

Living into Discipleship

Pentecost 13 (Lectionary 22)

Texts: Jeremiah 15:15-21, Romans 12:9-21 & Matthew 16:21-28
August 28, 2011 Discipleship Is Not an Easy Road to Travel

Outside the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, there is a statue called *Moment of Mercy* that pays tribute to an incredible act of courage and compassion.

The act of valor *Moment of Mercy* commemorates occurred at the Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia, in December of 1862.

With nearly 200,000 combatants, the Battle of Fredericksburg was one of the largest and bloodiest battles of the Civil War.

When the Union army made its main assault against Gen. Stonewall Jackson, nearly 60,000 soldiers attacked Jackson's Confederate forces and threatened to destroy his army's right flank.

But the lack of reinforcements and Jackson's powerful counterattack stymied the Union effort.

Both sides suffered heavy casualties.

By the end of the day, 9,000 soldiers were killed, wounded or MIA, and there was no change in the strategic situation.

In the meantime Gen. Burnside, the commanding officer of the Union forces, ordered a *diversionary* attack against Confederate troops positioned on Marye's Heights.

This diversion produced a similar number of casualties, but, in this case, most of the casualties were suffered by Union troops.

Wave after wave of Union soldiers marched forward trying to take the heights from the Confederate troops that were well entrenched behind a stone wall.

But each wave of Union soldiers was met with devastating rifle and artillery fire

As darkness fell at the end of the first day of the Battle of Fredericksburg, the bodies of the dead and wounded were strewn across the battlefield, and the weather conditions were becoming critical.

Snow started falling and the temperature dropped far below freezing. Making the situation even worse was the suffering of the wounded.

All through the night the heart-wrenching moaning and groaning of wounded and dying soldiers could be heard echoing across the battlefield.

Listening to the cries for help was a terrible ordeal for the troops on both sides.

Finally, Richard Kirkland,
a 19 year old Confederate army sergeant from South Carolina,
could stand it no longer.

He went to his commanding officer, Brig. Gen. Joseph Kershaw,
seeking permission to go to the aid
of the wounded Union troops.

Kershaw was hesitant at first,
but seeing the courage and heart of the young soldier
he relented and granted his permission.

But there was one condition.
He refused to allow Kirkland to wave a white flag to ensure his safety.
The young soldier agreed.

Kirkland left immediately and collected as many canteens as he could carry.
Then he climbed over the stone wall shielding the Confederate forces
and made his way to the fallen Union soldiers.

Shots from the Union positions rang out at first,
but when the Union commander saw what Kirkland was doing,
he yelled to his troops, *Don't shoot that man; he's too brave to die.*

For the next 1½ hours,
the battlefield was silent as Kirkland
moved from one wounded soldier to another.

He gave them water,
and comforted them
as best he could.

On both sides of the battlefield the guns were silenced.
Battle weary soldiers watched in awe
as Kirkland performed his incredible act of mercy.

Finally, after all the canteens were empty, in one last act of mercy
Kirkland covered a dying Union soldier with his own overcoat.
By now, men from both sides were cheering his act of mercy.
After helping those he could,
Kirkland went back behind the Confederate lines
and resumed his duties as a Confederate soldier.

Less than a year later, Kirkland
—who became known as the *Angel of Marye's Heights*—
was killed at the Battle of Chickamauga near Chattanooga, Tennessee.
But his act of bravery and compassion
on that terrible day at Fredericksburg
is a legacy that will live on forever.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul offers us practical insights
into how we are to live our lives as followers of Jesus.

Listen again to what he writes:

(Romans 12: 9-20a, pew Bible, NT p. 169)

*Let love be genuine;
hate what is evil,
hold fast to what is good;
love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another
in showing honor.*

*Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.
Rejoice in hope,
be patient in suffering,
persevere in prayer.
Contribute to the needs of the saints;
extend hospitality to strangers.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
Rejoice with those who rejoice,
weep with those who weep.
Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty,
but associate with the lowly;
do not claim to be wiser than you are.*

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
but take thought for what is noble
in the sight of all.
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all...
if your enemies are hungry, feed them;
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...*

So often, the teaching of Jesus seems so out of touch with the reality of life.

- *Love you enemies...*, says Jesus.
Come on, get real!
- *If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer them your left...*
Sure!
- *Love you neighbor as you love yourself...*
You've got to be kidding, right!

And then there's Paul's take on it:

- *if your enemies are hungry, feed them...*
- *if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...*

Give me a break!

Living like that can get you killed.

To which

Jesus responds:

*If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

The path of discipleship is not an easy road to travel.

We see that with Jeremiah, the prophet, who feels *abandoned by God* because of the hardships he experiences in his ministry.

He is doing everything God has called him to do,
and he is taking a beating for it.

When he complains about it, God answers in a way that
may be different than what Jeremiah expects or wants.

Instead of promising Jeremiah things will get better
—or that the road will become easier—

God simply says,

I am with you to save you and deliver you... (repeat)

That's the promise of God
to which we cling.

That—and that alone—is the promise of God
that gives us hope.

Like Peter, most of us are erratic in our discipleship.

On our good days, we are the foundation upon which Jesus builds his church.

On most other days, Jesus is saying to us, *Get behind me Satan.*

The good news is that even though we are not perfect

—even though we fall short of God's expectation for our lives—
we are forgiven.

We may give up on God, but God never gives up on us.

The promise of God

—the assurance that God is with us and that we are a forgiven people—

offers us the inspiration
and gives us the courage

to take heart

and live the life of loving discipleship

Jesus calls us to live.

We may never carry out

as dramatic an act of compassion

as Kirkland's *moment of mercy*.

We may never do something so unbelievably bold

the world stops and watches

in awed silence.

But we can be inspired to share small acts of compassion and love

that make a world of difference

in the lives of the people we touch.

And we can rejoice

as we see how these acts of love

bless them—and bless us—as well.

