

Sermon by Audrey Klein-Leach, Thirteenth Sunday of the Year, Year C

Let the words of my mouth and meditation of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Two words I wish to focus on today are “cornerstone” and “discipleship”.

Let’s take a look at the word “cornerstone” first. According to the dictionary, a cornerstone is: an important quality or feature on which a particular thing depends or is based; a stone that forms the base of a corner of a building, joining two walls.

My parents introduced me to many things and one was their love of architecture. I, too, love architecture; I love houses. One of my favorite books when I growing up was, *The Little House* by Virginia Lee Burton. A happy, family home in the country finds itself slowly engulfed by the city. It becomes sad and neglected, until a new family recognizes the house’s “good bones,” moves it back to the country and restores it. It is a wonderful story on so many levels – the literal resurrection of a family home; an allegory for the transformational power of love. So it is no surprise that when I was introduced to the writings of nineteenth century architectural write, John Ruskin in graduate school, I fell in love. Ruskin doesn’t merely talk about proportions or architectural styles. He talks about architecture impact on us physically, emotionally, spiritually. Whether in *The Seven Lamps* or *The Stones of Venice*, his works are infused with references – and a very deep understanding – of the Old and New Testaments along with many other great philosophers. Ruskin says the principals of architecture are Sacrifice, Truth, Power, Beauty, Life, Memory and Obedience. Ruskin believes that for an

architect to ensure a great structure they must adhere to these seven building blocks. One of the principles of great architecture, Ruskin says, is Life. He says that all great architecture engages the creativity of everyone involved in its creation, not just the architect. The real question to ask is, “Was the worker happy when he or she worked on the building?” If so, the life force of the worker will be embedded and able to be seen in every corner of the building. The great cathedrals of Europe are enduring examples of this principle. So also is the story of the Little House...

Now let’s set the word cornerstone aside for a moment and turn our attention to the second word for today – discipleship. Today’s readings show an evolution between the Old and New Testaments understanding of who/what a cornerstone is *and* what it means to be called, to be a disciple.

In the reading from Kings, Elisha wants to inherit a double share of Elijah’s spirit. Elisha wants to be Elijah - only better. And indeed, it does come to pass that Elijah’s mantle falls upon Elisha and he succeeds him, becoming a prophet like Elijah. He, too, is able to part the waters. In the Old Testament following someone is akin to the type of subordination a student may have to someone who is teaching or mentoring them. Discipleship in the Old Testament is a stage in one’s development – like Elisha being Elijah’s student. He waits, learns, and eventually becomes the teacher who inherits and carries the mantle of the law and tradition forward to the next generation.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus comes to the situation based in a thorough knowledge of the rabbinic law, traditions and instructions. He understands it all

and as Jesus often does, he turns the idea of call/discipleship and who is the cornerstone on its head.

Chapter 9 in Luke's Gospel begins the journey to Jerusalem and to Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. It is a journey and there is no turning back. As Jesus walks along he is approached by several different people who wish to follow him. But when Jesus says, "Follow me" one person says they have to go bury their father first and another says they have to say goodbye to friends and family first. I get that don't you? Doesn't it sound like something any one of us might say? After all, it's being responsible. We're letting people know where we're going; we're taking care of family obligations as rabbinic law outlined in Jesus' time or as just good manners in our time would dictate. Jesus will have none of that. Discipleship to Jesus is not simply inheriting the mantle and carrying it forward; it isn't good manners. All of that is a barrier to true discipleship according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the *Cost of Discipleship* where he differentiates "cheap grace" from "costly grace".

"Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.... Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, it is grace because it call us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life... Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son...and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not

reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”

Bonhoeffer goes on to say that the call to discipleship is obedience to Christ’s word. He writes, “Jesus summons men to follow him not as a teacher or a pattern of the good life, but as the Christ, the Son of God...The grace of his call bursts all bonds of legalism...But since he is the Christ, he must make it clear from the start that his word is not an abstract doctrine, but the re-creation of the whole life of man... only he who believes is obedient and only he who is obedient believes.”

To Bonhoeffer faith and obedience are inseparable. But my husband asked a good question when I read him a draft of this sermon, “What you’re talking about is blind obedience. What about free will?” I reflected on this. I, too, am a believer in the importance of free will. Free will comes in our response to Jesus’ call, “Follow me”. We have a choice, as those in our Gospel reading today did to follow Jesus or not – and many did not. If we do, Bonhoeffer says faith is borne out of obedience and discipline to Christ.

Christ is the only cornerstone. Christ is the cornerstone that joins the two walls of us and God through his sacrifice. If we accept Christ’s call to discipleship the journey starts with obedience to Jesus. Both Ruskin and Bonhoeffer believe in the transformational nature of discipleship, which when answered, results in a right relationship with God. Once we are in a right relationship with God our lives will become a living testament to God’s love. That love will be manifest in everything we do – whether that be in our civic duty to each other or the wholly mortal materials our buildings.

This is radical stuff. We currently live a world with many competing people and ideas claiming to be a cornerstone, wanting us to be some sort of disciple. If allowed, it can eat up much our emotional and intellectual bandwidth so much so that we lose sight of Christ saying to each of us, "Follow me." The call is never easy, but we know who our cornerstone is and that discipleship has a cost that brings true life.

Lord, may we hear your call and not hesitate to answer. Lord be our strength, our cornerstone, help us to be true disciples and bring your love to the world.

Amen.