

Sermon: Year A, III Epiphany

Texts: Isaiah 42:2-7

I Corinthians 1:10-17

Matthew 4:12-23

A couple of years ago, the editors of Time magazine awarded Stanley Hauerwas the title of America's most influential theologian. To my knowledge, no one challenged their assessment. It might interest you to know that he began his church life as a Mennonite, became a Methodist, but, just lately, has found his home in the Episcopal Church. Hauerwas is prolific, tireless, and, almost unfailingly, provocative. He is also, for a theologian, unusually succinct. While many in his guild feel compelled to write vast tomes that labor on and on for thousands of pages, Hauerwas has yet to produce anything longer than an essay on any given topic. His efforts are more arthroscopic –small incisions that, nonetheless, render dramatic results. Thus his readers don't have to spend weeks recovering from a lot of heavy lifting. They can quickly get on their feet and find that their capacity for faithful movement has been wonderfully freed.

In some recent comments made in reference to the passage we have just heard from Matthew's Gospel, Hauerwas stayed true to this form. In essence, he said, we really only need to keep two words and one distinction in mind. Matthew presents us with disciples and with admirers, and each responded to Jesus in very different ways. And if we can be clear about this very difference, then most of our work will be done.

Matthew, he also noted, has very little complimentary to say about the disciples that Jesus called. They started well, but immediately thereafter, almost everything went awry. We tend to forget this, especially when drawing up sermons, and we freeze the first disciples in this initial moment of decision and courage. God beckons, and they, without delay and without question, show themselves willing to drop everything and follow. Simon and Andrew, James and John, leave their nets, their boats, their family, and all the things that previously defined their lives, and with impressive abruptness they walk away. And we, in turn, with similar abruptness, can piously superimpose on this one moment many of the highest ideals that we expect discipleship to consist of, such absolute trust, conviction, and compliance that no sacrifice would be considered too great. This, then, is declared the gold standard against which all of us will be measured. Our faith, many contend, should show the same resolve and dedication, discipleship that borders on zealotry.

But this isn't Matthew's testimony if you read the entire Gospel, (and being a good Episcopalian I can add that this isn't a legitimate *interpretation* of the text either). Jesus' own disciples were no heroes. In many ways, they were just plain dolts. About this, Matthew is unsparing in his criticism. The twelve may well have left their nets, but, all too soon, Jesus may well have wondered why they did, for throughout Jesus' ministry, they seemed to be last and least in understanding what was transpiring. The Pharisees and scribes certainly knew what was at stake. They could see how threatening Jesus was to the institutions and power they so valued. They set out to publicly embarrass and discredit him, and when this did not work, they plotted his assassination. They didn't suffer the same dimness in perception. In comparison, the disciples were perpetually lost and confused, even when they were given the repeated privilege of special, private instruction and enjoyed uninterrupted access to Jesus. Still, they never rose above being

befuddled. This is the long and constant witness of Matthew's Gospel, and this, Hauerwas suggests, is actually the true character of discipleship, the very discipleship to which we, as the church, are called.

If this is the case, the better option might be to be an admirer rather than a disciple. Admiration seems so much more complimentary and noble. Esteem is a proud word in our public vocabulary, and Matthew's Gospel has no lack of admirers chasing after Jesus. They are the masses, the tens and hundreds and sometimes thousands who reportedly sought Jesus out, day after day, as he came by. Some brought their sick. Some inquired after wisdom. Some wanted revolution. Others were just wildly curious. But for all of the clamoring crowds, in that moment of encounter, Jesus was their hero, and they were adoring fans. Proximity to him was enthralling, and people pressed in on him to get their own wishes fulfilled. Jesus was a full-fledged celebrity, on to whom many projected their deepest dreams and desires. He was their Messiah. He would do for them what was needed and, quite possibly, he might also do what was wanted.

This, as Stanley Hauerwas is so adept at pointing out, is often exactly the kind of god we imagine today and the kind of relationship we prefer to have with the divine – something mutually beneficial, mutually profitable and flattering, a god and a relationship that mirrors our American character. In our modern world, so emphatically independent, admiration is an admirable stance. It's not blinded by commitment. It's a measure taken from a reasonable distance, objective and discerning. And under such informed scrutiny, Jesus then is honored as a good teacher, an excellent mentor and role model, a prophet of peace and reconciliation who boldly took personal risks on behalf of others. By his own unflagging zeal for the good, we may determine that he deserves our admiration, and, because of our admiration, some degree of emulation. This is the faith that many profess – well intentioned, balanced, and more enlightened than discipleship.

Matthew's Gospel, however, makes clear one other very significant aspect of admiration. It can disappear in an instant, and when it falls away, it can easily descend into indifference or hatred instead. By the end of his story, all the voices that sang so many praises had turned either to silence or to shouts of violence. Celebrity is fragile, and all that was so highly touted, fell to nothing. The hopes and expectations, once so vibrant, die in crucifixion, and the admirers become taunters. For the crowds in Matthew's Gospel, there is no resurrection. Their role ends at the grave – as does the faith of many admirers in our day too.

But this was not the case for Jesus' disciples. In spite of all their bumbling, the resurrection was revealed to them, which, in turn, they didn't understand any better than anything else that they had experienced. But, in its way, this is the point, which reframes our own perception of what disciples are and what discipleship should be. They aren't those who possess the answers about God and life and death, who then, in turn, can be diligent in saving the world by means of them. Disciples aren't the chosen few who are dead certain in their convictions and completely clear in their faith. Matthew, rather, renders the disciples in a different light. They are those who, by the end of the story, have space to admit, without hesitation, that God's ways are and remain mysterious. They have witnessed them enough to have a message, but they don't hold the strings. The privilege and responsibility of discipleship, then, is to stand as close as possible to Jesus, even when God in this form and love of this kind can't be explained, but leaves us speechless and befuddled in the same manner as the original twelve. Following means following, not

leading from a position of strength, standing above others, but living always very near to what in Jesus seems both inexplicable yet true, outrageous and yet, deeply right. Discipleship is personally engaging in this dynamic messiness, which, sometimes, is exquisite and, sometimes, is only exasperating, but always it cleaves to God who, in incarnate form, showed most explicitly who God is and what love and faith and hope consist of, well beyond the neatness of systems, traditions, and a thousand dogmatic formulations.

So it is yours to decide, whether you wish to be hot like a zealot or cool like an admirer or entwined in the humble passions of discipleship, where the love of God and love for others never ceases to overwhelm and surprise. A couple of words are all you need.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen