

**“The Apprentice”**  
Rev. Robert H. Wade  
January 23, 2011  
Judges 7:2-8  
Matthew 4:12-23

I am currently reading Dallas Willard’s book, Revolution of Character in which he uses an unusual word to describe followers of Christ. The typical word is *disciple* but Willard chooses the fascinating word...*apprentice*. I like that! I like viewing all of Christ’s followers as apprentices. As opposed to Donald Trump’s apprentice where you either claw your way to the top or you get fired, Christ’s apprentice is in a *life long* relationship with the Master Craftsman. As Christ’s apprentice we acknowledge that Jesus is always the Master Craftsman and we freely accept that we are always in the role of the apprentice. The joy of being Christ’s apprentice is that we can actively grow, learn and serve all the days of our lives under the tutelage of the Master Craftsman....and we will never be fired!

There are many wonderful stories of God’s apprentices in the Bible and this morning you heard about God’s apprentice named Gideon. Gideon was called by God to lead the Israelites in battle against the dreaded and mighty Midianites. God trusted Gideon to defeat the Midianites but God first wanted to make sure that Gideon and the rest of the Israelites understood that their victory would be won by God’s hand and not the peoples’ wisdom, wealth and power. Throughout the Bible and up to this present day God yearns for God’s people to rely on God and not place their confidence in their own strength. It’s a hard lesson for us to learn.....this living by faith. Let’s admit it.....we are prone to trust dollars, numbers and human leaders.

In Gideon’s day the people placed their trust in an army that numbered over 30,000. But God had a plan to redirect their faith. God told Gideon they had too many soldiers and, therefore, Gideon was to send the fearful home....and 22,000 soldiers skedaddled on home. But that still left 10,000 and God said, again, that’s still too many soldiers. Take them down to the river and set aside those who lap up the water like a dog and send the rest home. It turned out that only 300 out of over 30,000 made the cut to defeat the Midianites. That must have seemed absurd to Gideon and every realist in Israel but God said, “*With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you.*” (Judges 7:7) I hope you will read the rest of the story in Judges 7 to learn how the 300 defeated the mighty Midianite army.

This past Monday I woke up with Gideon on my mind and I shared this story at our Session meeting. It seems to me that Fairmont can learn from Gideon's story. For those who have grown accustomed to having *Norma* in the office (she's been here for 20 years), or to having *Joe* direct the Bell Choir or having *Nadia* serve as our full time Christian Educator it must seem absurd to think that Fairmont will be able to carry out what God wants to see accomplished without these staff members. For those who believe that 15, 20 or 30 percent of the budget should be the minimal goal for mission giving it must seem absurd to think that Fairmont will be able to carry out what God wants to accomplish with only 9.4 % of our budget going to mission.

*Could it be that we are facing a Gideon opportunity? Could it be that God is up to something far bigger than we are currently able to imagine? Could it be that we have gotten so comfortable with the luxury of resources that we have forgotten how to trust God? Could this be a new day of faith for Fairmont?*

I applaud the Session for, first, making the decision to balance the budget. I applaud the Session for believing that God's Spirit led the people of Fairmont to faithfully offer their pledges with an average increase of 11%. I applaud the Session for getting back to the basics of solid financial stewardship. These decisions, however, naturally have consequences. Allow me to share a brief recap of the process that has brought the Session to the point of presenting a balanced budget.

After the various ministry teams paired down their program budgets, our Session met for an informational meeting two Sundays ago and we still faced a 100,000 deficit. The Session agreed that only two ministry areas could possibly sustain such a major reduction.....Personnel and Mission.

Personnel met and prayerfully made the difficult decisions to dissolve three positions. *Jim Getty* and I visited *Norma*, *Joe* and *Nadia* to share with them what the Personnel Team would be recommending to Session. Again, last Sunday our Session met to hear Personnel's report. Needless to say it was a painful meeting as Elders realized the severity of the cuts. Tuesday evening, at our regular meeting, Session prayerfully worked through the Personnel Team's recommendations. After discussion our Session voted, one recommendation at a time, in the affirmative.

The last position brought to the table was the recommendation to dissolve the full time CE Director's position. Nadia was most gracious in sharing her sincere faith that she trusted God's will for Fairmont and for her future. She then left the room and, for about an hour, the Session engaged in spirited discussion of the pros and cons of dissolving the full time CE staff position. The Session took time to explore other avenues through which we might fund the full time position, including funding the position by using the Mission budget. When the Session saw what would be left in the mission budget it became clear that the Session was unwilling to cut the mission dollars that much. So we came back to the original motion and the Session chose to vote by ballot on the recommendation to dissolve the full time CE position. It passed by a clear majority. Nadia then returned to the meeting and prayers of thanksgiving and blessing were offered for Nadia, her ministry at Fairmont and her future. At that point we moved on to the matter of the mission dollars and Session approved taking the remaining \$21,850 from Mission to balance the budget. Needless to say it was a painful meeting! Yet I applaud the Session for prayerfully seeking the Spirit's guidance each step of the way.

