

Discerning the path of Discipleship
Matt 21:28-31, Luke 14:24-35

Brothers and sisters in Christ, while we expect to hear from the Lord each Sunday as we gather together for worship – this morning that expectation is, and should be, a bit higher than usual.

Because over the past five months we have been considering how Valleyview might best respond to the Syrian refugee crisis which gained the world's attention late last summer.

As you know, hundreds of thousands of Syrian people have fled the danger and destruction of the ongoing civil war in their country and have ended up as refugees in neighboring countries...

Since the start of this refugee crisis, humanitarian organizations, relief agencies and governments have been working to respond to this crisis with their efforts going largely unnoticed by the global community until the refugees began to

attempt – en mass – to cross the Mediterranean and enter into Europe via Greece.

Countless numbers of people drowned while attempting to make this crossing, but it was largely seen as a local issue for southern European nations to respond to.

Until the media got ahold of a picture of a young boy who had drowned while his family was attempting to flee across the Mediterranean.

The photo went viral and proved to be the sentimental tipping point for the North American public, and it was this sentiment which raised the issue for us here at Valleyview and has us considering and reflecting on what we should do in response.

Now you might think that responding to this situation is a straightforward matter, but it's not.

First of all – we need to determine exactly what we are responding to.

Are we simply responding to what we feel? Provoked by seeing terrible images and hearing the descriptions of the awful conditions and desperate situation which Syrian refugees in Europe are facing – we react by wanting to do something to fix that situation, and fix our feelings...

And I bring this issue up friends as part of our discerning process this morning because the truth is this tragic situation was going on long before that photo of a drowned boy on a beach went viral – but there was no outcry....

In fact there were many horrific things going on in many parts of the world prior to that photo which have continued to this day – and so as part of our discernment process we have to ask ourselves “why are we wrestling with this issue and not some other issue?”

Because brothers and sisters in Christ, as disciples of Jesus we do not want the undertow of reactionary public opinion and sentiment to be the deciding factor for our actions and determining what we do in the name of the Lord.

And to that end it is helpful to listen to our Lord’s command in Matthew 6:1 *“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”*

I have to say friends, that there is a great deal of societal pressure around this issue to respond and do something about it – because we are concerned about what others see or don’t see us doing and how they will judge us accordingly – just look at how it became an election issue.

And that leads of course to the temptation to respond to this issue for matters of good publicity – and if that is why we respond, then that will be our reward.

We will have our good publicity in the community, we will have our neighbors view us positively, and we will have calmed our disturbed souls by having done something about things – that will be our reward.

But as followers of Jesus Christ it must be our Lord who decides what course of action we take and how we respond to what goes on in the world around us – not our feelings, or public reaction or opinion.

After all, we are His body, and He is our Head, and what the Head decides and determines... the Body does.

And secondly - is that truly the reward we really want? As Spirit-filled, Christ followers shouldn't our primary desire be to first and foremost please our heavenly father, so that he says to us *"Well done good and faithful servants!" (Matt 25:23)*

So in light of this then brothers and sisters, the first question we want to ask of our Lord in this situation is "Lord what situation would you have us respond to?"

Please show us if you would have us help a refugee family who has been waiting in UN Camps even before this whole thing hit the media, or perhaps you would rather have us respond

to that need and send help for the refugees who are in Europe – in the middle of winter...

Or Lord, is it better for us to focus our attention locally in Calgary, and get involved with those who are helping to settle the Syrian refugees which our Federal gov't has committed to bringing into Canada?

And as our Lord makes this direction clear to us, in our time of listening this morning friends, we are released from the tyranny of sentiment and reactionary response with regards to this issue – we can simply be obedient to what our Lord would have us do.

Friends – the good news is that Jesus bears the weight of all the world's problems, and challenges and issues, on his shoulders, not us.

He is the sovereign Lord of Lords and King of Kings and He will direct the different parts of his Body to respond to various needs across this world – we can trust that.

We don't have to do it all – we just need to do what He commands us to do. So in that sense it is true that Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light. (Matt 11:30)

But friends there is more that Jesus says to us as that we must reflect on as we listen for what He is calling us - together - as his body at Valleyview to do.

First, and very straightforward in what it says, is the parable of the two sons from Matthew 21:28-32.

A man asks both of his sons to go and work in his vineyard, one says yes! But then doesn't follow through, the other one says no! but then changes his mind and does what his father had asked him to do.

So congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ – which son will we be? Hopefully neither right...

This morning - as we hear what our Lord is telling us, we want to respond with a yes! And then we want to follow through

with obedience, and the commitment, that is needed to see our response through the end.

It does no-one any good to respond positively this morning and say yes to the idea of responding to the refugee situation but then not keep that commitment when the time comes around to do what we said we would do – not to mention that we are disobeying our Lord.

So, I know you all want to say Yes! And then follow through – even if other important things come up like they always seem to do.

And that leads into the other thing we need to consider as we prepare to listen for our Lord's directions this morning – we need to determine if we have the resources to respond as our Lord will instruct us to.

So, we heard our Lord's teaching from Luke 14:28-32 where he speaks about counting the cost for a building project before you start, so that you don't fail to complete the project

because you have run out of money... He speaks about making sure that you have enough soldiers in your army in order to defeat an enemy army – so that you are not humiliated in defeat.

And so typically when we hear these examples about carefully considering our resources before we commit to something we think about the types of resources mentioned in these illustrations - money, manpower and so on.

And to be sure there is wisdom in looking at those things. Proverbs 20:25 says *“It is a trap to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider one’s vows.”*

So friends – as we listen for what the Lord is calling us to do this morning, something that your minister wants you to consider is the time commitment that comes with the response.

