Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 25, 2017

Neal MacPherson

A DISCIPLE COMMUNITY Jeremiah 20:7–13

Psalm 69:7–18

Romans 6:1b–11

Matthew 10:24–39

Let’s begin by turning to those difficult words of Jesus, which he spoke to his followers:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace

to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but

a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,

and a daughter against her mother,

and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-

law;

and one’s foes will be members of one’s own

household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is

not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or

daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and

whoever does not take up the cross and follow

me is not worthy of me. Those who find their

life will lose it, and those who lose their life for

my sake will find it.

—Matthew 10:34–39

What are we to make of these words? Behind these difficult words lies the truth that if the Gospel of Jesus Christ is brought to bear of the life of the world in an uncompromising way, division will result, the kind of division that a sword brings when it is used to separate and cut in two. The Gospel is not a benign Gospel. The Gospel is not all sweetness and light. When the justice and love of God’s realm confronts injustice and hatred in our world, it will bring division among those who hear it. The followers of Jesus, however, must hold fast to the Gospel as they carry it into the world, even if means that they will have to take up the cross. Such is the cost of discipleship.

We really need to understand that these difficult words of Jesus rang true for those for whom the Gospel of Matthew was written. By the time this Gospel was written, the early Christian community had begun to encounter opposition and persecution in the society in which it existed. Christians were being expelled from the synagogues. They were being brought before political authorities and charged with sedition. They were being killed. They were being driven underground. Even families were being torn apart as a result of the decision to follow Jesus.

We do not face the kind of situation those early followers of Jesus faced. Yet, more and more we are beginning to sense that following Jesus in our own day could well become more and more difficult and costly because of what is happening in our society.

Perhaps from our Gospel reading, you will recall these words of Jesus: “So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” (Matthew 10:26) Perhaps we can be grateful that because of the 2016 President Election and all that has followed, what has been covered up is becoming known. What has been revealed is that there has been a radical shift in our society. From the time when citizens were encouraged to work together for the common good, when safety nets protecting the lives of the poor and vulnerable were established, when neighbors knew and cared for one another, when children were encouraged to actually play with one another, from that time we have become a society in which individualism and selfishness rule, when we are not encouraged to take care of one another (witness the proposed health bill which allows me to buy insurance to cover only my own health needs and not the health needs of others), when we no longer work together for the common good, when the fear of the immigrant and stranger has become the norm, when everyone is urged to purchase a weapon for self-protection.

These trends are now becoming more and more evident to all who care to look and listen. And the good thing about it is that the church now has the opportunity to discover what the Gospel can mean in such a society. No longer can the church accommodate itself to the ways of the world. Now, it may be that God in Christ is calling the church to become a community of disciples all over again, to be a community willing to be engaged in the struggle for justice and peace, as the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith declares. The time may be coming, and perhaps already is, when we will be asked to accept the cost of discipleship.

Yet, there is also a joy to be found in faithful discipleship. This is the joy that comes when we leave our hurts and grievances behind and come together in a shared vision of that new world to which God calls us and when we commit ourselves to a common witness and mission. This is the joy that comes when we sense that whatever may be in store for us, God will be with us and for us. God who does not look aside when a sparrow falls and who knows the number of hairs on our heads (God has an easier time counting what hair I have left) is a God who will not abandon us when the going gets difficult. There is a joy to be found in faithful discipleship.

The Gospel we proclaim and practice may bring division in the world, but among us there must be no division. We are to love one another, pray for one another, forgive one another, and care for one another. Some churches become so engaged in causes of social justice that their members forget to care for one another. Such churches will find it impossible to keep their church doors open.

Today, in the life of our church, we are just about to celebrate the sacrament of baptism and the reception of new members. Baptism is the way we enter the community of the church. Little children who are baptized are brought into the life of the church through the promises made by their parents. Later they will be given the opportunity to confirm their baptisms and become members of a particular community of faith. Adults who are baptized are brought into the membership of the church by virtue of their confession of faith.

Baptism means many things. To be baptized is to baptized into Christ Jesus, his death and resurrection, as Paul declares in his letter to the Romans. When baptism is by immersion this meaning is clearer. We are buried in water and then rise again. When we are sprinkled, the symbolism is less obvious but the meaning is the same. We are brought into the life of Christ Jesus. We take on the life of One who was often called Beelzebul (a demon), who bore the cost of faithfulness, who made his way to a cross. Jesus followed in the footsteps of the prophet Jeremiah who was a laughingstock in the midst of the people he served, and we are called to follow in Jesus’s footsteps. We are to bear both the cost and joy of discipleship.

But baptism also brings us into the life of the church. And then the question is: what is the church into which we are baptized?

Is the church an organization for the religious or a disciple

community? Is the church ruled by Roberts Rules of Order or a church governed by prayer and the leading of the Holy Spirit? Is the church member centered or Christ centered? Is the church withdrawn from the world or a community engaged in mission? Is the church a community that plays it safe or a community willing to accept both the cost and joy of discipleship?

I trust that Nu‘uanu is more and more becoming a disciple community governed by prayer and the leading of the Holy Spirit, a community centered in Christ, a community of the faithful whose mission it is to bear witness in word and in deed to the truth of the Gospel and the realm of God’s peace and justice.

Into this disciple community we are becoming by the grace of God, into God’s beloved Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, we welcome our new members today with great joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.