

“Faithful Reps”

“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful”

Our high school’s football team was mediocre at best during my student years, but they were champions in the way they represented North Plainfield High School. When the team boarded a bus for away games, they always dressed in jackets and ties; the coaches always stressed that they were representatives of the school and had to dress and act in a way that would always bring respect to the high school for which they played. They may not have been the best football players, but they were faithful representatives of the school in which all of us took pride.

You don’t have to be an athlete to know the importance of being a faithful representative. People who wear a uniform at work know that they are representing their company in the community and need to present themselves to others in a way that will bring honor to their company. If you are volunteering for a community organization, you are representing that group’s values and mission to others, and your behavior needs to faithfully reflect the purpose and goals that you are embodying to others. In my role as a pastor, I have learned that whether or not I’m in my formal attire, I am representing the church and its mission every day and must behave in a fashion that brings honor to the church and its mission and faithfully witnesses before others to the Gospel that we seek to proclaim in word and deed. When we are called to be representatives, the way we live among others testifies – either positively or negatively – to the group or organization that has entrusted its tasks and mission to us.

When we hear Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels, we need to remember that he is instructing his disciples on what it means to be his followers, and what it will mean when they are sent forth as apostles, Christ’s representatives that will proclaim his message in both word and deed. When Jesus invited persons into discipleship, calling them to *“follow me, and I will make you fish for people”* (Matthew 4:19), their acceptance entailed leaving everything behind – their homes and professions, as well as their former ambitions and priorities – in order to follow the one who *“came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”* (Mark 10:45). They were called by the Lord whose *“thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways ... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* (Isaiah 55:8-9). They were learning what it would mean when Jesus commissions them *“to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). Their lives were no longer their own; all that they would say and do would be a Christ’s representatives, and they needed to learn how they could be faithful to the Lord’s commission to *“make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19).

- “When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person. The grace of his call bursts all bonds of legalism. It is a gracious call, a gracious commandment ... Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Today’s Gospel lesson needs to be understood in its context of Jesus’ teaching his followers what it means to be his representatives, those he will send forth to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

Jesus addresses his words “*to you that listen*” (Luke 6:27), to those who sit at Jesus’ feet knowing that “*you have the words of eternal life.*” (John 6:68). But as eager and willing as these disciples are to learn from the one for who they had left everything behind, they probably weren’t expecting to hear Jesus instruct them to “*love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*” (6:27-28). We might imagine how stunned the disciples were upon hearing these words. How can a person love their enemy, or to do good to those who hate them, or to pray for persons who abuse them? It goes against all conventional wisdom that teaches us to defend ourselves against our enemies and to retaliate against those who would do us harm. It was surely not something they could have expected would be a key element of being disciples of Christ.

- “Perhaps no admonition of Jesus has been more difficult to follow than the command to ‘love your enemies.’ Some men have sincerely felt that its actual practice is not possible. It is easy, they say, to love those who love you, but how can one love those who openly and insidiously seek to defeat you?” – Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies.”

Jesus’ teachings to his followers are not easy to understand or to practice, but they are in keeping with our Lord’s own teachings and how he will live as the Messiah of God. He is the embodiment of the Word of God that has consistently revealed God as one who is “*gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*” (Joel 2:13), the God who “*proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8) and reconciled us to God in Christ “*while we were enemies*” (5:10). If God loved us even though we were God’s enemies, as God’s people we too are called to love our enemies; for that is what it means to “*be children of the Most High; for he is kind to be ungrateful and the wicked.*” (Luke 6:35). The disciples’ relationship to God is based on the axiom that the child is like the parent, so the character of God dictates that we practice a love that is not limited to others’ response to us, for God is kind to the merciful and unmerciful, to the good as well as to the wicked. We are called to be merciful because God is merciful, to “*be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*” (Leviticus 19:2).

- “Christian behavior and relationships are prompted by the God we worship who does not react but acts in love and grace toward all. This is what it means to be children of God.” – Fred Craddock.

