

Discipleship: Learning by Doing
September 12, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Matthew 28:18-20

Today, we begin a season in the church that we usually think of as the “stewardship” season. But we invite you all to give that word a rest, at least for a while.

By “we,” I mean the group of people who have taken on the responsibility of helping us all think about our many blessings and respond to God’s grace with our commitments to God’s church. That’s a lot of words to describe the “Stewardship” Committee, but again, we’re giving that word a rest.

Not that there is anything wrong with it. Indeed stewardship – the right and responsible use and care of what we have - stands as one of the most important aspects of the life of faith. But we have an even broader idea for us all to consider – prayerfully and intentionally – in these next few weeks. It is the idea of *discipleship*.

Now, for some, even the word ‘discipleship’ may be intimidating right off. It may conjure up images of the 12 apostles who walked away from everything they had – family, friends, jobs, homes, everything - to follow Jesus. From there, our minds may move on to thinking about monks and nuns removing themselves from the world so they can pray seven times a day and spend long hours in deep meditation.

“You can stop right there,” you might be thinking. “I’d just as soon you send me a financial pledge card. I will add a little to what I pledged last year. We can be done with it and move on.”

I’ll be the first to admit that in all my years of sitting where you are – on that side of the pulpit – I had times when my response wasn’t far from that. It wasn’t that I wasn’t committed. It was that I was ready just to “do the deal.” We all have times like that. We’re busy. We have an idea of what we can do to support the church and its ministries. We tell ourselves we’ve thought about it enough (when perhaps we have barely thought about it at all). We say to ourselves, maybe even others, we don’t need to make that big a deal about it, regardless of whether we call it stewardship or discipleship or something else.

But ... not only would that response cut God short; it would also cut us short. And here's the even better news: to put the idea of discipleship on some lofty pedestal that we can never reach is altogether the wrong approach. It also mischaracterizes the role the actual Biblical disciples played.

The Greek word for disciple appears 261 times in the New Testament. But, oddly, the vast majority of those references do little to shine light on what it means to be a disciple. Most uses of the word simply describe what those closest to Jesus did as a group: They walk, ate and slept. They talked, prayed and sometimes argued. It started when they were called by Jesus. And when their time with Christ in person was over, Christ sent them into the world, just as he had called them from it in the first place.

More than anything, though, they learned. While they were walking and eating, while they were talking and praying and even arguing, they were learning from Christ. That is what it means to be a disciple. Indeed, the Bible Dictionary on the shelf in my office defines a disciple as "a learner or apprentice who follows the instruction of a teacher or a movement."¹ That's what the disciples were before centuries of Christians added layers of meaning to the term "discipleship."

Perhaps we should reclaim that simpler original term. Perhaps that would make the Christian life a little more accessible. That is not to say that God does not sometimes call women and men to extraordinary roles of leadership and sacrifice. It is not to say that the first disciples didn't face hardship, that they didn't pay a price. They did. But, first, they learned. They learned by following Christ, their teacher. The movement came later and, then, the institution of the church.

But, first, they literally followed Christ. Where Jesus went, they went. They watched how he interacted with the lofty and the lowly. They observed how he healed and counseled those in need, as well as how he irritated those who thought the faith belonged to them and their rules and official titles. They gaped as he performed miracles and they racked their brains to understand his parables. They watched and learned.

But the Bible Dictionary definition also says that a disciple is an "apprentice." What is an apprentice? One who learns by doing. One who has had time at the foot of the teacher, one who has spent hours with the book and is now ready to try her or his hand.

¹ HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, p. 242

So it was with Jesus' disciples. There came a time when he sent them out. He gave them authority over unclean spirits.² He empowered them to heal disease and sickness. He sent them to find the lost sheep of Israel and to preach the good news of the gospel.

But first, they spent time learning what it meant to walk with God as Christ did and to do God's work in large ways and small, as Christ did. And finally, in the closing verses of the Gospel of Matthew, perhaps the best known sending of all, Christ sends his disciples out to do his work, to be the body of Christ:

“And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Go and make other disciples – baptizing and teaching, teaching others who will become disciples themselves, by learning and then doing. On the front of your bulletin, you see a diagram that portrays the simplicity of what Christ had in mind. Disciples are called, just as Christ called his followers. Then, after learning, they are sent to do God's work. By doing God's work, they teach others, who are called and then sent. And on it goes, at least in the ideal, a never-ending cycle, an ever-widening circle of disciples, moving out from within themselves, into the world in the name of Christ.

