

Sermon

October 23, 2016 | Luke 9:10-17 | Peter Lane

Good Morning! Today I am excited to ask you to give money. Or more accurately, excited to ask you to tell us how much money you plan on giving. Or even more accurately, I am excited to invite you to join my wife Erin and me, to join wardens Harold Olivey and Romonda McKinney Bumpus, to join Dan and Christian, to join us in generously pledging your financial support to the 2017 Annual Giving Campaign and the Building our Future Capital Campaign. Opt in. Already there is over \$850,000 pledged to the capital campaign and over \$150,000 pledged to the annual giving campaign. Incredibly good starts, but we have a ways to go. Every gift matters. Be generous. Join us.

I am excited because I believe in SPR. Since 1859, this parish has made the lives of the individuals who have worshipped here more meaningful, more connected, more faithful, helped those people be more fully alive. And since 1859 this parish has been vital to the civic life of Hyde Park/Kenwood, making common life more creative, more beautiful, and more just.

While I am proud to lead a 156-year-old organization, what energizes me most is the faithfulness of you all and the vitality of this parish now. Are we alive? You should have been here last night. Or last Wednesday when we handed out food to feed 88 people or last Sunday when the Open Kitchen folk cooked 50 gallons of stew for the hungry. You should be here on November 6 when the choirs sing Rheinberger and the youth make pancakes. Yes, we are alive. We are striving to mirror the radical hospitality practiced by Jesus.

Or to put it another way, we are following Jesus—different in so many ways from the 5,000 who followed him outside Bethsaida and ended up fed, but with many similarities too.

I try to imagine the stories of some among those 5,000 (actually many thousands more). Some were probably ill, some probably had a parent with cancer, or a child suffering—you know how much you want a sick family member to recover and they had heard Jesus heals. Some were probably deeply religious—trying

to figure out how the words of this Galilean Jew jived with their understanding of God. Some were community people, the type that go where the crowd is and are animated by the energy. Some were probably spouses or teenagers, dragged along by someone else interested in Jesus. I love to think of the diversity of reasons that motivated those thousands to follow Jesus.

Luke highlights a specific group among Jesus' followers, the disciples. They were trying to institutionalize the Jesus movement. Thinking ahead. Being responsible. "We've got to get these folks home!" I like that kind of thinking. I also admire how quickly they pivoted to faith when Jesus challenged them, "You feed them." I wonder what the group dynamics internal to the disciples were like. Did they all immediately agree to do what Jesus said? Or were there 1 or 2 who had to charge the other ones up? I like to note that once their faith was activated, their organizing ideals are not thrown out the window. They calculate how much food is available: two fish and five bread. They split the crowd into groups of 50—that in itself is an amazing feat. They collect the leftovers and count them. Starting with the disciples and including the thousands more, we can imagine so many ways they followed Jesus outside of Bethsaida.

Can I share a vision for how we at SPR might be followers of Jesus? How we might be disciples?

In one sense, being a disciple is preposterous. Think of how even the apostles desert Jesus in Luke. And didn't Kierkegaard say there was not a single Christian in Denmark? Or think of the people you know who are zealous in following their Jesus but advocate for a type society you don't admire. It is why some liberal churches have opted for the Big Welcome. You all come! Church as spa. The Big Welcome is not enough. Institutionally, easy come often leads to easy go. But more than that... We want to be seen, right? We want to be challenged. We understand we have something to confess. We want to experience the divine. And Jesus beckons us to follow. And so we need a vision for what a disciple might look like, how a

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follower of Jesus might sound. Let me throw out two musical analogies. I'll be curious to hear if either of them resonate.

My first idea is discipleship after Tristan. In Wagner's great 1859 Opera *Tristan and Isolde*, there is famous chord right at the beginning—an augmented 4th and augmented 6th or something. It is famous because for many people it doesn't sound right in that spot. It sounds discordant. Not pretty. Not like Puccini's "Nessun dorma." Well, the way some of us follow Jesus doesn't sound like the three tenors singing "Nessun Dorma" either. Some of us follow Jesus in a way that seems discordant to those whose ears were not impacted by Wagner's revolution, to those who love the part of the Art Institute that faces Michigan Avenue but scurry quickly through the Modern Wing. The Tristan chord changed musical history. It seems to me that the service music we are using right now, the Calvin Hampton Gloria, Holy, Holy, Holy, and Christ our Passover are deeply influenced by the revolution the Tristan Chord started. Chromatic scales. Changing time signatures. Our lives might be like those Hampton pieces. Discordant discipleship. It is a vision for SPR. And let me be clear, I don't mean discordant in a negative way. The opening of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* is breathtakingly beautiful.

My second metaphor is from jazz. If people know one thing about jazz, they know it involves improvisation. They might think a skilled player can just sit down at the piano and start. Grab the saxophone and blow. Not true. When Miles Davis recorded *Kind of Blue*, you remember John Coltrane was the Tenor Sax player on that album, they had to first know the chart and only then could they improvise together. The chart. In jazz, the chart gives you the basic harmonic and rhythmic information for a song, gives a roadmap. Just one or two pages for a long song. Davis and Coltrane could improvise so beautifully only once they knew the chart!

We can think of following Jesus as improvisation. But what is our chart? Richard Hooker provides a good answer for Anglicans/Episcopalians. In the 1590s, he laid out the

authorities for a follower of Jesus: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. As a parish, we should make sure we are steeping you in scripture, providing you ways to practice the tradition, engaging you minds, and then you must improvise. Scripture, tradition, reason—makes a pretty good chart. But incomplete, I think.

Hooker left out one really important source of revelation. Thankfully John Wesley added it later—experience. So that is your chart, scripture, tradition, reason, experience. To follow Jesus, improvise on that. Of course, when you add experience to the chart, it opens up the expressions, the improvisational possibilities for Christianity in dramatic ways. In 1960, Ornette Coleman added experience to his jazz chart, so to speak, and started playing something people called Free Jazz which allowed even more space for improv and dissonance. It was spectacular to some, unrecognizable to others. Or to switch away from jazz for a minute, think of the poem that Richard Blanco read at Obama's 2nd inauguration. People said, that is not a poem, it doesn't rhyme. Sure it was a poem. It was an improvisation on the classic forms of poetry. Discipleship as improvisation on the chart of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Each of us following Jesus in ways that, like a good combo, make space for the others to shine as well. That is a vision for SPR.

Some might ask, "If we can't hear the same, familiar melodies from each person how will we know when someone is a follower of Jesus? Who is to judge the discordant disciple or the improvisational follower of Jesus?" We will have to testify to our discipleship, tell our stories. And we'll have to listen to each other's stories and trust one another.

What a blessing this place has been for so many years. I pray it has many generations more of helping people make their song.

Amen!
