

September 18, 2016 “Partnering With God Today” Matthew 8:18-22

The heading in our pew Bibles for this passage in Matthew 8 is, “The cost of following Jesus.” It is about discipleship. It is about what we have come to call, being a Christian. It can rightly also be called entering into partnership with God. All of those phrases, make it plain to those of us who have an interest in these things, that it is serious stuff. Important business. To a great extent we are talking about eternal destiny. I would say, it is for the local church, the primary issue of our times. Churches will fail and close, or they will survive and continue beyond this current era, based, on no other issue, than how its people answer the bell on this question.

I have seen what you and I would call large, prosperous city churches reduced to a fraction of their former size and reach the edge of financial difficulty in the last 10 years. It is not a Presbyterian problem, it is a Christian problem affecting most denominations. And if we have the courage and the faith to ask the question “How did it come to this?” We arrive at the issues raised so clearly and plainly in Matthew 8:18-22. How seriously do we take this matter, that what is involved in the vigour or lack thereof in local churches has to do with one thing. And that one thing is do we understand it is about the nature of our partnership with the Lord God Almighty, revealed in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, who is with us in the person and power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, you might react to that last statement with a “slow down”! Just a minute! You said a whole lot of things in that last sentence. I did. But that bouquet of things boils down to this. How seriously do we take the fact that we have entered into a partnership with God. This little portion of Matthew's Gospel in

chapter 8 makes plain it is not a new issue. It is an issue as old as discipleship with Jesus. People wanted in. They said they wanted in. Jesus described the cost of discipleship. And some of those who claimed they wanted to walk with Jesus and submit themselves to His Lordship clearly...had to make a choice...in or out. And Jesus did not make it easy.

As Matthew described the scene, there was a crowd around him. I will tell you it was a great crowd. This is in Galilee. Galilee is the area in Israel where Jesus ministry took off and where our Lord had what we are tempted to call, HIS greatest success. Crowds came to hear HIM. Crowds came to see HIM. HE was a celebrity all of a sudden. And we miss part of that celebrity if we only think it had to do with HIS ability to communicate. They brought their sick friends and relatives to HIM, people who were in danger of dying. Loved ones who could not support themselves, because of their physical limitations...blindness, shriveled limbs, life limiting diseases, that guaranteed poverty and eventual death. Jesus healed them. There was an expectation that Jesus could change everything. He could heal the sick. He could make the poor prosper. People wanted to see what Jesus would do next.

That is the context of Matthew 8. And they wanted to see as they came to Jesus, what God would do next. Miracles? Yes. Signs of the Kingdom of God? Yes. Wonders that revealed Messiahship? Yes. All of the above and more. To be with these crowds, was to enter into a Partnering with God at the feet of Jesus whom they are coming to believe must be...must be...the Christ of God.

The first thing Matthew tells us about this crowd and the conditions that day is that Jesus upped the anti. HE did not make it easy. He made it more difficult. The crowd is there. All Jesus has to

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do is perform. Teach. Heal. Whatever. The first thing he does is get in a boat and cross the sea of Galilee. He crossed to the other side of the lake. The sea of Galilee is about a mile across. It is 16 miles long. There are bigger lakes in cottage country to the north of us. And I am not talking about any of the Great Lakes. The question is who is going to get into a boat and follow. Even more so as most would not have a boat at their disposal, who is going to make the journey around the shore. Jesus does not make it easy for us to follow HIM. He makes it plain that the price of discipleship will be high. It requires a commitment. You have to be willing to pay the price. And the price involves effort, the price involves time, the price involves prioritizing following Jesus above other things.

Too often we get the impression that the Scribes and Pharisees, the priest class, were disinterested in Jesus ministry. At the very least opposed to HIM and all HE stood for. Matthew reminds us that was not always the case. A teacher of the law, a Priest of Israel, came to Jesus just after he has made the announcement to move the meeting to the other side of the sea of Galilee and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." Here is how the KJV says that, "Master, I will follow you whithersoever thou goest." It is marvelous. The speaker is a Scribe, a teacher of the Law...Torah...Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. He is a priest of Israel. He is saying to Jesus....you are my rabbi. I will bind myself to you. What you say to do, I will do. I will do whatever it takes to get to the other side of this lake. I am yours to command.

