



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Reverend Denise Weaver
July 7, 2019 Sermon

Disciple Making

Scripture Lessons: Mathew 28:16-20

After three years of ministry with his disciples, Jesus shares his final words about carrying on his mission. A small band of eleven disciples remain, Judas is gone, and the gospel writer Matthew tells us when the disciples met up with the risen Christ “they worshiped him and some doubted.”

Here is an encouraging word before we get too far into the passage. The disciples worshipped Christ and some *doubted!*?! The very disciples, who had had front row seats to Jesus teaching crowds, feeding 5,000+ with one lunch, healing the lame, blind and ill, and casting out demons. The same disciples who witnessed his death on the cross, discovered his sealed grave empty except for grave clothes and have since been sharing meals and conversations with the risen Christ. These disciples, when they saw him on that mountain, they worshipped. But their worship was mixed with doubt. Not even the sight of Jesus negated all the uncertainties and questions. The disciples still experienced a mixture of adoration and indecision. Given that disciples who had intimate knowledge of and experience with Jesus had their doubts, it should come as no surprise those of us who “see” Jesus with eyes of faith will also. The good news is that doubt does not negate faith, rather faith and doubt go together like a hand in glove. As Frederick Buechner said, “Doubts are the ants-in-the-pants of faith. They keep it alive and moving”.¹ We all doubt at some time or another. “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith”, Paul Tillich wrote.² (That quote is on the front of your bulletin.) Jesus does not seem surprised the disciples have doubts. What is surprising is that the disciples are not excluded because of their doubts and questions. In fact, it is precisely to these worshipping and doubting disciples that the Great Commission is given. Jesus tells them, “*Go and make disciples of all nations.*” (Mt. 28:19a)

Just as Jesus taught his disciples how to be students of God’s will, they are now sent as tutors to teach mercy and righteousness, forgiveness and peacemaking as they equip others with this kingdom training. So how do we “make disciples” in this day and age?

We need clear instruction at times, such as one receives in a sermon, bible study or adult education class. Yet there are other ways to “teach” the Christian faith. I believe disciples are made, by and large, through the examples set by other disciples.

During my first week serving as a hospital chaplain, I was visiting patients in the unit I had been assigned. I noticed a family standing in the hall looking distraught, one woman in tears. Not sure exactly what to do, this being my first week, I reminded myself I was the chaplain and should at least ask if there was something I could do to help. After introducing myself, they poured out the story of their loved one and the daunting challenges he faced to getting well. We talked until the doctor arrived for a consult with the family. I excused myself, promising to return to visit their loved one.

When I shared this incident with my supervisor, he asked, “How did you know to approach a family out of the blue like that?”

“I don’t know, I thought it was something I was supposed to do since I was chaplain for that unit. Was that wrong?”

“No, it was not wrong,” my supervisor said, “but that is learned behavior. Who taught you to do that?”

“I don’t know”, I responded.

“Think about it and let me know”, he said.

I thought about it for several days and memories came flooding back. There was the time my youth group got the news a high school junior in our group and her college-age boyfriend were dealing with an unexpected pregnancy that impacted their college plans. Our entire youth group felt sad and distraught for our friends and their lives turned upside down. The next Sunday at church, Mr. Wilson, an adult advisor to our youth group, pulled me aside to reassure me this couple would be okay because we, the church, were going to love and support them as they got married and had their baby. It was a challenge no one wanted for them but they would be fully supported. I appreciated his taking the initiative to care for me knowing I was deeply troubled about my friends. I learned later he pulled every youth member aside to tell them the same thing.

There was the time Mrs. Kepner, an older woman I knew from attending the bible study she taught, heard my parents were getting a divorce. She invited me to her home where she offered a listening ear, support and practical wisdom. As our conversation drew to a close, she prayed for me and my family.