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But somewhere along the way, the church at large got things out of order. Too many church people drew the biggest circle around themselves and put the church inside that circle, to serve our needs. Then we put God inside the church. So God's circle was the smallest. We knew right where it was all the time. Too many people of faith put it off to the side in their personal circle and left plenty of space for other things to make them happy and distracted. To get to God at all, they had to fish around, as if God was in the bottom of their pocket, next to the loose change and the car keys.

That's all backwards. At least so says, Brian McLaren and other new church thinkers who are calling the church to remember its origins. The earliest church, the one that followed in the decades after Christ's life, death and resurrection, was a movement, not an institution. It attracted learners and apprentices. It fulfilled Christ's words in Matthew 28. The business of “making disciples” as Christ instructed wasn't an assembly line

² These references all from Matthew 10

operation or a process of getting someone to say a few magic words. It was organic, never the same twice. The verb Christ used in making the great commission meant to “form” disciples, which takes time, like forming a pot or a vase out of clay, shaping something of use out of a lump of inert material.

In too many places, McLaren and others say, churches have forgotten what it means to be a movement. As with other organizations in society, they have become institutions. Institutions come to exist originally for the purpose of protecting advancements that movements have gained. But movements and institutions are very different things.

Think of the civil rights movement. It truly was a movement, a compelling cause that drew people together in unpredictable, uneven, sometimes even chaotic ways but with equally unpredictable and remarkable results in how it changed society.

As movements often do, the civil rights movement gave birth to institutions such as the NAACP and the Urban League, which exist to preserve the advancements the movement gained. But the thing about institutions is that they get conservative, the focus on conserving the reasons they exist rather than achieving even greater gains. Then, too often, they become complacent.

What do institutions ask of their members? Mostly they ask for fees. Mail in a check every now and then and you are a member in good standing. That’s all that’s needed.

But what do movements ask? First, they ask people to learn. Most often, they do not offer simple answers to complex questions. They invite people to engage with their hearts and minds and souls. Then, at some point, they ask people to commit, as Christ did with those who followed him.

Which would you rather be a part of – an institution or a movement?

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This week, you will receive a packet from the church. It’s offered to frame our thinking about our discipleship. The season of discipleship for Caldwell will follow the two steps that mark the life of disciples.

First, we are called. As it relates to the church, we invite you to consider how you are called to practice your faith in action, to learn as a disciple but to learn by doing. What ministry do you feel drawn to? What ministry would you like to know more about? What

ministry do you think is most needed in the life of our community right now, one that calls you into action?

The information you receive summarizes our full range of ministries and invites you to consider how you will commit your time and talents to God's work. Take time to think and pray over these materials. Then, two weeks from today, bring your commitment of calling to church on Sunday, the 26th of September. After that date, we will focus briefly on how Caldwell as a church is sent into the world and what that sending means for our financial resources.

God is doing amazing things here. God calls each of us to take an active role in this movement.

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Recently, one of you shared a story, a story that even surprised the person who was telling it.

This church member was telling a family member about all she was doing through Caldwell. Knowing this person, I have no doubt there was both excitement and conviction in her voice as she described the role she was playing in bringing our ministries to life. There was also a quiet joy in her voice even as she recounted the story to me.

Upon hearing about this member's many active commitments, her family member responded with a puzzled look.

"But why are you doing all of that?" the family member asked.

And without hesitation, this church member found herself saying, "I'm doing God's work."

From the way she told the story, it was clear that she was almost as surprised by her answer as the family member. Not because she had not been a faithful member of the church for a while. She had. Not because she had not helped out with multiple ministries. She had.

No, her surprise, I think, was more at the reflex-like speed of her answer, how those words came out so effortlessly and the comfort and sense of purpose they brought to her.

“I am doing God’s work,” she said. And both she and her family member sat for a moment in reflective silence.

That, friends, is the response of someone involved in a movement, someone who is learning all the time what it means to be a Christian, but who is learning by doing. It is the response of a disciple.

May God be with each of us as we consider how we are called – and sent – by the one we follow, Christ, our teacher, our model and our Savior. Amen.