

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

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Matthew 16: 21-27

“The Boundary of Commitment”

A couple of weeks ago, we talked about the parable of the mustard seed. We saw how Jesus' message was not to see a mustard seed as only a tiny little thing, but to realize that when it flourishes it can become a blessing to all. That is the same with Kingdom of Heaven. The seeds may seem small, but something may grow out of them that will be a blessing to all. Last time, we talked about how sweet it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity. In order for the Kingdom of Heaven to grow and for people to live together in unity, God calls us to help make the Kingdom happen.

Today, we are going to look at what it means to be a disciple? And what may be stopping us from being a faithful disciple of Christ?

According to a research done by the Barna's group, which works on statistics of Christianity. In year 2009, about 66 percent of the adult populations in United States are being classified as Casual Christians. According to Barna's interpretation, Causal Christians are those Christians who claim that they are Christians because they feel religious, but do not have a sense of commitment to their faith. For them, Christianity is low-risk and non-demanding.

To be a good Christian, in their view, it can be enough to just be a nice human being, a family person, and a reliable employee. They are not willing to defend or proclaim publicly defended or proclaimed their faith, but they think that their faith is genuine, realistic and practical. Their faith is one into which they do not feel compelled to heavily invest themselves. Their spirituality is driven by a desire for a pleasant and peaceful existence. In other words, their faith is a comfortable faith, limited by what is pleasant and agreeable. They have set a boundary or comfort zone to their faith.

"Are these people true Christians?" My answer is, 'we are in no position to judge them, but their status of Christian faith is at risk.' These so called Casual Christians have a common problem; they have a limit to their commitment and involvement when it comes to discipleship. A boundary which will not let them go further as a disciple of Jesus. Their commitment is confined to a safety zone, where they know themselves secure and protected. They do not want to be vulnerable. I believe today's reading from the gospel tells us that this kind of faith is not the way of Jesus.

Jesus has been with his disciples for three years. He has now come to the moment in his ministry where he declares that he will be captured, tortured, killed and raised from the dead. Just before this, Simon Peter has confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of the living God. But now, Peter hears that Jesus is going to suffer and die.

How can this happen to Jesus? He takes Jesus aside and starts to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' Jesus knows that it is Satan's voice that he is hearing, through Peter's mouth trying to seduce him away from his call, from going to the cross. That's why Jesus turned and spoke to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan!'

But we cannot just blame Satan alone; actually, Peter also has a part in his statement. In Peter's

mind, Jesus is the one who has walked on water, the one who healed the sick by a single touch, the one who can cast out a demon from the Canaanite woman's daughter and Jesus is the one who fed thousands of people with a few loafs and fish.

How come he cannot defeat the chief priests and scribes now? How come he surrenders himself to injustice? In 'Peter's mind, there are many ways that Jesus can change this corrupted world. He does not need to sacrifice himself this way. Peter has a limited view of how far Jesus' commitment should go. Jesus can sacrifice, but not his life. Actually, this kind of mindset also stops many Christians following in Jesus' footsteps today. We are willing to commit or sacrifice but, it needs to be within our comfort zone. We may want to commit ourselves to Bible study or some church ministries, but there is never a good time to start.

Jesus knew that Peter did not understand the heart of the Jesus' plan, Jesus does not make partial sacrifice only; he is going to sacrifice his life without reserve or boundary. He is totally committed. So, Jesus tells his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'

Jesus has denied himself for the sake of loving us. Likewise, he wants us to deny ourselves for the sake of loving him. As you know, it is hard to love without sacrifice. But the point is how far are we willing to sacrifice? Then, Jesus spoke to the entire little group of disciples, Jesus asked his disciples to deny themselves and take up their cross which is inevitable.

To deny oneself means to give up all reliance on whatever you are, and depend for salvation on God alone. To take up our cross does not mean that we need to be nailed on the cross to fulfill that command. To take up one's cross refers to the cross that is suffered because of union with Christ and obedience to him. The fulfillment of an authentic discipleship is the cross we bear on earth.

Each disciple has their own unique cross to bear. Each cross can be different from another, some may seem easier, others may seem harder. Taking up one's cross means that you identify with Jesus to the point of suffering and rejection, and perhaps even death. It is a voluntary response to the calling of Jesus.

Today, may be, for the sake of Christ, to reconcile with your long lost family is your cross. Or, may be to proclaim your faith among your unbelieving friends is your cross. Or, may be to sacrifice your time and money for the ministry of the church is your cross. To many of us, if we have a close relation with Christ, we would know our cross already. It is just a matter of answering to the calling. To others, may be you have the heart to serve God and still not having enough faith to do it, please come to the ministers and pray about it.

So, to answer the former questions:

What does it mean to be a disciple? The answer is, being a disciple means we do what Christ did, we take up our cross to follow him. Then, **what stops us from serving him with our full potential?** It is our unwillingness to step out of our comfort zone because of all sorts of reasons. So, when those excuses come to our mind, try to rebuke it by saying to 'Satan, Get behind me! You are a stumbling-block to me; I will set my mind on divine things not on human things.'

When we say we are followers of Jesus, it means we follow the way of Jesus. But we need to cross our comfort zone to do that, otherwise our commitment will be very limited. It is worth for everyone of us to extend the boundary of our commitment to Christ. For Jesus said, *'the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.'*

Jesus has promised to reward us in the ages to come as well as the present.

Last month, I went to Vanuatu for a Beach mission. We met a young lady who was an optometrist from Taiwan. She told us that she so loves the local people that she has been committing two months every year to come to this island to teach the locals about eye care. She came here by herself, on her own expense because she was willing to move out of her comfort zone. I am sure that what she did for the people will glorify God and she will be rewarded at the end times as Jesus said.

Finally, some of us may think that they are too old for any more commitment. You know, bearing the cross of Christ is necessary to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, but there are many ways in which we can do that, and it does not necessarily mean that we have to sacrifice our life. Being a true follower of Jesus refers to our 'being' more than our 'doing'. A true follower of Jesus is the one who is willing to care, to love and to proclaim. It may not be as hard as we first thought. Say for example, it is not hard for us to pray for someone in need or to care for someone who is sick or weak. Or even, to cheer up your hardworking church leaders and friends. It is just a commitment of your time and energy to someone else.

If you want to be a true follower of Jesus, you need to take a step forward in faith and cross your boundary for Christ. Jesus has committed his life for us, so that we may be healed in his suffering. Now is the time for us to be united with Christ in our commitment. Let the Holy Spirit speak to us in our prayer and I am sure that everyone of us is able to find our own cross safely and joyfully in Jesus.

Amen.