

Matthew 8:1-27

Follow me and let the dead bury their own dead.

The Gospel of Matthew Chapter 8 has powerful message for believers. It tells a story of Jesus, the miracle working healer. Jesus heals a man with leprosy. Jesus said, "be clean" and the man was healed. This account is followed by the story of the faith of the Centurion who pleaded for his paralyzed servants' health. Christ grants his request and the servant was healed that very hour. This is followed by the healing of Peter's mother in-law who was healed from her fever when Jesus touched her hand. Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah by healing the sick and demon possessed.

Then the Gospel story shifts to the cost of following Jesus. Jesus reveals that the cost of his ministry led to his becoming homeless. Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but Jesus had no place to lay his head. We then move to the heart of the matter for the purpose of our reflection. A would-be disciple of Jesus was not prepared to pay the cost of following Jesus. He wanted time to go home and wait until his father died, to bury him, and then become a follower of Jesus. Then we read the difficult words to hear, "follow me and let the dead bury their own dead. What a curious notion. The Lukan account of this encounter records the words of Jesus' teaching that no one who starts on the journey with Christ can keep looking back taking their eyes away from the task ahead. Followers of Christ must, "keep their hands on the plow," to be fit for service in the Kingdom of God.

And finally, in Matthew chapter 8, we see the disciples' amazement as Jesus stands up in their boat in the middle of a storm and commands the devastating storm to cease. The winds and the waves obey his will. And then, once again, Jesus challenges his disciples as people of little faith.

What of disciples today, as we seek to follow Christ. Are we people of little faith? Surely, we seek to follow Christ, but we have a number of dead to bury. The death toll of COVID-19 has surpassed the number of Americans who died in the Vietnam war. Recently more people have died in Louisiana than those who perished in hurricane Katrina. One third of the people in the world who have contracted the virus are citizens of the USA. More than one third of the people in the United States who have died from COVID -19 are people of color. The frail, aged, sick, poor, immigrant, and incarcerated face the threat of death from this pernicious virus. Anyone who steps out of their house risks this scourge. What of this miraculous healer that we follow, what is his word for this moment? What are we called to do in this moment?

The scripture states that Jesus stands up in the storm and commands the devastating winds to cease. In turn, the follower of Jesus must stand up in this storm. Surely, we must bury our dead even when we cannot stand together at a funeral service and grave side. And then in turn, we say what to the living?

Jesus was a healer, a protector. While we have no cure for this disease, we can protect one another. I firmly believe that we should stand up as people of faith. We should stand up and demand that before we open ourselves to the ravages of COVID-19 we must implement the strategies of mass testing, tracing, and quarantine as our healers implore. We must release the strangle hold of this public health crisis upon our economy through deliberate responsible healing actions (not manic anger). I contend that the followers of the Way should unite in a concerted effort to protect the living. We must advocate for public policy that heals life and brings strength to our economy.

Keep your hand on the plow and hold leaders accountable for swift actions that protect and heal our land. Stand up and demand that acts of compassion and healing are implemented and be satisfied with nothing less. Stand up and make your voices heard across the land. Pay the cost of discipleship, stand up and speak words of healing and protection for all humanity this very hour!

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