

The 1st Sunday Lent: Holy Trinity Church: March 6, 2022

Luke 4: 1-13 & Ezekiel 36:26

A real disciple of Jesus Christ cannot be a stowaway.

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit, I will put within you.”

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

I wonder, how many teachers have heard this, “The dog ate my homework.” Isn’t that the standard for shifting blame, for an undone school assignment? We adults have a similar mantra: In the 1960’s and 1970’s, there was a Comedian named Flip Wilson who played a character named Geraldine Jones. Now Geraldine Jones had a husband named, ‘Killer. Geraldine would always get herself into trouble with ‘Killer’ saying, “the devil made me buy that dress, the devil made me buy those expensive shoes, the devil made me buy that mink coat.” and she would howl, “Killer honey, I didn’t do it. The devil made me do it.” This simple phrase suffices for almost anything that we

don't want to take responsibility for, or that we want to avoid owning up to. Except that this phrase at least attests to the fact that "something" was done. The "homework assignment" excuse means that nothing was done at all. This is a case of "avoidance" to the "nth" degree. Sadly, discipleship today leans more toward "dog blaming" than "the devil made me do it, blaming," although a case could be made for both.

For many, the discipleship journey may be most like stowing away on a ship. Now, a stow away is not a sailor. A stow away is a person who hides aboard a ship or airplane to obtain free transportation or elude pursuers. A stowaway is a criminal. A stowaway doesn't take part in the work of hoisting the sails, scrubbing the decks, steering at the helm, or navigating the ship watching for the ship's position and looking for foul weather such, a stowaway is along for the ride. It's the ultimate in "just slipping by." I think most of us believe we are on the journey. But the way we travel in our discipleship adventure smacks more of the stowaway than "all hands-on deck."

A real disciple of Jesus Christ cannot be a stowaway. We like to observe the journey more than taking part in the journey. We want to take the easy way out, the "discipleship" route that requires not too much effort, sweat, toil, or commitment. We don't want to get our hands dirty. We don't want it to take

too much time out of our lives. More interesting distractions, or the promise of a quicker, easier route to our destination, can easily lure us off course. We have difficulty telling the difference between our true direction and false promises.

One of the most legendary tales in the world, and named a masterpiece of Italian literature, is the story of Pinocchio. Written by Carlo Collodi in 1883, the episodic series, the adventures of Pinocchio, was made into an animated, feature film by Walt Disney in 1940.

In the story, an old Italian woodcarver named Geppetto carves a wooden puppet he names Pinocchio. The puppet is brought to life by a fairy, who tells Pinocchio that he can become a “real boy” if he proves himself to be “brave, truthful, and unselfish.” To help him, the Blue Fairy gives him a “cricket” as his conscience. However, Pinocchio quickly goes off on his own, encountering various unsavory characters who consistently lead him off course and get him into trouble. When he lies about his escapades, his nose grows longer and longer. Finally, Pinocchio with the help of Jiminy Cricket escapes his wayward plight and returns home only to find that Geppetto has gone to sea looking for him and has been since swallowed by a Monstro, a huge ship-eating whale.

When Pinocchio jumps into the sea to rescue his father, he too is swallowed by the whale. Together, they make the whale sneeze, and they are cast into the sea on a small raft. Angry, Monstro smashes the raft. Pinocchio selflessly pulls Geppetto to safety on the shore but sacrifices himself in the process. Geppetto carries Pinocchio's lifeless form back home, where the Blue Fairy revives him and in doing so, turns him into a "real boy."

While the story itself is fictional, like many early stories, it smacks of biblical metaphors. From his time in the "whale" to the change from a false, wooden heart to a flesh and blood, authentic and true heart, Pinocchio echoes what it means to be a true person of God and a true disciple of Jesus, a repentant soul tested and tried by hardship, and a sacrificial spirit.

