

July 6 – What is A Disciple?

One Who is Called

Matthew 4:18-22

The church, like any group or business, uses words that are specific to what we do. Over the past year and a half we have been discussing the concept of the Simple Church. What this means, in brief, is that churches over time keep adding programs and rarely deleting any. Our structures become more complex and after a while we are so busy doing church that we have no time to be the church. The Simple Church movement stresses that we need to evaluate and simplify so that most of our effort is going to those core things that we value. In conversations with our district superintendent we came to understand that what this church, any church, should be focused on is making disciples for Jesus Christ. This led us to a discussion of what is a disciple. The basic definition is one who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another: We have no problem with the first part, accepting the doctrines of Jesus but the second part, spreading the doctrines, makes some of us very uneasy. I came to realize that many confuse being a disciple with being an evangelist.

This came home when, a few months ago, in the span of a week I had two different people tell me they were not comfortable being a disciple and wondered why I was placing so much emphasis on this idea. When they saw my shocked looked, we had further dialogue and I learn that they don't want the role of evangelist. They believe in Jesus but thought that my emphasis on discipleship would mean that soon I would be challenging them, perhaps even forcing them, to go talk to their friends and neighbors about our church. This is not a bad thing let me be quick to say, but not a gift for all. This and other conversations in groups led me to realize that we use the term disciple frequently in the church but most have little understanding of the fullness of its meaning or misunderstand its meaning and are scared of the title. So, this summer we are going to look at what it means to be a disciple of Christ and why we need to, in everything we do as a congregation, focus on this task. If we do, we will find out that we will grow in faith and just as importantly others will be invited, loved and all will be transformed. Today we learn a disciple is one who is called and accepts the calling.

Today's scripture focuses on the call of the first four of Jesus' disciples. Jesus asks the two sets of brothers to come and follow him. This is the first part of being a disciple. We are invited into a personal relationship with Jesus. But, and this is just as important, it says that they left everything and followed him. We have to say yes to the call. We need to respond which means a change in life, a change in focus, a change in community. Many can give verbal assent to the values of our faith but until they respond in definite ways it is just words.

The good news for you is that because you are sitting here this morning at some point in your life you said yes to Jesus' call. You have made choices for Jesus. You have entered into a personal relationship and are living it out in the community called Trinity UMC. Whether you realize it or not you have said yes to life changing actions. Some of you might say, but I have gone to church all of my life. I grew up in the church and so I haven't made any real change in focus or values. We have to renew that calling every day. Many grow up in the church and then for whatever reason no longer attend. They think of themselves as Christians but they no longer are part of a faith community and so they are no longer disciples. For discipleship means learning, growing and sharing our faith and staying connected to the community of faith.

You can quit being a disciple. You may continue to hold onto the beliefs of faith but you are not living them on a daily basis, which is part of what it means to be a disciple. So, discipleship is about a daily call and our response to that call. The more we intentionally think about it, the more faithfully we will live our faith. This will cause us to grow and will be an example to others.

When I think about this saying yes to the call, I am reminded of many saints of the churches whom I have had the privilege to serve as a pastor who continually and intentionally live out their faith, sometimes under very trying personal conditions. I am reminded of one who attends though her husband never comes to church. Almost weekly they have a conversation that goes something like this. Let's do such and such on Sunday. Fine, I will be free at noon. That won't give us enough time. You can skip church this week, can't you? No, I am going to church. Well then there is no use doing it. It is a weekly battle of wills. They arrive at a compromise, most weeks. Sometimes

she does skip church but mostly she stays the course and reminds him how important her faith is to her and to her well-being. Her children have been raised in the church and are going as young adults. One of them mentioned to me that one of the reasons she goes to church is that seeing this weekly struggle made her understand that church is important. So we are to say yes to the call.

Also, by our actions we can make it easier or more difficult for others to say yes. There are wonderful stories within the gospel that prove both points. Think about when a disciple brought the boy with the loaves and fishes to Jesus. The disciple was skeptical that such a small lunch would make any difference with such a great need but he brought him to Jesus and 5,000 were fed. The disciple was providing an entry point. Through his actions the boy came to Jesus and others were blessed. What can we do to make this happen for others? We can make sure there is a Sunday school and make sure families know about it. We host a monthly meal outreach. We need to support it and invite others to come. We work hard at making sure that everyone who enters the doors of this church are greeted with a smile and a warm word of welcome. If you live faithfully, you will be given opportunities to invite, to care and to share. These are points of entry for others to have a personal relationship with Jesus. It is the work of a disciple. It isn't the evangelist who knocks on doors but the faithful sharing the blessings of community.

One person defined discipleship as one beggar telling another beggar where to find a scrap of bread. It is inviting others into the joy of our life together. Now you begin to see why we need to focus on being a disciple.

I do need to say that sometimes we make it more challenging for people to be faithful. Think about the gospel story where the disciples tried to turn away the mothers and their children who wanted to see Jesus. They were making it difficult for them to hear and respond to Jesus' call of discipleship. When have we done that as individuals and as a church? We have all been guilty of it.

Think about times you have heard people bad mouthing someone or something in their church to others who are not part of the faith community. Is that an invitational

act? I mean it is bad enough when we talk about each other to each other but at least we are family and there is hope of fixing it, but to others? Or we decide not to invite a new acquaintance to an activity because we are sure they wouldn't want to come. Or, we create rules and labels that exclude. Yes the church has done it all.

So in saying yes, we accept that we are to learn and assist in spreading the good news. We are entry points for others to meet Jesus so they too can say yes. This is not the role of evangelist that some of you fear. We will talk about this in our series. I want us to image a faithful disciple as being like a doorman. You know those people, they are getting kind of rare, that stand outside to welcome you, hold the door open, and invite you in? That is a disciple living our faith in the world, presenting our faith in the most welcoming way we can, and when given the opportunity, to invite.

So first of all a disciple of Jesus is one who is called into a personal relationship and says yes on a daily basis, and lives in such a way that others can also hear and respond.