

**WHOSE AGENDA ARE YOU FOLLOWING?
2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-15; MATTHEW 4:1-11
FEBRUARY 13, 2005 – LENT ONE
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We begin a Lenten sermon series today. It compliments the Wednesday evening worship, dinner and discussions. The theme of the Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings in Lent is this: becoming disciples and becoming a disciple-making church.

It may seem a little obvious to be talking about becoming disciples and a disciple-making church for a 151 year old congregation. Isn't that what we've been up to all these years? Certainly it is, but I would also say the world in 2005 is different than it was in 1854. Revisiting core behaviors of discipleship is not a bad idea.

What I'd like to explore in Lent is this: what qualities, actions, behaviors define a disciple? And then this question: are we embodying, encouraging, evoking these behaviors in and for one another?

Ash Wednesday, we said, quoting Luke, the first thing a disciple does is to count the cost of discipleship. Take seriously the demands discipleship makes, then sign on or not.

What's the cost? Jesus said, give up everything you have and follow me; take my yoke upon you and learn of me; if any of you would be great in the Kingdom of God he or she must become servant of all. Truly, the more pertinent and challenging part of discipleship is not what I think but what I do.

Once we are on the road of discipleship, the next question is: "whose agenda am I following?" Whose agenda guides my actions?

Let me share an example of how this works. A couple of weeks ago I pulled into the Starbucks on Delaware Avenue. I go there when I want a dark roast for the road because they have parking. Except this day. So I decided to park in a clearly marked no-parking zone, put my flashers on and saw a police car entering the parking lot right in front of me.

Unfazed I walked over to the officer, who looked like Morgan Freeman, preparing to explain to him why it was OK for me to park illegally. He calmly put down his window, looked at me and said, "I made one New Year's resolution last month – that I wouldn't be taking any prisoners this year."

To which I said, "Why yes officer I see exactly what you mean. Excuse me while I park my car down the street at one of those meters."

What startled me upon reflection was how focussed I was on my agenda – getting a cup of coffee on my travels.

The agenda of that officer was to uphold and enforce the law. I knew that. But I was blind to it. It took him telling me I was a nanosecond away from getting a ticket to get me off my agenda and focused on the agenda of parking statutes.

The issue of whose agenda are you and I following when it comes to life is the question today. If we call ourselves God's people or followers of Jesus I think we at least know whose agenda we ought to be following. But my hunch is we often end up in some no parking zone of life following our own or someone else's agenda and supplanting God's dream for us.

The story of Jesus in the wilderness is a parable about choosing between our own or God's agenda.

Each time the Devil tempts Jesus to do something it is for the purpose not only of shifting Jesus away from following God's agenda – but violating God's statutes.

In each instance Jesus remains faithful to God and rejects the Devil's suggestions.

Jesus might have been thinking if I listen to the Devil, turning stones to bread could feed the poor; or being saved by angels from the pinnacle of the temple might inspire others to believe; or having power over the kingdoms of the earth could allow me to bring justice.

Have you ever been there – when your motives get mixed up with some high flying, fine sounding motives and before you know it what seemed like a laudable idea turns out to be blatantly self-serving? Conflict of interest is what the business world calls it.

Or maybe it's not mixed motives but fear that drives you to choose your own agenda instead of trusting God. If I don't look out for number one no one else will. I've been out in this wilderness long enough. Where is God anyway?

All sorts of flawed thinking causes us to take the reigns away from God.

What we're talking about is not turning our minds over, becoming automatons. Rather, another way to describe setting our agendas aside, like Jesus did in the wilderness to listen for and follow God's leading, is setting aside our egos.

About 170 years ago Soren Kierkegaard shed some light on this when he compared the disciple of Jesus to the disciple of Socrates. The disciple of Socrates, said Kierkegaard, becomes independent of the teacher. Through a system of asking questions – called the Socratic method – Socrates was training his disciples to think for themselves to the point of no longer needing him.

But Jesus was a different kind of teacher. Jesus said, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life." Rather than independent of Jesus, his followers are more dependent on him and his agenda for life. We are literally grafted into him, "I am the vine and you are the branches," he said.

St. Paul puts it this way in today's reading from his second letter to Corinth, "He died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." No longer live for themselves.

St. Paul is talking about dying to ourselves, to our ego and its dictates, replacing it with the mind of Christ which is strikingly congruent with our own conscience.

Did you ever have this experience? Do you remember dying to ego and opening the way for Christ and conscience, for healing and reconciliation?

Marriage is a great testing ground for dying to ego, for setting aside our own agenda. The other day Carol pointed out that on my night to prepare dinner I dropped the ball.

I could have come up with a hundred excuses. But something in me said, "Don't even go there! Don't try to deny it, she's right."

So instead of saying, "Gee I had a long day, give me a break," I said, "You're right, you had a long day, it was my turn and I could have had dinner ready but I didn't. I'm sorry."

St. Paul says to the church in Corinth the goal of discipleship is not to live for ourselves but to live for Christ. To give our lives to the one who gave his life for us.

What would it take to become a congregation or individuals like that?

What does Jesus want anyway? He wants for us to seek the Kingdom. If you do, he said, everything else you need in life will be given to you.

Right there he takes care of the burning question of our egos will I be OK?

And the burning question of tribal loyalty, will my loved ones be OK?

Let go he seems to be saying. Let go of control, of fear, of ego. What would it take to let go as individuals and as a church? Just as important what would it look like if we did?

I suspect there would be an energy loose in us and through us that just might turn us around if not this community around. A trust in God and willingness to risk and go for it that would cause age-old barriers to come crumbling down.

We'd be less concerned with how we looked than who we are. Less with what we'd received than what we'd given. Would it all work? Not always.

I remember a colleague who as a student minister was told by his church he could use the \$100 emergency fund with three conditions – that he didn't use the money to help anyone who got in trouble for drunkenness, laziness or bad judgement. That church still has its \$100 he said. What's more important: following our agenda and keeping the hundred bucks or following God's agenda, changing lives and maybe losing a few dollars?

Stewardship wouldn't be about persuading people to give some of their calendar or wallet or already busy people to do a bit of volunteering. Stewardship would be an opportunity to figure out with each other where our resources were most needed and how much.

If we set aside our personal agendas and followed Jesus' agenda life would be less about juggling priorities than it would reordering them.

Like the young father of this church who started a new hockey league a few years ago because the one his sons would have played in met every Sunday morning. The new league doesn't play Sundays.

Is it possible to become that kind of person? That kind of congregation? You bet it is. But not only will it take dying to ourselves, setting aside our own agendas for God's purposes but it also means switching a deadly emphasis now in the church.

There is a high premium in churches today on what we "think." But being a follower of Jesus is more about what we do. Actions are what define believers.

Following God's agenda means seeing everything I do as eternally significant.

Last weekend I led a family memorial service for Marie Bell, 91 years old, life-long Presbyterian. Present were friends and neighbors Marie helped each day. One single mom she took regularly to dinner to get a break from the kids; a young father she slipped wads of cash to for his family; nursing home friends who recalled how Marie loved to sing the old hymns.

She did it so well, lived God's agenda instead of her own. I'll bet if you and I try that this Lent we'll feel the burden of worry and control and fear drop from our shoulders and the joy of life seep again into our hearts. Amen.