I know you as a congregation, brothers and sisters, and I know that we are very busy people with very full schedules and

many important commitments, largely due to the fact that God has blessed us with stewardship responsibilities in our families, in our work and in our communities.

And responding to the refugee situation is a serious calling – it’s not something we can say we’ll help out with and then realize that we have family and work responsibilities which prevent us from following through with helping to sponsor and settle a family.

So - consider the fact that you will likely need to give a few hours each week towards this and that a sponsorship commitment is made for a year.

That means we are committed to this through Easter and Spring break... through summer vacation... through the busy time of getting back into the fall routine and going back to school... through the busy fall season... through Christmas vacation and into 2017.

There will be a family that will need you to spend time with them and help them find work, find housing, furnishing their house, learn to use the transit system, how to grocery shop, getting their children set up in a school, where to find fun things to do???

Now I say “I want you to consider this” because this is my pragmatic side speaking here – I don’t want us to take on something that we’re not ALL able to handle together and then the responsibility ends up falling on the committed few who will only end up resenting the whole situation.

And this is why Jesus’ words here about counting the cost before you start came to mind for this message.

However... as I studied this passage I realized that we look at the resources that Jesus is asking us to consider all wrong.

The counting and estimating part is right, but it’s not money and manpower or even time which Jesus wants us to count and consider if we have enough of in order to follow him as

disciples – both back then, and now with responding to refugees.

What Jesus is telling us that we need to have to follow him is first; the ability to put Jesus’ and his commands before our family and our own needs; second- the realization that Jesus goes to the cross to suffer and die; and third- the ability to surrender anything we have to Jesus and his commands when he requires it of us.

And then I think, we need to be able to do this all without grumbling and complaining, as Paul writes in Philippians 2:14

So really friends, what Jesus - and not me - is asking us to consider this morning is whether we have enough of these three specific resources to follow through on what He will ask us to do.

If we do then time, money, manpower will be no issue at all.

Now the other thing to consider this morning friends - is that if it be true that we lack sufficient discipleship resources, then perhaps from Jesus' perspective, this whole refugee situation is really more about us than it is about them.

Remember – Jesus has got the whole world in his hands.

If we balk and don't end up going to work in the Vineyard, even though we may have initially said yes – Jesus can easily raise up someone else to do his work for him and take care of the refugees.

But where does that leave us? Are we truly short of the resources that we need to follow Jesus as his disciples?

And that kind of takes us back to last week's message about initially growing in Godliness – type A growth and then being able to continue to train for Godliness to move on towards maturity – type B growth.

So perhaps for us this is an opportunity to start training and for Jesus to help us start to gain more and more of the resources that we need to mature as his disciples.

When you begin to train physically – especially if you are out of shape and don't have the resources of flexibility, strength, and endurance needed for rigorous training – you don't say oh too bad, guess I won't train.

No, instead you look at how you can increase your flexibility, strength, and endurance – and you do that by starting small and building up.

You start with doing 10 minutes of cardio on the treadmill for a couple weeks and you will build up endurance that will allow you to then do 30 minutes...

You start by lifting 5lb dumbbells for your arm exercises and after a month you will build up your strength to start lifting 15lb dumbbells.

In the same way brothers and sisters, we need to recognize that in what Christ calls us to do in response to the refugee crisis may simply be about putting him before family and personal needs in a small way so that we grow in our ability to do that...

It may be about experiencing the cross of Christ in a small way so that we grow in our ability to suffer and die to ourselves more...

It is the chance to give up a small part of what we steward so that we are able to give up more later on...

It is a chance to take a small step in our growth towards becoming mature disciples so that we are able to take bigger steps later on as our Lord has need of us – as our Lord works out the Father’s plan for his return to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to this earth.

So it’s not about us, it’s not about us making a difference – it’s about following Jesus to maturity and being obedient participants in His plan to renew ALL things.

Whatever Jesus calls us to do this morning – those actions are to be a witness and a proclamation that one day – when He returns - there will be no more wars or disasters which produce refugees.

Because our Lord has taken upon himself the sin of ALL humanity – including our own – and put it to death on the cross, paid the price for how it violates our Covenant with God, and has graciously given us the forgiveness and mercy we need to find refuge and peace in himself, and therefore in the New Heavens and Earth.

So, congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ – or Lord calls us as his disciples to make the sacrifice and pay the price to offer refuge and mercy to those who need it – as a proclamation and a witness to the truth of what has become a reality in our lives and can become a reality in their lives as well.

Lord Jesus – we ask for your direction this morning in how to respond.

We who have ears, let us listen.

Amen.

Friends – as we move into a time of listening and discernment now, I want to refer you to the handout in the bulletin which has three options on it which are viable options for response.

This morning we are seeking to discern which option the Lord would have us focus on.

I don't want to have this become a question period – but I will take a few brief questions on the different options....

Ok at this point want to ask the band to come up to sing and play that song As we Gather – because that is our prayer, that as we gather right now that the Holy Spirit would move among us and reveal to us together what our Lord Jesus is directing us to do.

So I invite you to either prayer quietly in reflection by yourself, or if you want to gather with a few people around you and pray together

And in this time of prayer and singing we want to listen for Jesus – not for our own preferences or other's opinions and I've included the discernment tests that we've learned from Dunamis on the insert to help you in this time.

Then when I ask you to, please indicate on your insert what you are called to pursue in response and we will have the ushers collect those inserts and myself and Session will see what emerges from this time of listening.

Let's spend some time listening....