A prime example of how Christians can live as faithful representatives of our Lord who loves all people unconditionally is in Jesus instruction that “*if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also*” (6:29). Striking a person on the cheek was a form of insult, a physical expression of cursing or reviling. “*Turning the other cheek*” is an equally dramatic and physical form of retaliation that breaks the cycle of violence and rejects the principle of retaliation, that which seeks “*life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*” (Exodus 21:23-25). When a follower Jesus “turns the other cheek,” that person is witnessing to the truth of the Gospel we embody, a truth that proclaims that love is stronger than hate and life is stronger than death. It is the faithful witness to our Lord who even on the Cross cried out “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*” (Luke 23:34).

- “An overflowing love which seeks nothing in return, *agape* is the love of God operating in the human heart. At this level, we love men not because we like them, nor because their ways appeal to us, nor even because they possess some type of divine spark; we love every man because God loves him. At this level, we love the person who does an evil deed, although we hate the deed that he has done.” – King.

A person who desires to be a disciple of Jesus and a faithful representative of all that our Lord and Saviour lived and taught will seek to pattern their lives on Jesus' command to *"be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."* "Mercy" (*eleos*) is based on the word proclaimed through the prophet Micah that what the Lord desires from God's people is that they *"do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God"* (Micah 6:8). Throughout the New Testament, *eleos* is used most often to describe the attitude that God requires of the disciples of Christ:

- "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." – Matthew 9:13.
- "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others." – Matthew 23:23.
- "'Which of the three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'" – Luke 10:36-37.
- "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." – James 3:17.

Those who first heard Jesus' teaching might have wondered what they had gotten themselves into. When they accepted Jesus' invitation to discipleship, did they understand that it would entail giving up not only all their possessions but also the way they understood the world and the manner in which they interacted with other people? Could they have imagined that they would be called to love their enemies, or to turn the other cheek, or to be merciful to all? Did they realize the high cost that discipleship would entail?

The call to discipleship is a difficult one, but it is a call that is filled with grace, because it is a call to share God's gracious love with others, to let the light of Christ shine before all persons. It may mean sacrificing our own agendas, priorities, and goals so that the will of God might be accomplished through us, but it will also mean that we have the privilege of being the "earthen vessels" that will bear the extraordinary blessings of God to others. It means that we are called to continue to work begun by Christ and his first disciples, that all may know the love of God that is ours in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

- "The mercy of Christians must not seek its own, but must be complete and comprehensive, regarding friend and foe alike, as our Father in heaven does. For where this mercy is absent, faith is also absent." – Martin Luther, 1522.

When the North Plainfield High School football team put on jackets and ties to travel to away games, they knew that they were representing our school and respecting its history and traditions. When we accept Jesus' invitation to discipleship, we clothe ourselves in the attire which witnesses before others that we are God's holy people, called and sent forth to let the light of Christ shine before others in both our words and our deeds:

- "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves in love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the

peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you are called in the one body. And be thankful.” – Colossians 3:12-15.

We who have been called through our baptism into the Body of Christ and sent forth to “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9) know that we are the representatives of our Lord, and that every word and deed of ours represents to others the one who sent us. As one of my mentors once pointed out to me, Christians do not have a choice as to whether or not we will be witnesses, because any one who bears the cross of Christ is a witness. The question is what kind of witness will we be: faithful or unfaithful, building up or tearing down, proclaiming the Word of God or our own thoughts and desires? All of us are representatives of our Lord; it is up to us to make certain that our witness is faithful to the one who has made us into “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people*.”

- “Love your enemies ... *that ye may be children of your Father which is in heaven.*’ We are called to this difficult task in order to realize a unique relationship with God. We are potential sons of God. Through love that potentially becomes actuality. We must love our enemies, because only by loving them can we know God and experience the beauty of his holiness.” – King.

People would have known the team members from my high school no matter how they dressed; but their jackets and ties communicated a message to all that they understood the respect and honor of the school they were representing. By the manner in which we live, through our embodying the gracious love of God that loves all people – even those we find difficult to love – people will know that we are faithful representatives of our Lord and Saviour who has called us to love one another; because “*by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*” (John 13:35). Amen.