

Listening to God's Voice in Creation

This the first Sunday in the Season of Creation, five weeks each year in which Episcopalians join with our fellow Christians around the world to pray and act for our common home. This year's theme is "Listen to the Voice of Creation," and its symbol is the Burning Bush. Today's Gospel gives us the perfect place to begin.

This morning, Jesus has some harsh demands for his crowds of followers. If they want to be his disciples, they have to "hate" their spouses, parents, siblings, children, and even life itself. They have to take up their crosses and follow him, having considered and accepted the cost of discipleship. And if that's not enough, they have to give up all of their possessions. When Jesus finishes talking, it wouldn't surprise me if a lot of his followers decide that the fun is over and it's time to pack up and go home.

This passage is pretty unappealing. It would be wrong to sugarcoat it, but I think it's fair to explain it. Let's start with Jesus's directive to "hate" your loved ones, which isn't what we'd normally expect from the Prince of Peace. Jesus can get a little intense sometimes, particularly as he approaches Jerusalem, but his message here may be inflated a bit by Luke's telling. Matthew's version of this passage is more moderate, saying only that one who loves family more than Jesus is unworthy of him. Jesus's words may also be distorted by translation. People in Jesus's time didn't understand hate as an intense emotional reaction the way we do. Here, our LORD uses a Hebrew idiom anchored in the word שָׂנֵא. That word is usually translated as "hate," but in the sense of being injured by someone or wanting to avoid them, not of being hostile toward them. Considering everything, we can fairly conclude that Jesus wants to be first in his disciples' loyalties, but he doesn't demand active animosity toward their loved ones.

Jesus's insistence that his disciples give up all their possessions is probably overstated, too. Even the twelve disciples owned a few things, the clothes on their backs and the sandals on their feet if nothing else. Jesus may not have wanted his followers to worry about what they would wear, but he undoubtedly wanted them to wear something as they traveled with him. Minimal ownership had to be okay.

Jesus's message becomes clearer when he tells his would-be disciples to count the cost before deciding to follow him. That cost wasn't insignificant. Ten of the twelve original disciples were martyred, as were Paul and many of the saints. Early Christians were harshly (if intermittently) persecuted by the Roman authorities for centuries. Jesus warning his followers that discipleship comes with a cost is simply truth in advertising.

Sad to say, Christians are still persecuted in various places around the world. We Episcopalians are fortunate not to suffer persecution for our faith in modern America, but we still have to consider what today's Gospel asks of us. We can't be disciples in the sense of literally following Jesus on foot from town to town across Israel – that ship has sailed. We've mostly figured out how to worship Jesus without abandoning our families. Giving away all our possessions is neither practical nor popular but, as we've seen, that requirement probably wasn't absolute even in Jesus's day. But we must acknowledge that discipleship comes with a cost, and ask ourselves what that cost might be and whether we're willing to pay it.

There are many things we pay in this life. We pay bills, we pay fines, we pay taxes. We pay visits, we pay compliments, we pay our respects. And, perhaps most important for purposes of this Season of Creation, we pay *attention*.

People of faith have always recognized that we can learn something about God by studying his handiwork. As Turkish mystic Gregory of Nyssa recognized in the 4th Century,

“[b]elief in God rests on the art and wisdom displayed in the order of the world, the belief in the Unity of God, in the perfection that must belong to Him in respect of power, goodness, wisdom, and so forth.” When we pay attention to the beauty of Creation, when we contemplate its diversity and complexity, when we listen to its voice, we can begin to appreciate, just a little, who our Creator is and what he values.

The trouble is, life can keep us too preoccupied to hear the Song of Creation. Today’s Gospel skips over the Parable of the Great Dinner, which immediately precedes our passage. Responding to a man who said “blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God,” Jesus tells this story. “Someone gave a great dinner, and invited many.” But when the host sends a servant out to announce that the meal is ready, the guests all start making excuses. They’re so busy with their business concerns and personal lives that they can’t be bothered to attend the dinner, to enjoy the feast that their host has prepared for them. There are undoubtedly various ways to interpret this parable – with Jesus, there always are – but I’ll give you three guesses whom the host might be, and bet that you’ll only need one.

I know from personal experience what it is to be too busy to pay attention to the glory of God’s world. Several years ago, circumstances took me to an island in Maine. I stopped at a local deli to grab some lunch before my meeting. Stepping out of my car, I was suddenly surrounded by a rushing sound that I didn’t recognize. It was soft but powerful, and it came at me from all sides. It wasn’t until I looked up and saw branches swaying overhead that I recognized that rushing sound as the wind in the trees. I had been so preoccupied for so many years, dashing around with my endless to-do list, struggling to accomplish just one more task every minute of every day, that I had literally forgotten the voice of the wind. For this former Girl Scout camper and nature lover, it was a shock to realize how deaf to God’s Creation I had become.

The costs of discipleship can be paid in many currencies. But I believe they all come down to offering love, wonder and gratitude to our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Every day, God gives us a sumptuous gift in the beauty of Creation. If God is anything like us, one of the best ways we can repay that gift is by delighting in it. Spending time really looking at the world, studying the patterns in the bark of a tree or the dots on a ladybug's back. Touching and really feeling the softness of moss and the roughness of unpolished stone. Savoring the aromas of wood smoke, freshly cut grass and roses. Tasting the sweetness of apples, the tartness of lemons, the yeastiness of bread and the pungency of cheese. And *listening*, to the murmur of running water, to the cry of seagulls, to the singing of crickets, to the silence of midnight and the rush of the wind in the trees. All Creation sings a ceaseless hymn of praise to our Creator. If we listen to that hymn long enough and with enough love, I believe we can sometimes catch a whisper of God's voice beneath the melody. And when we praise the beauty of Creation, I believe that we join in that hymn, paying our debt to God with praise and thanksgiving.

Jesus's words about counting the cost of discipleship may seem a little ominous. We generally assume that paying a price means giving up something we'd much rather keep. But what if the cost of discipleship includes putting aside mind-numbing busyness that was never good for us in the first place? What if the price of discipleship is best paid with attention and gratitude? What if we, as disciples of Christ, join in his love for the Father by giving thanks for the beauty that our Creator so generously showers upon us?

As the Season of Creation continues, we'll look at what our treatment of Creation says about our relationship with God. But for now, it's enough to quote British poet, painter and mystic William Blake, who said "all that lives is holy." Creation is holy, and the Father sings through it. As disciples of his Son, may we listen well and learn to sing along. *Amen.*