You would expect, I would anticipate, that the reaction of Jesus would be...good man...big smile. We need more like you! Instead what does HE say to the eager teacher of the Law? Foxes

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have holes. Birds have nests. The Son of Man, The Messiah who I am, has nowhere to lay HIS head. Translation: Be careful of what you ask for. I do not have a home...I'm homeless. Do this...follow me wherever I go...and you cannot expect to have more than I have. This could cost you your life, as it will cost me mine.

And Jesus is not mean. He loved and loves people more than anyone else you can name. But he looks this teacher of Bible in the eye and says, take a cold shower. You have not begun to figure out how hard this could be to do. Consider the lack of security that this journey could involve. Partnering with God is a tough journey. A costly journey. A faith journey. The question is, how much are you willing to risk? And Matthew never tells us what the Bible teacher did. The implication is that he may indeed have said to himself if not to Jesus...and God always knows what you say to yourself...the secrets...the implication is that he may indeed I have said...I had better think about this for a while.

It is not a coincidence that most of those who stuck with Jesus had very little to lose. Partnering with God is a costly business. What is happening in North American Churches is just this. We are being shown how costly it can be to function in a society and a culture that is not supportive of following Jesus. It is pointless to complain. It is the way of the world. And we have been invited to be partners with God in a world that does not care about God, God's Word, or even His existence.

Notice the next bit. This involves another disciple. Another follower of Jesus. A member of that crowd that is responding to crossing the lake or travelling around it on shore to "follow Jesus". To hear Jesus. To see what Jesus does, in order to do

it. This disciple was eager to follow Jesus as was the other. But there has been a family crisis. Someone of significance to the family of this disciple has died. The request of this disciple is so understandable. “Master, just let me go and bury my father.” He is my Dad. He has died. There is going to be a funeral. I won't take longer than I have to. I will be back. Permission please to go.

But Jesus told him, “Follow me. Let the dead bury their own dead.” In other words Jesus said, “NO.” Permission denied. Follow me. This...following me...is more important. Following me will have eternal consequences. Do it, and do it now. Being a Christian is being a disciple of Jesus. Being a disciple of Jesus involves partnering with God. The stakes are high. So is the personal cost. No one understood that more than Jesus did. The cross was real. It stands out there waiting for Him. He asks nothing of us that HE does not face Himself. The shake out and the shake up of the Church as an industry, as an institution has begun. I cannot tell you where or how it will end. I can and I do tell you these things are being said to us as surely as they were said to a Scribe and another of the disciples of Jesus. Security as this world defines security will go by the boards. Follow Jesus. Not me. Not the church, follow Jesus. And do it now.

Believing in Jesus, we have fallen into the hands of God. That alone is certain. There is no putting this matter of being HIS off until later. It is urgent that we follow HIM where HE leads us. It is urgent that we do so now. This is about today and tomorrow and each tomorrow that remains for us. There is a need to act. A need to do. And I am sure you would like me to tell what it is that you are to do. I will be as specific as I can. Be faithful. You have put your shoulder to the wheel as a partner of God. Define yourself in those

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terms. No looking back. Come what may. There is one word we need to eliminate from our vocabulary as believers. The word BUT. I would follow Jesus, but... You have heard the words. Jesus said, Follow me. Nothing is more important. We are partners with God.

Let us pray;

Heavenly Father, we live in hard and scary times. Change surrounds us on every side. Biblical values, what we used to call Christian values are not valued in our culture. And yet you have not given us the privilege of withdrawal from the world. If anything you have called us to go boldly into the world and yet to be not of it, like it, fitting in, compromising. Grant us the faith and the courage to follow you...no matter what....no matter where. We offer you our praise in the name of Jesus. AMEN