

Living as Disciples of Jesus Christ

The fourth in a four part series on *Being Church* by Rev. Susan Morrison

September 25, 2005
Holy Trinity United Methodist Church

Today's lesson from Exodus is a continuation of last week's reading. The people of Israel are still murmuring and complaining as they journey toward the promised land. Last week they were hungry. This week they are thirsty. In the wilderness God's people are being led into a deeper, more complex knowledge of God and what their relationship with God means. Israel's task, which is also ours, is not easy.

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Please stand for the gospel lesson.

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'I'm on my way,' but never went. Which of the two did what was wanted?' They said, "The first."

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of you. ³² When John came walking on the road of justice, you didn't believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you didn't repent and believe.

Leader: Here what the Spirit is saying to the church.

People: Thanks be to God. Amen.

Credentials! that's what was on the mind of the priests and the elders in this morning's gospel lesson. "Who are you?" they demand of Jesus "and what are your credentials?"

We all know the importance of credentials. I remember one morning at the Lexington United Methodist Church when the office manager informed me that the FBI was there to see me. "The FBI???" I said. "You must be kidding!" Panic rose as the agent walked through the door into my study. Like in the movies, he took a wallet-size folder from his pocket, opened it and held it up for me to see – his official identification as an investigator from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

I probably should have been more careful in examining his ID before talking with him, but the truth is I was so stunned that he was standing in my study that I merely glanced at it before he put it away. Let's face it, when the FBI drops by for a visit, your anxiety level increases exponentially.

Turns out that one of the parishioners had applied for a job that required government clearance and a routine security check. The man from the FBI asked a few questions about the member from the congregation and left. After he left, I thought to myself that I should have been more careful about answering those sensitive questions about my parishioner. That man's ID could easily have been counterfeit.

There are times, aren't there, when it is appropriate to check out a person's credentials. Your dentist and your doctor display those diplomas and certificates on their walls for good reason: they spent much money and time to earn their credentials so that they could establish their authority to practice their profession. We expect those to whom we entrust our physical and mental and spiritual health to have proper training.

So it is not surprising to learn that the chief priests and elders came to Jesus one day and challenged his credentials. Jesus had been saying things that offended them. He regularly challenged their authority. He had been teaching and preaching and even healing the sick. Here were men with outstanding credentials. They felt that they had every right to ask Jesus for his ID. "Show us your diploma, your ordination papers," they said. "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?"

In an exchange typical of his day, Jesus answers their question with his own question. He applies this question of authority to John and Baptist and suggests that **both John's authority and his own authority come from God and their response to God.**

It's not enough to have the authority from God. It must also be lived. To illustrate his point, he tells a parable about two children. One says "I won't work" but afterwards regrets it and goes to work. The second child says "I'm on my way" but never shows up. "Which one did the will of the parent?" asks Jesus. The answer is obvious. The one who actually did go to work.

Jesus then insults these priests and elders by suggesting that they are more like the child who said "Yes" but never showed up. Here they are in the presence of the Messiah and not only do they not recognize him, but they challenge his credentials. They refuse to follow Jesus. In fact, these keepers of the Scriptures along with the Roman officials ultimately arrest Jesus, examine Jesus, and crucify him because of his counter-cultural, God centered life and deeds.

Jesus goes on to note that even the tax collectors and prostitutes – those who are deemed marginal, expendable, unworthy, even undesirable - they are the ones who have heard the Word and repented and become followers. They

are like the child who shows up for work and for that reason Jesus portrays them as leading the parade into the kingdom of God! Oh, those religious authorities must have been outraged! They must have murmured, don't you think?

So, what's the point? It would appear that Jesus is warning us that it's not enough to just SAY that you believe. It's important, but not enough. If you believe then you have to DO SOMETHING with your faith.

Are you familiar with Isak Dinesen's book *Out of Africa*? In which a young Kikuyu boy named Kitau appears at Dinesen's door to ask for a job. She hires him but is surprised when after three months he asks her for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim living in a nearby town. Dinesen offers to raise Kitau's pay in order to keep him, but money is not his interest. Kitau explains that he is in the process of deciding whether to become either a Christian or a Muslim and his purpose in working for Dinesen has been to see, up close, the ways of Christians. Now he will go and live with Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behave. Then, he will decide. "Good God, Kitau," Dinesen says, "you might have told me that when you first came here!"

How would your life measure up if someone came to live with you for three months? Would your deeds match your profession of being a disciple of Jesus Christ? The Christian faith, says Jesus, is more than knowing the right words. Being Christian is more than an intellectual exercise. As 19th century theologian Soren Kierkegaard said, Jesus wants followers not admirers. His question is "Will you walk the talk?"

Each of us has Christian credentials. I like to think of our baptism as our Christian credential. Baptism is God's claim on our lives. It is the free gift of love and grace. It is our card carrying identification. We belong to Jesus Christ.

This morning four children have received their lifelong credential as a Christian. It is as if Moses struck the baptism font with his staff and caused the waters of baptism to flow. Precious water that blessed Nicholas, Mia, Preston and Patrick and credentialed them as Christians.

All of us who proclaim ourselves as Christians carry around that same credential. It is what we have in common in this body of Christ. It is what makes forgiveness and acceptance and diversity and comm.-unity possible! Every day we need to remember our Christian credential.

One of the most memorable things that Bishop George Bashore shared with my ordination class was that every morning when he arose and got ready to shave, he would take water from the tap, touch his brow, and looking at himself in the mirror would say, "George, remember your baptism and to whom you belong. Thanks be to God."

For those of you who have been baptized, I invite you to touch your brow. Say your name and give thanks for your baptism. Remember to whom you belong. Remember your credentials. And give thanks to God.

But the point of this morning's scripture lesson is to remind us that it's not enough to just talk about our credentials as a Christian. Jesus expects us to act on them. Too often we say to Jesus "I will go." And then we sit still. How many of us would be the first to confess how much we love members of our family but end up spending very little time with them? Or how many of us profess concern about the environment but do little to recycle or conserve on gas? How many of us say with conviction that we are opposed to violence but wait in line for the next *Terminator* movie? How many believe in prayer but never find the time each day to talk with God? Wouldn't each of us be the first to speak highly of our church? but when was the last time we invited a friend or neighbor or work associate who is unchurched to come to church with us?

Jesus asks us this morning if we want to do more than to simply speak or think about our faith. Do we want to live as his disciples? How will we respond to the grace and love that is ours through our baptism?

I recently heard a story about a young boy who headed off for his first day of school wearing his brand new Red Sox World Champs baseball cap. His mom waited with him as he boarded the bus and was back to greet him at the bus

stop after school. The first thing that she noticed was that the baseball cap was gone. She began with the familiar parental tirade, “We just bought that hat for you. You wanted a Red Sox cap more than anything else in the world. Now, one day at school and it’s gone.” She ranted and raved. When the boy finally had the chance to speak he said, “But Mom, my teacher said that Sandy, this girl in our class, will be getting medicine this year and that her hair will be falling out. It’s gonna be getting cold pretty soon, and I thought Sandy should have something to keep her head warm. Besides I remembered what Mr. Brown taught us at Sunday School, that Jesus is most happy when we give away something that we love the most so that someone else can have a good life.”

Once there was a parent with two children. One said “I’ll go to work” but stayed. The other said “I won’t go to work” but did. Will we go or will we stay? Will we live as disciples for Jesus? or will we simply carry our Christian credentials in our wallet? Will we give our all to God or will we offer something less? May God guide us and inspire us as we decide. Amen.

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