

A sermon delivered by Sister Maxine Shonk, OP, at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 27, 2010.

“Becoming NOW Disciples”

**1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21;
Galatians 5:1, 13-18; Luke 9:51-62**

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

First of all, on behalf of the Dominican Sisters of Peace and Dominicans everywhere, I want to thank Rev. Tim, Janine and all of you for this invitation to be with you in this way. As the Order of Preachers (which is what the initials OP stand for), it is always a grace and privilege to respond to the call to preach and proclaim God’s word.

However, that call to preach is given to all of us, to all of you, for it is by our lives that we preach. It is not just by our words but our actions for peace and justice and our attitudes and intentions of compassion and love that we all proclaim God to those around us. This is the very call to discipleship that our scriptures put before us today. As Paul says to the Galatians, it is when *we* live by the Spirit that God becomes known among us. In our call to discipleship, it is as though the mantle of Elijah has been placed upon *our* shoulders just as surely as it was placed on Elisha in the first book of Kings. In our call to discipleship, it is as though Jesus put his hand on our shoulder and said, “Follow me”.

It is an awesome responsibility, this call to discipleship. It is a call to speak the truth in love and to see and serve one another as Jesus does. Are we up to it? What does it take to follow the call to discipleship?

Where does one start? What is asked of us? How do we serve God in one another?

I'd like to share a story with you. It is told by Edwina Gately, who is from Great Britain, is a noted author and speaker and poet, whose ministry has led her to the streets of Chicago, where she has established a respite place called Genesis House for the prostitutes or "women of the streets" as she calls them.

She tells of the winter when, as she was walking the streets with an eye out for her women, she happened upon what looked like a pile of clothing or rags lying on a grate in the sidewalk. Knowing well that this was a person for whom she could do nothing and seemed to be beyond help, she simply said "hello" and moved on down the street. The next day she passed again and said "good morning," and the next day, and the next and each day she greeted him.

Eventually, as she passed, she began to notice that there were eyes looking back at her and following her. Then a few days later he was sitting up as though waiting for her. One day, he said "hello" back. Then she noticed one day that he had a clean shirt on and he was sober and alert. One day, he got up and introduced himself. "I'm Mark, but people call me "Gypsy," he said.

He began to walk with her on the streets. They chatted and he would show her the hidden places of the street where she might find her women. One day, he walked with her back to Genesis House and she invited him in for a visit. Then, on another day, she invited him to stay for a night, then a week, then six months . . . and Gypsy became one of Edwina's most faithful volunteers at Genesis house, acting as the fix-it man and all-around helper.

Then Edwina tells of a later time in Gypsy's story when she herself was walking through a forest, and as she walked, she spied what looked like the leg of a table peeking through the underbrush. It had many intricate designs carved into it but it was covered with an ugly drab green paint. She pulled and tugged but could not move it from its hiding place. So she went and got Gypsy who was able to extricate it from the brush and set it upright. And sure enough, it was a table, intact even in its ugly drab green and with all the grime of the forest.

“Oh Gypsy”, said Edwina. “Let’s take it back and clean it up, get some stripper and . . .”

“Yes ma’am,” said Gypsy. “I will take care of it.”

So Gypsy took the table back to his workshop and spent days cleaning the table. Using a piece of broken glass, he scraped off the ugly drab green; underneath was gray paint; under that was white paint. Gypsy scraped and scraped. For months Gypsy scraped. Finally Gypsy got the table down to its natural wood and took it to Edwina to see. What she saw was a beautiful oak table with designs intricately and elegantly carved into its legs and edges.

“Oh Gypsy!” Edwina said. “It’s beautiful! Let’s get some restoration oil and varnish and rub it down.”

“No Ma’am,” Gypsy said. “Nothing artificial will touch this table.”

So Gypsy took the table back into his workshop and went out to the forest and pick some berries, and he made a natural resin of them and stained the table to a radiant glow. The process took weeks to complete, but finally Gypsy called Edwina into his workshop to see.

As Edwina entered Gypsy’s workshop she saw it. There was the table and there was Gypsy. The table was glowing and Gypsy was gleaming with pride. And Edwina said, as only this wonderful British author can say it, “And God said to me, “The table is Gypsy and Gypsy is the table. And all I did was say ‘hello’ to it.’ ”

All she did was say hello to what was already there, an image and likeness of God. She recognized something more in Gypsy than his poverty or homelessness or addictions or mistakes and paid honor to it with her hello. And with her hello, God was awakened in Gypsy and it was God and Gypsy did the rest.

Could it be that the call to discipleship is as simple as saying “hello,” acknowledging what is before us and not shrinking from it? Could it be as simple as addressing it, whatever “it” is, whether injustice or oppression or suffering or even an observed act of compassion or goodness? Sometimes it’s not words but gestures. After all, it wasn’t words that Elijah used to call Elisha. It was a simple gesture of covering him with his cloak.

We are that pile of rags on that grate. And when Jesus put his hand on our shoulder, he in essence was greeting what he knew was already there. It's Jesus' "hello" that opens *our* eyes to God in us; that moves *us* to sit up and take notice; that enables *us* to respond and to follow. It's Jesus' "hello" that awakens in us recognition of our worth and a claiming of our own gifts and graces. It is Jesus' "hello" that lets us know how loved we are.

And don't we gradually, if we are faithful to this relationship initiated by Jesus, come to greater and greater realization of our own call to recognize the same in others? Isn't it our relationship with Jesus that ignites the passion for doing good in our world? Some of those that Jesus called found ways to delay their response. But when we are captured by the passion of relationship with Jesus, there is no putting off our discipleship till later – such as when we have more time, or when it's more convenient, or after we've had time to say good bye to the past, or after we see if something better comes along. Discipleship is NOW. Discipleship does not wait. When we've been captured by the passion of this relationship with Jesus, we cannot *not* be disciples, even in the midst of death because we know that resurrection follows.

Being a disciple means that we are willing to say "hello" to the things and the people with whom we are uncomfortable or unfamiliar; to greet the unpleasant, and accompany the broken and the poor and not shy away in fear. To be a disciple is perhaps to say our hellos to those who have hurt us or offended us and to acknowledge that in God's eyes they are more than their offenses.

The apostles in our gospel story weren't ready to say hello to the Samaritans who rejected Jesus. They wanted to call hellfire down upon them! But Jesus rebuked them. It just takes that one word or one like it, and sometimes it's the hardest "hello" we've ever uttered, to acknowledge and recognize the God image in each person. Can we believe that if we are but willing to greet God in one another and in every circumstance, God will do the rest? Can we live by the spirit so that God does indeed dwell among *us*? Can we feel the hand of Jesus on *our* shoulder calling us to become NOW disciples?

Benediction: May the God who calls bless us with ears to hear the cry of the poor, the whispers of the weak and the silence of the hopeless. May we hear the voice of God in cricket and birdsong, in thunder and rain

and in the prayer of children. May we be blessed all our days by the sweet sound of God's call to us. Amen.

Copyright 2010, First Congregational Church, UCC