

True Disciples of Jesus Should Expect...

Why do some people openly oppose and label as strict, old fashioned, and out of touch with reality those who strive to defend, teach, confess, and practice ALL the teachings of Scripture? Why can I talk about sports, books, movies, video games, weather knowledgeably and without hesitation, but I get nervous and feel inadequate when I try to explain the Word of God to others and live my Christian faith in front of others? Why do some people argue with me, or tell me that is my opinion, or ignore me, or change the subject when I strike up a spiritual conversation with them when all I am trying to do is show love and concern for them and where they will spend eternity? In early June, at the Southeastern Wisconsin District's District Convention, I heard the sobering news from Pastor Jon Hein (Chairman for WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling). In 1990, WELS hit its statistical peak of 420,000 baptized souls. 29 years later, WELS has seen a 14% decline in membership to 369,000 baptized souls. Deaths are up and baptisms are down. The average age of a WELS member is 43. Only 20% of WELS membership is made up of millennials (22-37 year olds). This isn't unique to WELS. Declines in other church bodies are worse. Polls reveal that 42% of Americans claim NO religious affiliation. Of those who claim a religious affiliation, only 20% are regular in attending worship. We live in a world that is becoming more and more ecumenical (accepting of all religions and philosophies as God pleasing), more and more tolerant of sin and more and more apathetic to hearing and following God's Word? Do you ever feel tired, frustrated, and discouraged because it feels like you are on the losing team? You aren't alone. That's how Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zerubbabel, Zechariah, and some of the Jewish Christians coming back from exile in Babylon were tempted to feel and did feel in the late 500's and early 400's B.C. as they experienced strong opposition in trying to rebuild Jerusalem, rebuild the temple, rebuild their lives and reestablish the worship of the one true God in that area of the world. Listen to God's encouragement for His true disciples who are tempted to feel like this or do feel like this as they face opposition and hardship for what they believe. Zechariah 13:7-9.

⁷ "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!" declares the LORD Almighty. "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.

⁸ In the whole land," declares the LORD, "two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it.

⁹ This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.' "

Part of the comfort for us as Christians is that God is up front with us about what we should expect from being one of his true followers. Don't expect it to be all rainbows and sunshine as you confess your Christian faith through words and actions. Expect some push back. Expect to feel different than most of the world because you think differently. Expect it to be uncomfortable to a certain degree. Consider what it was like for our Good Shepherd, Jesus, when he lived on this earth. As verse 7 tells us **"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me! declares the LORD Almighty."** Our Good Shepherd, Jesus, had much support and joy during his life on earth, but he also faced temptation, rejection, hardship, and execution. So as the sheep who follow Jesus we should expect to a lesser degree what our Good Shepherd faced on this earth. Or as Jesus said in the Gospel lesson for today, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"** (Luke 9:23).

As disciples of Jesus we struggle with that. The Gospel message is so awesome – I'm forgiven of all sin; I'm at peace with a Holy God; I'm saved from the eternal punishment of Hell that I have rightfully earned for my sin; I'm an heir of eternal life in this perfect paradise called Heaven! These are all free gifts that God gives to me through the belief that Jesus is my Savior. The Gospel message is so fun, exciting, easy, and enjoyable that we expect confessing the Gospel through words and actions to others to be fun, exciting, easy, and enjoyable all the time. And when Jesus tells us it won't be all the time, it feels like the rug has been pulled out from under us. So we try to cope with this disappointment. We get discouraged and frustrated and cynical and stop trying to confess our Christian faith completely or at least to certain people. We just focus on ourselves. We let the devil convince us that we don't have the skills necessary to confess our Christian faith, so we fade into the background and let other Christians be on the front lines of carrying our Gospel ministry. We let the world and our own sinful hearts convince us that being a follower of the one true God shouldn't be so hard, I must be doing something wrong so either we give up or we live our lives with this nagging guilty feeling that I am failing God. When this happens, and it happens to every Christian in various ways and in varying degrees, Jesus Maundy Thursday words come true, **"You will all fall away...for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'"** (Mark 14:27 – Jesus quoting Zechariah 13:7). Even the real disciples of Jesus, you and me, scatter and fall away at times because we don't want the discomfort, inconvenience and hardships that come along with being a real disciple of Jesus - being on the team that seems to be losing.

But that's where knowing what to expect as a follower of Jesus is comforting and helps us to fight all the temptations mentioned before so that we keep focused on our Savior God, knowing him and living for him. **"In the whole land," declares the LORD, "two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. ⁹ This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God'"** (vs. 8-9). The two-thirds and one-third are not to be taken literally, but the point is this - more people will end up in Hell (two-thirds) than heaven (one-third). That doesn't seem comforting, but sometimes just knowing the hard truth and what we

are dealing with is helpful and comforting. And this promise from God is good news because it means that not everyone is going to Hell in a handbasket. God will preserve a remnant of true disciples (one-third) that will never lose their faith in Jesus Christ as their eternal Savior. And those same real disciples of Jesus who were scattered when the Good Shepherd, died on the cross, were the same disciples who after his resurrection were welcomed back into the fold by the Good Shepherd and given more opportunities to embrace what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Our Good Shepherd does the same for us when we scatter. He is ready and willing to forgive us and give us more opportunities to embrace being a true disciple. Note how the apostles responded to their second chance from Jesus. After a night in jail and the threat of death for proclaiming that Jesus was their crucified, risen, and exalted Savior – **“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (of Jesus)”** (Acts 5:41).

I started the sermon with some sobering news about WELS. Let me share some good news. God has kept our little church body faithful to his Word for 169 years! Over the last 50 years our little church body has started 500 new churches serving 100,000 people! Our worker trainer school system is the envy of many other church bodies. Our membership has declined 14% over the past 29 years, but our membership is still higher than it was 50 years ago! Not many church bodies can make that same claim. While our synod in America is declining, some of the Lutheran church bodies that we are in fellowship with around the world are increasing! Just like our Good Shepherd Jesus, there is much to rejoice in and feel joy about when it comes to our lives on earth! That being said, the reality is that we should also expect discomfort, persecution, and hardship as we confess our Christian faith in words and actions. Instead of being discouraged, frustrated, and wanting to give up over this let's embrace it as a hidden blessing of God. A blessing as it keeps us focused on our need for Jesus and Heaven. A blessing as it serves to refine us (Zechariah 13:9) so we will be stronger and more battle tested when it comes to confessing our Christian faith in words and actions. Peter echoes the refinement thought of Zechariah. I leave you with these words. **“In this...greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith-of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls”** (1 Peter 1:6-9). Amen.