

Disciples vs. Volunteers. Sermon. 10/2/2011
16 PentecostA Pr.22; Fr. Hugh. St. George.
Philippians 3:4-14

A young married couple went out for a drive one afternoon and went into a newly opened pub in Ocala. It was decorated just like an Olde English Pub.

It was only a quarter to four, but since it was their day off, and on the principle that it was 'five o'clock somewhere', they went to the bar and ordered a couple of drinks. The barman put two delightful looking cocktails on the bar.

The young man asked "how much?" and the barman said, "That'll be twenty cents, please."

He said,

"What? Twenty cents. You've got to be kidding me! How do you manage to serve drinks so cheaply?"

The barman said: "Well I've always wanted to own a nice friendly pub, a place where people could relax with friends and enjoy a couple of drinks. Then a couple of months ago I won the lottery. So I thought I'd open a pub and serve drinks at 10 cents a glass."

"Wow. That's terrific."

Then he noticed another table with four senior citizens sitting down, but they didn't have any drinks. "What's up with them?"

"Them? Oh. They're from the Villages. They're just waiting for Happy Hour!"

In the 18th century a young man named William Wilberforce, who suffered from a very poor constitution

and was under constant assault from sickness, felt called by God to express his discipleship.

Although he held a fairly inconsequential political office he made repeated attempts to get the British parliament to abolish slavery.

He fought against the entrenched interests of many powerful figures in the British Empire.

At one time he was so discouraged with the lack of progress that he was on the point of giving up.

An elderly friend of his, The Rev. John Wesley heard of his discouragement.

From his death bed Wesley called for pen and paper.

With trembling hand he wrote, "Unless God has raised you up for this very thing you will be worn out by men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are even all of them stronger than God?"

"Do not be weary of well-doing. Go on in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery shall vanish away before it."

John Wesley died six days after writing this letter.

Wilberforce fought on for forty-five more years.

Finally he too succumbed to his illness and was close to death. He finally heard that the British Parliament had agreed to abolish slavery. Three days later Wilberforce died in the knowledge that he had fulfilled his destiny. It was another thirty years before the United States of America followed suit.

In today's reading from Philippians St. Paul describes some of what he'd endured to be a faithful disciple of Christ.

While hopefully we won't have to undergo the same trials as either William Wilberforce or St. Paul, we are, like them, all called to be faithful disciples of Christ.

A lot of people tend to think of the words 'disciple' and 'volunteer' as meaning the same thing.

But the truth is they are quite distinct in meaning.

A volunteer gives of their time to a charity or a cause. But a disciple gives of themselves to God.

Volunteers and disciples may outwardly be doing the same thing. But a volunteer is just that, a volunteer, and is only answerable to themselves.

A disciple understands that they are answerable to God.

So outwardly volunteering and discipleship may not appear different, but each one represents a very different perspective.

St. Paul was definitely not a volunteer. Volunteers generally don't get shipwrecked or lost adrift at sea, unless you want to count cruises. Volunteers generally don't get beaten, at least not at St. George.

Volunteers don't speak so forcefully about their belief that they incite people to riot. That's just not the done thing for respectable Episcopalians.

But the key distinction is in the level of commitment to God. Anyone can volunteer with a minimal commitment of their time.

Being a disciple takes a commitment of your heart.

Being a disciple is responding to the inner call from Christ.

To be a disciple is to answer very affirmatively to the call from God that He issues to all of us.

To be a true disciple is an awesome thing, and yes it can be scary too.

Everyone is familiar with old workplace adage,

"The boss is coming. Look busy."

And a few years ago someone came up with the bumper sticker, "Jesus is coming. Look busy."

But looking busy is far from what the Church is about.

Indeed busyness can sometimes obscure the true purpose of the Church.

Paul understood that this was a human weakness.

He pointed out how nothing else in his life, gains or losses, can even begin to compare to the eternal benefit of being close to Christ.

He said, "I have come to regard everything else as loss, because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord."

This is a remarkable perspective, but one that digging deeper into the truths of God compels us towards - the realization that a close relationship with Christ is the most important thing we can attain in this life.

Today's reading from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians was the inspiration for one of the greatest hymns of all time - "When I survey the wondrous Cross," composed by Isaac Watts.

"When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

"Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood."

Most people will remember Chuck Colson for his role in Watergate. Colson is certainly an interesting figure. A former Washington insider who would stop at nothing and ran afoul of the law, Colson later examined his conscience and turned to God.

After serving his stint in prison he started a prison ministry which has been very far-reaching and enormously effective.

Colson had this to say about discipleship.

"Back when I was a young man I entered Marine Officers' basic training. During the first grueling weeks we were

put through intense physical training on a death defying obstacle course.

We learned to handle and clean a rifle, to disassemble and reassemble the rifle until we could do it blindfolded.

We had to memorize the Marine handbook of military rules and regimen. And no-one ever debated the rules or argued that they might not be acceptable to some Marines. Our hearts and minds were imprinted forever with the meaning of discipline. "

He said,

"I have come to realize that it should be the same for soldiers of the Cross. Yet, rather than being well-disciplined members of the Body of Christ, many of us act at best like weekend warriors whose real life takes

precedence, but who occasionally turn out for drills, or to hang out in the officers' club on Sundays.

"If we are to take our handbook the Bible seriously, we have to conclude that the Church is the basic school of discipleship and training for all Christians."

Many people from time to time feel an inner prompting by the Holy Spirit, a nudging to get closer to Christ and become a true disciple.

But often people respond to this inner prompting by postponing it to sometime later

- perhaps after I've raised my family;

perhaps after I've saved enough for retirement.

But it's possible to run out of excuses, or to run out of time.

A priest friend of mine was talking to a man who seemed very knowledgeable about theology and about the Church. He asked him, "Are you a priest too?" And the man replied, "Oh no. I have too much respect for the Church to inflict myself upon it." - which seemed like an original response.

But really he was expressing the old concern of, "Well, I'm just not good enough to be a disciple of Christ."

Many of us struggle with doubts about whether we are good enough.

A lot of advertising works by suggesting to us that we don't have enough, or that we won't be good enough without whatever it is they're selling.

A lot of people have thoughts like, "I'm not spiritual enough. I'm not good enough. I'm not sufficiently educated," and these thoughts can get in our way.

But God doesn't ask us to be good enough to become a disciple. He asks us to become a disciple first, then work on the rest later, with His help.

Instead of taking what we have, the good, the bad and the ugly, and offering it to God, we obsess over whether we meet a qualification that exists only in our own minds, and in all that inner agonizing we avoid drawing closer to God, while something inside us keeps asking us to just do it.

St. Paul speaks to that. He says clearly:

"I do not consider that I have done this by myself. But I press on to make it my own, because Jesus Christ has made me His own.

"This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind, and stepping forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

Paul didn't believe in himself any more than anyone else, but he did believe in God who called him to be more than he thought he could be.

Could it be that when you hear an inner prompting of God calling you to be closer to Him, to really be His disciple for the rest of your life, that you could say:

"Lord, I may not be good enough for you, but you are definitely more than enough for me.

I don't want to hold you at arm's length any more.

So yes, Lord, here I am. I want to be your disciple."