

Starry Eyed Applicant

It has become a spiritual practice, in this congregation, at the beginning of the new year, Epiphany Season, we are invited to select a star word. According to my “official” record, the ritual goes back at least 10 years -

You know the intention for these bright colored single word chosen stars. Right?

Maybe you’re like me. Each January I hold fast to a vision of myself committed to focusing on my word, journaling, meditating, mining deep for profound personal meaning - it never quite happens that way. What usually happens is I forget, or I experience moments of gentle reminding, a bit of tugging on my spirit, inferring sprinkles of new perception of the years Star Word.

Occasionally, I flip open the cover of my bible where I can review all those star words as a beautiful whole. Then I am able to encounter movements of profound spiritual insight for which I am grateful: I’ll share an example:

2020 - the year of covid - Courage

2021 - a time of deep personal and professional struggle - Harmony

Spiritual practice indeed!

Which is why I am not surprised the text today shines a bright spotlight on my 2026 word with a truth I'd rather not deal with, let alone come up here and seek to inspire. You see, the text today is challenging.

But it's right there on the page, Matthew 10:24 page #1631.

Sometimes for our faith to deepen and continue to have relevance, even the hard parts have to become part of our story as well.

Here's an example of what I mean. A few months ago, weeks after Easter, Amanda and I were storytelling with the children, reviewing the encounter of Thomas with those that had recently seen Jesus. You know how the story goes. Thomas meets up with his friends, they are excited and explain to him we have just seen Jesus. We thought he was gone, but He is alive. Thomas could not comprehend what he was hearing and replies,

"Not until I see the very wounds on his hand will I believe what you are saying"

As you well know, we have very inquisitive children in our class and they proceed to ask "why does Jesus have wounds on his hands? What happened to him? How did Jesus die?"

I looked at Amanda and we agreed perhaps we could reveal, carefully, death on the cross.

Each Easter, with good reasons, we speak of the death of Jesus with our primary focus on the resurrection. But sometimes, it is necessary to contemplate the story in its entirety. When we spiritually internalize the full narrative - including the humiliation, pain, and suffering the full glory of resurrection and promise is magnified.

Today is the difficult text I need to hear (and now share) to discover the meaning of my epiphany star word **discipleship**.

In the text. Matthew embarks on a conversation, clarifying what it truly takes to learn from and to follow Jesus - to be a disciple. We might say the text provides a first century equivalent to a job posting. See if you might be interested in applying?

Wanted: a deep hearted individual willing to learn the ways of Jesus. Hands on training included. willing to go the extra mile, 60% travel necessary, Must not be afraid of rejection, but be of the mindset of dusting yourself off and doing it again. May include unforeseen challenges and risks.

Ummm. I might consider applying for that job. I think it could be rewarding and use my skill set in a unique way. But, like many listings

for jobs you may have seen, as you read further there may be additional requirements necessary. Be sure not to miss the fine print

In Matthew, disciple - is a word that begins with a capital D, Discipleship requires serious commitment and is a radical choice.

Jesus continues “ 34 Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

What?? I thought I would be working for the Prince of Peace. Why might I now need a sword and potentially be asked to use it? My jedi skills are seriously lacking. Sounds like a bait and switch to me, no way am I submitting my application for a disciple THAT is too much to ask, of anybody, Jesus can't be serious? Can He?

If we backtrack in the gospel of Matthew we are reminded of Jesus' well known teachings manifesting peace. Matthew 5:9 “Blessed are the peace makers for they shall be called the children of God”

and the summary of God's law from Matthew 5:37 the Message translation:

‘Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.’ This is the most important, a second is alongside it: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’

Jesus never imagined to be the prince of the sword. The work of the disciple, with a capital D, is to set about the work of God's kin-dom peace. To imagine, proclaim, expand, bring forth a new reality for the entirety of God's household.

That my friends is **Difficult**, with a capital D, work. Committed discipleship requires us to be willing to pick up the metaphorical sword of hard choices and fully embrace God inspired loving choices. Choices that may be counter to personal comfort, financial gain, cultural norms or political realities.

Jesus boldly spoke out against the abuse and the misuse of ancient oppressive political and religious authority. Such systems needed to be figuratively plowed down to make way for God's vision. Peace is not the absence of trouble but the presence of God. Such was the work of Jesus.

I am aware, throughout the story of history, many have co-opted Jesus' hope. For a vast array of deceptive reasons. Choosing violence and domination to bring about desired outcomes. Please understand I, wholeheartedly believe we need to be talking about good trouble - disruption obtained by non-violent protest, speaking out and organizing, building bridges, finding common ground, prayer and singing. I am also aware that as we near the dawn of the nation's 250

birthday white christian nationalism stands to imply that those who are not with us are against us. Power brokers that erect barriers, build walls and shout rhetoric. AND Therein lies the challenge of the day, do we risk the trouble to engage in a messy, complex and sometimes scary world? In the name of peace, the kind of peace Jesus died for? I don't know. Honestly, I am quite uncertain of my job qualifications to set about this work. Yikes.

I do know we have to try. To call ourselves a follower of Jesus demands it. I also know we are gifted with the tools of the trade. I am willing to trust in the work of the spirit and the loving presence of God to have committed as much of myself as I can to as of much of God as I have discovered along the way. We take it a step at a time and believe, that's enough for today.

There is a discourse shared towards the end of John chapter 6. After the miracle of feeding 5000 on a country hillside, followed by walking on water across a blustery Sea of Galilee, a spectacle crowd gathers to make sense of what's going on. They ask Why don't you give us a clue about who you are, just a hint of what's going on? When we see what's up, we'll commit ourselves.

I have imagined the scene many times as it settles a large question for me. My interpretation goes something like this.

Jesus is once again explaining to all that have gathered to hear him the cost of true discipleship. I have given you the kin-dom of God revealed in me. It's near, your job is to partake to this living bread. Feast, consume, devour - for the one with a hearty appetite will live life eternal. Many who heard said this is hard, I don't like it. Can I just nibble on side? Jesus saw this and replied. Every word I have said to you is a spirit word, not of man. **It is life making.**

After thinking about it a minute many followers were resigned to face the fact they lacked the faith to continue on, they couldn't hack it. They chose not to try. they lowered their heads, and shuffled off.

Jesus looked at the others and asked " Do you also wish to leave?"

And their response to Jesus was resigned, where would we go?

You, Jesus have the words of real life. I think I'll stay right here with you and go ahead and apply for that job as a disciple, yeah that sounds good.

Amen.

Loosen the grasp of self interest and embrace a deeper way found in the way of Jesus

As has so frequently been the case in church history, those whom churches single out as “other” may actually be those who can invite the church into a deeper understanding of living out the teachings of Jesus, if only the church will listen. Presbyterian outlook

38 If you do not go all the way with me, through thick and thin, you do not deserve me. If your first concern is to look after yourself you'll never find yourself. But, if you forget about yourself and look to me you will find both yourself and me.

That kind of commitment gets you in on God's works John 6:27

Discover for yourself yes it's hard.

Am I the one to take love to power, I don't know - I just don't and that's okay. I have come to believe, and my star words of the past have revealed, I am willing to learn.