

As our final hymn will say, “Come labor on. Yes, “labor” on, and we need more laborers, for the harvest is plentiful... there is so much need in the world, and the laborers are few. One verse says, “Labor on, *claim the high calling.*” Following Jesus is indeed a very high calling, yes, always a little beyond our reach, so it does take real intention, effort and labor. Like in Don Quijote’s Impossible Dream, to run where the brave dare not go, to bear the unbearable sorrow, to try when your arms are too weary, to reach the unreachable stars!

The Prayer of St. Francis is also an ideal, something we can only strive for (such giving: as in “more blessed to give than receive”). Paraphrasing St. Francis: *O God, grant that we may seek more to console than to be consoled, more to understand than to be understood, and more to love than to be loved.*) Maybe we could summarize our calling, this high calling, as having the heart of a servant, trying to meet needs wherever we can, whenever we can. Also St. Francis talks about sowing love where there is hatred, pardoning where there is injury, shining light where there is darkness. Truly a high calling, a bar set really high that none of us can fully live up to... but we can try, we can strive to be more giving, more loving, more forgiving, more like Jesus, *and pray* for the Spirit to work through us, to accomplish in us more than we can in our own strength.

Our gospel readings are no less challenging than our music lyrics this morning. Jesus sends out his followers with the message of love and peace... into a world of trouble and war, and warns them that they will be like sheep in the midst of wolves! He continually reminded them that goodness is often persecuted in this world, that prophets get rejected and even killed. He warns them that houses and towns may reject their message, and if so, to “shake the dust of their feet” and move on to the next town. I love that saying of Jesus; to shake the dust off one’s feet... he was teaching about having broad

shoulders, letting things roll off; he was foreshadowing what Paul would say about putting on the “whole armor of God,” putting on a shield of faith (Ephesians chapter 6).

So one of the conclusions about the gospel of Jesus Christ is that there will always be risk in following this Master and Teacher. Dietrich Bonhoeffer summarized it famously in his book, the Cost of Discipleship. We know that his resistance to Nazi Germany did cost him his life. We know that people who publicly dissent in resistance to governments are often punished; there is persecution and retaliation. I, however, know that I do not want to spend a few days in jail. I will speak the truth, hold signs at protest rallies, and might be persecuted in various ways, but I will avoid taking civil disobedience to the level of obstruction where I might be handcuffed and locked up; I’m too claustrophobic for that level of civil disobedience, much as I value the wisdom of people like Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. and the UCC’s Climate activist Rev. Jim Antal.

Let’s lower the risk level some and just talk about local communities, and *church* community. To say at the opening of worship that God loves all, and all are welcome here, is indeed radical and risky. You never know who might walk in the door seeking help or an experience of God. Our society, and most societies, are divided into people with similar interests, similar thoughts. (It has been famously said that Sunday morning at 11:00 is one of the most segregated times of the week!) We are like “birds of a feather flock together.” Yes, it IS natural to hang out with people more like ourselves... But Jesus asks us to go beyond that, to expand our horizons and our friendships! Jesus was unquestionably in favor of diversity, and we recall that he ate with “tax-collectors and sinners,” like Matthew the tax collector. For Jesus famously said, What good is it to love only those who love you back? Anyone can do that! (Luke

6:32). But we are to do good to those who hate us, to love even enemies, or at least pray for them. What good is it to hang out with people only like ourselves, our socio-economic class, our educational class, our age bracket? Jesus crossed all sorts of cultural, gender and age barriers.

Yes, we are called to stretch ourselves, broaden our horizons, learn to love our fellow human beings! When we learn more about Islam, we learn a similar high calling that embraces diversity: “We were made from male and female, made into peoples and tribes.. so *that we can get to know one another.*”

Back to church community, and the risky value of diversity. We start with careful listening, in order to understand and care for one another. We have that opportunity every Sunday after church, with refreshments and little cafe’ tables, and we find that our life stories are indeed very different! Trying to understand and care for someone different from ourselves is true ministry, truly following Jesus’ way. The beautiful words of the gospel reading said “When Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion on them, for they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. That is the key and summary of Jesus’ calling: to have compassion on those who are in need... we could fill in many other words that can easily apply to our world: They look anxious, frustrated, fearful, tired and over-scheduled, angry, yes, maybe even helpless! And those who don’t show it, may be hiding it; for everyone seems to have some anxieties and fears.

Even bullies have inner anxieties and lack of true self-esteem, that they hide by attacking others, putting on a front of machismo and strong-man dominance. The violent display on the white house lawn this weekend is very anti-Christ. Jesus was and is against every form of violence and war... The goal of cage fighting, as with the gladiators of old, and yes, even boxing, is always to bruise and bloody another,

to debilitate another human being. Jesus' calling is clear... spread peace to all, and treat them with loving compassion. There is no wiggle room in Jesus' teachings for intentional harm to others.

I need to close with one of the "Hows" ... how to spread more love and peace in the world. One such way is Praise and Thanksgiving! Seeing the good in life, and seeing the good in other people! *"This IS the day the Lord has made. We WILL rejoice and be glad in it."* (Psalm 118) Worship always starts with a song/hymn of Praise! Jesus would have sung songs when he visited a local synagogue on the Sabbath day. The word Psalm does mean Song, and the Psalms are an integral part of Jewish worship, and also our Christian worship. So many psalms say we are to Sing a New Song to God. Psalm 100 is so well known: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands. Serve the Lord with gladness; Come into his presence with singing! For the Lord is good, and his steadfast love endures forever!"

In conclusion, our service and servant heart starts with worship. We come into God's presence with Thankful hearts, and with hearts open to God's continual mercies and love. We receive it deep in our minds and hearts, and then we can pass it along to others. The Joys of the presence of God, and the loving presence of one another, strengthens us to take the risks of discipleship... strengthens us to take the message and spirit of peace and love out into a world that is often unkind, a world that insults us, calling compassionate love and empathy a form of weakness. Love will triumph. Love will win. Even a candle or flashlight can cast out darkness. Even a small word of kindness or act of love can disarm hate. Amen.