

## *Air-brushing Discipleship*

Time after Pentecost  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Over a decade ago, our extended family had a formal photograph taken, as a surprise gift to my in-laws at their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. The finished portrait was wonderful! My mother and father-in-law kept on asking, “How did you all manage to smile and not blink?” What they didn’t realize was how much technology was involved in the process. See, our family couldn’t agree on any of the proofs, but the photographer was able to take my head and my sister-in-law’s head and my nephew’s head from three other proofs, and put them all into the one photograph where everyone else looked great. *Voila!* The perfect family portrait!

Just this summer our extended family had another opportunity for a more formal photograph while vacationing together. The proofs showed this funny blue light on my sister-in-law’s face (apparently a reflection from blue lights on the steps where we were positioned), but after we pointed things out to the photographer, he was able to remove the blue mark from Jenny’s face, and we, again, looked picture-perfect. I was tempted to ask the photographer to remove the crow’s feet around my eyes, and the two funny scowl lines that run down my forehead that don’t go away anymore, even if I’m not scowling. I figured I could have used some serious air-brushing and photo technology.

You and I might want to give our scripture lessons a little air-brushing here, too. I mean, upon hearing our Gospel lesson, and Jesus’ strong words, don’t you want to ask, “What kind of a friend do we really have in Jesus?” After all, Luke reports Jesus telling the disciples that he isn’t coming to bring peace—he’s coming to bring the sword. And in the letter to the Hebrews, our author gives us a very long, gruesome list of the difficulties and afflictions suffered by the people of God. This isn’t the stuff people ordinarily want to hear. Surely this isn’t how we will win people over to Christ; surely this isn’t how we evangelize. How ironic—the Church, in many corners of our country and culture, has been promoting family values or seeking ways to support struggling households, and then, here in this one set of verses comes our Lord Jesus, intense as can be, saying that His presence among us will create division and conflict, even within the family unit itself. Our Gospel lesson today is not very family-friendly, to use a popular term. Jesus doesn’t appear exceptionally photogenic, and those who would be his disciples, those who would follow him, won’t find the idea of discipleship a pretty picture, either.

I know what we’ll do. We’ll take the head of Jesus from some other Bible story and insert it here. Give me the Jesus who takes children in his arms and blesses them, give me the Jesus who heals the sick—that’s the kind of Jesus we want to see. Let’s insert a Jesus who is less intense, less demanding, less offensive, and hence less a problem for us. We’d much rather hear stories about Jesus as peacemaker and reconciler, not instigator and troublemaker. And while we’re at it, let’s airbrush discipleship. Let’s make having a faith life appealing to the eye and easier on

the body. This is not the time or place to speak about negative outcomes possible from following Jesus. We need to market Christianity for the consumers who come in our doors. Let's face it: We look for painless ways to lose weight, painless ways to save money—how about a painless way to follow Jesus, so that discipleship wouldn't tinker so much with our lives?

Luke has us see a rare glimpse into the inner mind of Jesus. It turns out Jesus is much more complex than healer and story-teller. Certainly he was those things, too, but in this lesson Jesus tells the disciples that there is something more to him, that he's on a mission. In fact, he is utterly consumed by this mission, and it drives him along, propels him forward. Until he is able to fulfill that mission—to save the people God has created, to make possible new life for God's children—until Jesus can go and do that, he feels constrained, impatient, thwarted by things and people that get in the way of his mission.

You can hear that impatience in his words, can't you? Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" Jesus is eager to cast that fire. Now, we can interpret that a couple of ways: The fire of God's judgment upon unrepentant people who do not turn back to God. Or, the purifying fire of God that refines sinful people into holy, righteous, faithful people. Either way, the next words clearly indicate **how** the fire will be cast. Jesus says, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it's completed!" Turns out Jesus is poised to plunge into his **own** suffering and death on the cross in order to set the world on fire and change our lives forever. He'll be the first one to go into that fire, and in doing so to help us go through anything. This is not a photogenic moment, but rather, it is a moment of raw passion from the mouth of the Son of God. Judgment of our sins and purification of our beings will come; refining will take place, but at the expense of Jesus' own death.

Yes, Jesus will be the first one into the fire, and the result will be uncomfortable implications for those who would follow Jesus. Discipleship, a life of faith and obedience where trust in God is the foundation for our being, will not necessarily be painless. One implication is division, and it may occur within the human relationships we hold most dear, or in the social and communal structures in which we live and find fulfillment. It's not that Jesus is seeking somehow to subvert the family unit, or destroy patterns of social interaction. But he is lifting up a vision of God and a vision of the kingdom of God that says that any other claims on us ought not claim us. Jesus has hammered home that theme in the last several weeks, hasn't he? Other claims on us ought not claim us, be they wealth or possessions or power or family. Christ claims us, has the ultimate and absolute claim on us. Jesus wants the disciples to know that when they are claimed by Christ, and as they commit themselves to him, they cannot do so without it affecting every other commitment they have. Jesus will not airbrush discipleship. Instead, he's painfully honest. When our lives are devoted to following Jesus and his holy, life-giving ways, that devotion will shape our values and priorities; it will shape how we spend our money and how we share our possessions; it will shape our thoughts and our behaviors. Such shaping and molding can't help but affect every relationship we have, especially our most significant relationships. Just ask the person whose spouse or partner routinely finds something else to do instead of joining them in worship here. Just ask the parents who fulfilled their baptismal promises, raising their children in the faith and life of the Church, whose now grown-up children hardly darken the door of the Church. Just ask the college student who somehow makes it to campus chapel while his roommates sleep off a hangover. But it's not only discipleship's regular call to worship that has

implications for our relationships in daily life. Just ask the businesswoman who strives to be ethical in her job, while co-workers or the competition pursue business decisions that are less-than-ethical, self-serving, or downright illegal. Just ask the public servant, dedicated to helping his citizens, who finds party politics on both sides an ongoing barrier to accomplishing worthy goals. Just ask the person who takes a courageous stand on a controversial issue, who then suffers personal attacks in a public forum, and must find a way to rise above the incivility that abounds. Just ask them, and they will tell you that following Jesus Christ is not necessarily painless. In order for our discipleship to be painless, it would have to be superficial, partial, incomplete. As fake and disingenuous as some air-brushed and manipulated photography.

Jesus—this real and honest Jesus—with intensity and passion, has given himself to us. Through our baptism into his death and resurrection, his powerful Spirit works in us, his will becomes ours. The implication being that we will be filled with the same intensity and the same passion. Then our discipleship at last will be genuine, we will run with courage and perseverance the race that's set before us, and you and I will be part of the great cloud of witnesses that proclaim and live his name. **AMEN.**