But instead of a Blue Fairy of course, our scriptures tell us that God has made us this discipleship promise to those who commit authentically to God: The Prophet Ezekiel brings God's message to Israel, "I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. A new heart, I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you" (Ezekiel 36:26).

In our Gospel reading from Matthew 6 for today, the "devil" tempts Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days, offering him an easy way out of the mission he means to undertake. The devil tempts Jesus to use his miraculous powers to

feed himself, to pursue superficial but easy means of power, and even uses the scriptures itself to lure Jesus into testing whether his mission is valid, whether God is truly behind it, and whether God even cares about him. He challenges the sacrifice that Jesus means to make and invites him to take the easy way out. As we know, Jesus declines. But later, Jesus will challenge his own disciple Peter, when he makes a similar suggestion with “get behind me Satan!” For the road of discipleship, Jesus’ discipleship road, is paved with difficulty, challenge, and sometimes pain. To get to the promised land, the people of God had to go through desert, drought, and disaster. To get to everlasting life, Jesus needed to take up a cross and walk a lonely and snare-filled route filled with betrayal and pain.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, real discipleship takes both authenticity and investment, love, and commitment, exactly because it is not easy. Like the story of Isaac as he lay upon the sacrificial rock, Jesus’ story, and his disciples’ story, is a “coming of age story.” Like Isaac, like Pinocchio, like Jesus, we too must be willing to sacrifice our own hearts and lives for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of the gospel, and in this, we are redeemed and saved. In doing so, we become authentic disciples and gain eternal life.

Discipleship challenges our “easy peasy” way of doing discipleship in our churches and lives today. Having gone through the perils and temptations of the “easy road” the disciple, now spends his or her life helping others “to go deep and real” into the true meaning of discipleship. True discipleship means to reject popularity, great-ism, success-ism, and to embrace suffering and even failure in the name of Jesus. Instead, we must open ourselves up to authentic relationship and the willingness to engage in sacrificial giving.

Like “Honest John” the double-faced fox in the Pinocchio story, Easy Peasy Discipleship is the stuff of “liars” and “untruth tellers and serial liars.” The “devil” himself is a person of “lies,” who tells us that we can take an easier way to discipleship, that we don’t need to put out very much. That it can’t be that hard. Just do good things. Don’t do anything terrible. Pursue success in life. Be as great as we can be. Take part in a little mission. Attend worship once a week. Set goals and follow them. Give to the poor. And if we do all those things, we simply can hop aboard, stow ourselves away in a neat little corner of the boat, and ride out our discipleship journey in peace. No sweat. No tears. No effort. No big deal.

So, here we are at this first Sunday of Lent. The road to discipleship is not the easy way out. It requires deep levels of commitment, enduring trust in God’s

mission, the willingness to sacrifice our very lives for the sake of the gospel and making God the centerpiece of our lives. Jesus warns us several times in the scriptures that doing these things may cause us discomfort, grief, and pain. That's why he says to his inner circle, "are you sure you want to drink from my cup?" Jesus' cup is the cup of sacrifice. And Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice. He gave up his very life to cover the sins of all people.

My dear sisters and brothers, here is the challenge for this first week of Lent. The sacrificial heart of Lent means that when we come to drink of the cup of Jesus Body and Blood, we not only join God Him at the table, we join Him in his journey. We scrub the decks, hoist the sails, chart the course, steer the ship in the direction; Jesus wants us to go. And no matter, the storms or the winds or the ferocity of the deepest ocean, we must persevere, trusting in our destination. So, today, as you come forward to the table of the Lord, put your heart in His hands, and as Robert Frost would say, take the "road less traveled." It may not be easy. But the destination will be worth it, and Jesus will never lead you astray. God has made us this discipleship promise to those who commit authentically to God. Remember, A real disciple of Jesus Christ cannot be a stowaway. Amen.

The Prophet Ezekiel has a message from God. “I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh, a new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.” AMEN! (Ezekiel 36:26).