-deception, we sure do skip over this part, right? We skip over the hard stuff because no one wants to sign up for a difficult life; people seek God because their life is rough - they don’t want to hear that walking with Jesus will only make it harder, right?

Jesus, though, he’s telling his soon-to-be-graduated disciples that when they approach their walk with him, when they approach their discipleship, they must remember that there’s an easy way to live in the reign of God and there’s a real way to live in the reign of God. The easy way doesn’t produce much fruit, and the fruit it does make isn’t all that great. The easy way has

¹ Matthew 5:1-12

² Matthew 5:13-48

³ Matthew 6

a wide and smooth path because many have traveled it before. The easy way assumes that just because they're doing things in the name of Jesus that means that Jesus is present in it. The easy way builds their houses on sandy soil because it's easy to dig into, it's easy to move, and honestly, have you seen the cost of beachfront property these days? One would be a fool to not build in sandy soil! Jesus warns that a life built in this way will most assuredly fall.

Jesus calls his disciples to walk through the narrow gate and down the hard road. He calls his disciples to produce good fruit and beware false fruit-makers. Jesus calls his disciples to ensure the life of Christ is in the works done in the name of Christ. Jesus calls his disciples to be grounded on the solid rock, the rock which has withstood the test of time, the rock that remains when all else falls away. Jesus calls this group of tax collectors and fishermen, this group of widows and tentmakers, this group of folks living on the margins – Jesus, the rock, calls these folks to a life of discipleship in the new reality of the reign of God in the world.

What I love about these folks that Jesus has called is that this road-less-traveled life is, honestly, the life most of these folks have already been living. Jesus, out here on the margins of the kingdom of Israel, out here on the very northern edge in Capernaum in this little fishing village where folks are just getting by – this is the place where narrow, difficult paths are daily walks. These folks who are called to bear good fruit are well aware of what a good fruit-bearing tree would look like, and in turn, what a good fruit-bearing life would look like because they've been used and abused by a lot of bad-fruit-bearers. These folks who are called to be honest and sincere with themselves, these folks have dealt with those self-deceived leaders who do things only for their own good. These folks who are called to build on the rock have lived through countless houses of worship, houses of finance, houses of government assistance – all of which have crumbled and fell because they were built on sinking sand. The life of the disciple is a life lived on the margins, in the margins, among marginal folk doing the core work of the rock.

If *those* folks who lived life on the road-less-traveled were called to be disciples, my dear siblings, how joyous it is to know that you and I are called to be disciples as we live our lives on the road-less-traveled. We all have stories similar to these disciples, don't we? We all have come to Jesus because we knew the broad road wasn't enough...we knew that we were meant to produce something good...we knew that we wanted to point to someone other than ourselves... and so we came to the rock, and it was there that we found a new way to live and love God and

neighbor. We came to the rock and it was there that we found community and belonging. We came to the rock and it was there that we discovered who we are and what we are meant to be.

The narrow, difficult road is still there, my friends; will we walk down it? The trees are once again ready to bear fruit; are we ready to harvest it? The call to be a graduate of the reign of Jesus is the call to discipleship, the call to live a life for and about God within a world seemingly apart and against from its Creator. Sisters, brothers, siblings in Christ: “the rock is still there; will we build on it?”⁴

Alongside one another, firm in Christ the rock, will we further the reign of God in this world? Will we travel through that narrow gate and down that hard road to journey with one another? Will we go down that hard road, my friends, that road that calls us to love God and neighbor? That road that calls us to love our immigrant neighbors, and our black neighbors, and our Sikh neighbors. That road that calls us to love our conservative, Republican neighbors and our liberal, Democrat neighbors. That road that calls us to love our indigenous neighbors, our addicted neighbors, our Latin and Hispanic neighbors, our Asian neighbors, our LGBTQIA+ neighbors. We walk down roads – difficult, challenging roads – but we walk them grounded in Christ; the rock is still there, my friends.

Life lived from that rock, life ventured down that narrow road brings us to demand the right of our Trans community to exist – not to just exist, but to live and thrive as God’s beloveds. Life lived from that rock permits us to advocate for the rights of others, to insist that we spend less on defense and more on education, healthcare, and housing. Life lived from that rock gives us license to seek that redlining and gerrymandering come to an end, to ensure equity and equality at home, in the workplace, and at play. Life lived from that rock empowers us to march and protest, it empowers us to ensure our neighbors in Appalachia can access services and funds which provide aid. A life lived from Christ, a life lived from that rock liberates us from ourselves so we can serve others; the rock is still there, my friends.

Graduates of the Sermon on the Mount: the rock is still there. Know and believe you are blessed. Be salty and bright. Remain at the heart of it all, which is love. Never forget your motivations and don’t worry. Don’t judge, use discernment, be ready to move, and “in

⁴ F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew – A Commentary, Vol. 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 360.

everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”⁵ The road may be difficult and challenging...good fruit may be hard to come by...your ego will fight with you...but the rock is still there. Jesus – Emmanuel, God-with-us – is with us! Jesus – Emmanuel, God-with-us – on Christ, the solid Rock, I stand: all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand. But the rock is still there! The rock is still there! Thanks be to God – the rock is still there!
Amen.

⁵ Matthew 7:12, New Revised Standard Version