

Message: What is a disciple?¹

Today’s sermon is going to be interactive. I’m going to ask some questions and give you a chance to share together. I invite you to join us as we engage with God’s Word for today.

Are you a disciple of Christ?

That may seem like an odd question, but I can’t think of one that’s more important for world. It’s a question we need to wrestle with today, tomorrow and every day we live.

Why do we need to question ourselves, wondering whether we’re disciples of Christ – or not? The answer’s simple: there’s something missing from the life of the Church these days. Today’s church is a polite form of religion, but it seems to lack power, particularly the kind of power needed to change the course of our society. That’s not to say nothing is happening. In fact, all kinds of things are going on, if we consider church buildings, budgets and meetings a measure of success. I think you’ll agree with me that we aren’t here for business or meetings, but for a much deeper, more fulfilling reason. We want to experience God’s love.

Is all of this business actually fulfilling the commandment Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 28:19-20a, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you*”? That’s the mission of Jesus Christ and the mission of the church he established, the church we’ve professed to commit our heart, mind, body and strength to.

What’s the mission of the United Methodist Church?

The 2012 Book of Discipline says our mission is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”² The Scriptural vision we hold on to is the promise Jesus gave us of a heavenly feast (Matthew 22:1-14), where all who affirm Jesus Christ as the Son of God are gathered. That’s the victory at the end of the Bible, when darkness has

¹ Much material in this sermon is drawn from *DiscipleShift* by Putman, Harrington and Coleman, Zondervan, 2013

² 2012 Book of Discipline, ¶120

been defeated and we’re gathered together with all those who have gone before us in God’s kingdom. That’s a powerful motivation, isn’t it?

Two years ago, we participated in a discernment process led by Bishop Minerva Carcaño to clarify our mission in the California-Pacific annual conference. **Does anyone know that mission statement?** We are “inspiring the world as passionate followers of Jesus Christ so all may experience God’s life-giving love.”³ It addresses the way we’re to follow Jesus’ command, by “*loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves*” (Matthew 22:37,39). Putting both parts together, our mission is to make disciples who make disciples through love and grace. In other words, we’re to help people know the joy and love we share together as children of Christ, so much so that they invite their friends, family and others to come and share in what we have together.

Are you a disciple of Christ? The answer isn’t easy or obvious. If it were, all we’d have to do is stand up, say the right words and we’d be done. We could head on out to do whatever we want, free and clear. That’s a superficial faith, “cheap grace” as Bonhoeffer put it. If it was easy, we wouldn’t have any other books in the New Testament beyond the four gospels. The other letters were written by the apostles or those who knew the apostles, often in response to a challenge or difficulty within a congregation, a community or society.

In Matthew 7:12-14 Jesus gives clarity, “*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*”

Is the gate narrow? Is the road hard? It certainly is. Discipleship is not just about learning about Jesus. It’s about becoming like Jesus. The grace of Christ is freely given, but it comes at a great cost: our whole life. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all record Jesus’ words, “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the*

³ <http://www.calpacumc.org/>

gospel, will save it” (Mark 8:34-36; Matthew 16:25; Luke 9:24; John 12:25). Following Jesus comes with a great cost, a real sacrifice. We have to give up our me-first attitude and behavior and put Christ and others first in all things. I don’t know about you, but that’s hard for me. If you think it’s easy, then I would ask you to take a good, hard look at how much of your time, money and abilities you’re giving to the Lord. Then give the rest of what you’re holding back and see what happens.

We need a biblical foundation and a clear focus. Discipleship doesn’t happen through email, cold calls or over coffee in the fellowship hall. Discipleship happens through relationships, where we get into the messiness of each other’s lives. Discipleship happens when we turn to God in those times when we have disagreements, when we’re disappointed with one another, when we feel like we’re taken for granted or disrespected. Discipleship happens when we lose our job, when cancer comes, when the relationship sours. Following the path of Christ during those times is difficult. Even the most spiritually mature can fail, falter and be in need of repentance and forgiveness.

At the beginning of the sermon, I promised we’d spend some time interacting with each other. Just as it’s important for all the players on a team to come together to be successful, it’s important for all of us to be on the same page about discipleship. With that in mind, let’s start with a question: **what is a disciple?** Gather in groups of 2-3 and share your definitions together. What kinds of attributes do disciples have? Those are all good responses.

I invite you to reflect on the words from Matthew 4:19, when Jesus called Simon and Andrew to be disciples, “*Come! Follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people*” (CEB). Jesus gives us three key attributes of disciples. A disciple is a person who:

- Is following Christ (head) – we know we want to follow
- Is being changed by Christ (heart) – our heart changes as we follow
- Is committed to the mission of Jesus Christ (hands) – we invite others to come and be part of the life of Christ and part of our church.

Looking at discipleship in this way is clear, focused and Christ-like.

Making disciples who make disciples is a shift in our perspective.

We aren't just looking for greater attendance numbers, or bigger budgets or a better return on our investment. When we're focused on making disciples and we pass that desire and spiritual practice along, that's when we become true disciples of Christ.

God equips us to become disciples and to pass along the faith, love and hope we have to others. That's why God gives us spiritual gifts. We'll spend time studying spiritual gifts in March. God gives us all gifts, equipping us so we can be successful in the mission Jesus calls us to. Best of all, we have the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit to help us improve and follow that narrow path a bit more each day.

One of the ways we can grow spiritually is to do a simple exercise whenever we come together. I invite you to do this exercise in your small groups, in team meetings and, yes, we will do it during worship. I invite you now to turn to the person seated next to you and share with them the answer to this question:

“How have you experienced God this week?”

Thank you for sharing. I know it may have been difficult or uncomfortable. It gets easier with time. And there are blessings. When we share our experiences of God with others, it leads us to look for ways God is present in our lives. We begin to anticipate and look forward to the ways God will be present. That's a blessing, for it gives us hope. And it gives us something to share with others when they ask, “Why would I want to go to church with you?” That's the first step on the way to true discipleship.

Let us pray:

Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Take away the desires that shouldn't be there, and help me be single-minded in my focus and my pursuit of you. Help me to follow you and be transformed by your love so I may serve others with that same love. Lord, you are the source of true satisfaction and contentment. Guide me and help me to make wise decisions as I live my life for you. Change me so I don't waste what you give, but freely and willingly share it with others. Bless us when we live generously. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV)

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Matthew 4:17-23 (NRSV)

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 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. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 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. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. 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.