

'Genuine Love'
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
September 3, 2017
based on Romans 12:9-21 and Matthew 16:21-28

Please pray with me:
Life-giving God, walk with us through this message opening our eyes and ears to your will and way. Amen.

Our reading today from Matthew is often referred to as Jesus' ultimate challenge to his disciples that helps identify us as Jesus followers. This ultimate challenge is often referred to as the 'cost of discipleship'.

What does it cost to be a follower of Christ? *Everything*. You give up everything in order to gain all.

To an unbeliever that sounds expensive ... to give up *everything!* ... but to a believer the cost makes sense. We believe Jesus is who Jesus said he was. Sometimes the Gospels refer to faith as having "ears to hear" and "eyes to see".

It takes "ears to hear" and "eyes to see" the message of Jesus in order to understand that to give up everything is not expensive ... but priceless.

Yet, it's not surprising Peter, who loved Jesus totally, would balk when Jesus began to show his disciples he was about to suffer and die and come again so that more believe. I can honestly say that if someone I loved totally were to tell me they were going to suffer and die I would react the same as Peter.

No one ever wants to see a loved one suffer...much less die.

But you know what? Neither does God!

The Bible tells us over and over that God hears the cries of those who suffer. God sees the injustices and unfair human behaviors that are contrary to God's ways.

God does not want any of God's children to suffer harm. The kind of suffering Jesus was talking about was suffering for the sake of the Gospel ... the Good News that God's love was not sanctioned for only a few, but was available to all.

The kind of suffering that produces physical harm, however, is something we have the power to do something about. As Christians, the Good News compels us to find ways to alleviate suffering; minimize death; and be ready for when Jesus comes again.

Then there's that part in the scripture reading when Peter balks and Jesus rebukes him for thinking and acting in a human way and not a divine way. Jesus calls Peter a stumbling block and even compares him to Satan.

Poor Peter! He could not imagine his beloved Messiah, the Son of the Living God, was one who would suffer and die. It was unimaginable. How could God allow that to happen?

According to the Gospel of Matthew, it wasn't just that Jesus was to suffer, but that God willed the suffering ... and Simon Peter, the rock upon which Jesus would build the church, had become the voice of the one who tempted Jesus away from the suffering. A voice that lured Jesus from God's will.

I have no good explanation for the theory of atonement that considers Jesus'

suffering as God's will. ... this theory supposedly explains Jesus' suffering and death as a way of revealing God's plan for saving human kind from physical, mental and spiritual suffering. I don't like it. I don't want to believe it. It sounds like abuse to me when I think of God, the Father, setting his beloved Son up for death on the cross.

But then, maybe I'm being Peter. I'm being the stumbling block that keeps people from coming closer to Jesus because of God's ultimate show of love: the resurrection.

How then, do we live faithfully into Peter's claim that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God and still balk at the suffering?

By reminding ourselves ... in order to be a follower of Christ means we give up everything in order to gain all ... and we act as though we have ears to hear the suffering of others; and the eyes to see ways to help.

We've been hearing so much about the devastation from Hurricane Harvey. Every day we hear heartbreaking stories and see images coming from Houston and surrounding areas throughout southern Texas and Louisiana.

Our ears and our eyes are telling us to do something to help with the suffering.

This is where United Methodist's shine in the face of disaster relief. Our support of the United Methodist Committee on Relief provides us an opportunity to help that is:

1. cost productive
2. effective
3. and positions highly trained volunteers for immediate assistance.

Our ears have heard the cries of the people in Texas and our eyes have seen unbelievable trauma of people displaced from their homes. It's time to take a good hard look at the cost of discipleship and respond in the best way we can.

Over the next three weeks Covenant is going to partner with Asbury First UMC and possibly the Livonia and Albion United Methodist Churches in the Genesee Valley District to collect Flood Bucket supplies and cash donations to be sent to UMCOR.

A list of items needed for each Flood Bucket is available after worship today and through Sept. 24. These specific items will ultimately fit into a large bucket ... so if it says 10 ozs of dishwashing liquid, please get 10 ozs so it can fit into the bucket with all the other supplies.

We respond because we have the receptive inclination to hear and see the need and because of UMCOR has the wherewithal to respond.

Collecting items for Flood Buckets or making cash donations is part of an active solution for a specific situation ... but the whole of our commitment to follow Jesus and to live like Jesus is encapsulated in our reading today from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans:

Romans 12:9-21

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser

than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Our Scripture readings today help us see there are costs to being disciples of Jesus Christ but those costs aren't expensive or taxing, they are life-giving.

When we can help our neighbors as far away as Texas and Louisiana, and when we let our love be a genuine we become part of God's plan for saving all humanity from suffering.

When one suffers we all suffer.

What does it cost to be a follower of Christ? *Everything*. We give up everything in order to gain all.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.