Then there was Mr. George, who had a passion for the bus ministry of the Southern Baptist church in which I grew up. He arrived early on Sunday mornings to accompany one of the two buses used to pick up people from a socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhood and bring them to our church for Sunday School and worship. He rode along after worship as people were taken home. He spent Saturday mornings in the neighborhood inviting families to worship. He developed relationships with the families and often connected the Deacons with a family’s particular need. He encouraged members’ participation in the bus ministry so others could be reached with the news of God’s love. This took place in the early 1970’s. Even as a young high school student, I recognized Mr. George’s passion for this ministry through his investment of time and compassion. I also recognized the significant impact it had within our church and community.

You may wonder why I tell you about these church members. I share their stories because of what they have in common—being in the business of “making disciples.” They went about “making disciples” by living their lives faithfully, rather quietly, using their gifts, skills and passions to impact the lives of others. I tell their stories because some people might mistakenly think “making disciples” is best left to those seminary trained. I share their stories because so often the average Christian has very little idea that what they do matters to God and the church. Don’t believe me? Answer me this, what do you do on a daily basis that “counts” as God’s work? Earlier in my life, I would have credited Mr. George with “making disciples” since his work with the bus ministry most closely resembles evangelism. I have since realized all three were “making disciples” as through words and deeds they conveyed God’s love, exemplified Jesus’ teachings, and listened and cared for others just as Jesus did. Their actions taught me that becoming a disciple is not to be converted to an ideology; it is to be drawn into relationship with God and with those that love God. Their behavior showed me

that being a disciple is a life-long learning process about living one's faith. The things they taught me helped make me the disciple I am. Their words and actions continue to inform my ministry to this day.

How had I known to approach that distraught family in the hospital? I had experienced adult disciples initiating care toward me when I was distraught rather than waiting to be asked to help. I had witnessed disciples investing in relationships, listening and reaching out with compassion which became tangible reminders of Jesus' teachings. I wonder if those adults realized they had been engaged in "disciple making?"

How do we make disciples? The same way Jesus did. Jesus loved people, blessed them, helped them and gave them enough room to make their own decision.

Jesus gives the disciples clear instructions who is to be invited to become disciples; "I want you to be this way with everybody in the world." Everybody? Everybody includes a lot of people. People who do not look like us, think like us, share the same political views, values or sexual orientation. Jesus, do you really mean everybody? "Yes, everybody", Jesus repeats as the disciples flash back to Jesus welcoming Gentiles, Samaritans and a whole host of folks deemed less desirable – slaves, lepers, children, women – even less than virtuous women. You name them and Jesus welcomed them.

The task given to Christ's disciples is staggering. The Great Commission must have seemed ludicrous to the little band of disciples. There are only eleven of them hearing Jesus' words and they are being sent on a worldwide mission into some unwelcoming territories. Jesus has the right to command the eleven to "make disciples" because "*all authority in heaven and on earth*" has been given to him. (Matt. 28:18) The word "authority" carries the notion of power. The disciples are also promised the potency to carry out the task.

"There was only one word that could have prevented them from collapsing in laughter or running away in fear at the enormity of the mission. Only one word that could have strengthened their resolve and sent them out to the vast world with the good news of the gospel, and that was the word Jesus spoke: '*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*' (Matt. 28:20)

This parting word from the Risen Christ is the heart of Matthew's entire gospel. This is the way it is for Jesus' followers. We go into the world armed with both faith and doubts, both our understanding and our questions about God and we "make disciples" with everything Jesus has taught us. We are not promised every endeavor will be a success or that the good news will always be warmly received. What the church is promised is that God in Christ will not abandon us but will be faithfully present in our midst – loving, encouraging, guiding and giving hope."³

"*And remember,*" Jesus said, "*I am with you always . . .*".
Thanks be to God. Amen.

1 Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (HarperCollinsPublishers).

2 Tillich, Paul. *Dynamics of Faith*, (Harper & Row), 1957, p. 22.

3 Long, Thomas G. Matthew, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), p. 328.