And where does Session's action bring us? Fairmont is at a crossroads! Which path will we take? We know we are taking the path of fiscal responsibility....that decision has been made! But that raises the crossroad question of personal response which brings us to our Gospel reading from Matthew 4:12-23.

<sup>12</sup>Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup>He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup>so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: <sup>15</sup>"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— <sup>16</sup>the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." <sup>17</sup>From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

<sup>18</sup>As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup>And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

<sup>20</sup>Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup>As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them.

<sup>22</sup>Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

<sup>23</sup>Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Jesus knew his time for public ministry had come. It was time to reveal the true light of which the prophet Isaiah had spoken, *“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”* More than ever we need to look to the true light of Jesus Christ. And we need to see that Light in Jesus Christ who walked by the Sea of Galilee and saw four brothers and said to them, *“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”* Those brothers, Peter, Andrew, James and John recognized the Light and chose to respond to Jesus’ invitation to become his apprentices. Yes, individually and corporately we at Fairmont are at a crossroads. The choice is ours. Will we choose, like the fishermen brothers, to say “yes” to Jesus’ invitation to become his apprentices right here at Fairmont?

### **What I know:**

--I know three faithful staff members will be leaving Fairmont by the end of April and they will be missed

--I know Fairmont will change.....we cannot say goodbye to three staff members without the church changing

--I know some are extremely happy by Session’s action with some wondering why it took Session so long to present a balanced budget

--I know some are extremely grieved by Session's action with some believing that Session made a terrible mistake by balancing the budget on the backs of staff

--I know the Personnel Team prayerfully and thoughtfully approached the personnel recommendations and our Session concurred with those recommendations with a clear majority

--I know that *Omar Bolivar* and *Jo Karmele* are committed to providing ongoing leadership for the PYC fellowship

--I know that the PYC Boosters will be meeting this afternoon at *Brench and Julie Boden's* home to make plans for ongoing support and leadership of the PYC Fellowship...if you are interested in helping show up at 5:15

--I know the VBS curriculum is already here and I know we need teachers and leaders to come forward to help

### **What I hope:**

--I hope that those who feel sad, betrayed, and angry will allow time for God to heal and show us how God will give new direction

--I hope that those who have an idea and, better yet, a desire to help will not wait to be asked but will step up with the confidence that you are Christ's apprentice and there is a place for you

--I hope all of us will make a concerted effort to pray God's guidance, healing and blessing for the future of our church

### **What I believe:**

--I believe God can and will see us through this challenging season

--I believe God desires that we work *together* for a better future

--I believe those who agree with Session's action will be sensitive to those who are hurting and those who are hurting will guard their minds with the grace, peace and resurrection hope of Jesus Christ

--I believe all of us are Christ's apprentices and all of us are needed for such a time as we are facing

--I believe Fairmont can thrive and grow with part time, CE staff

--I believe the wheels of the Childrens and Youth ministry have not fallen off and we will not allow them to fall off

--I believe Fairmont will offer a Vacation Bible School this summer

--I believe Fairmont will send youth on the NYC Mission Trip

--I believe Fairmont will continue to love, teach and nurture our children and you will step forward to become SS teachers, youth and office helpers

I believe God is not finished with Fairmont yet and I can picture Jesus walking through our fellowship like he walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and his invitation still rings true, ***“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”*** Yes, we are a crossroads! Each one is being called to renew your apprenticeship with the Master Fisherman. *Will you?*

Amen

Prayers of the People by Rev. Denise Ingram, January 23, 2011

Eternal and Almighty God,

Forever and ever and ever you are God! Your love, your mercy, your providential care are steadfast and never ending which evokes our heartfelt praise.

Loving God, these are difficult days at Fairmont church. The realities of the budget have resulted in difficult decisions and painful loss. We ask for your comforting presence to bear up those affected by these decisions especially Nadia, Norma and Joe, families with children and youth, Bell choir members, recipients of Norma’s work and care, all members of Fairmont church. Bless Nadia, Norma and Joe through the coming transitions. Meet the needs of their lives and guide their steps. Continue to reveal your will for their lives to each one of them. Protect and care for them we pray and for all members experiencing grief and sorrow.

May your Spirit continue to work freely in our midst. May your Spirit continue to call forth members to ensure our ministries continue. Grace members with a sense of call and the gifts needed to accomplish your will. Enable us to care well for one another and to continue caring for those outside these four walls.

Astound us, O God, of how you can make a way where there is no way. Astound us, O God, of how--with your help--we can accomplish far more than what we ask for or imagine.

We know, O God, you are faithful and steadfast in your love and grace. We know that like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home you are faithful still! For this we give you our thanks and our praise. Amen.