**Celebration of Discipline Series**

**Sunday May 8, 2022**

**Sermon #1: “The Path of Discipleship” (Matthew 28:16-20)**

There is a common thematic thread found throughout the Gospels with respect to the events that happened after Easter. In all these accounts we discover a remarkable convergence of thought. With very similar images and themes, Matthew, Luke, and John record Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples to continue his mission in the world. In John 20:19-23, our Lord appeared to his disciples, pronounced peace upon them, and sent them out in mission, saying, “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you*.” He then breathed upon them and gave them the Holy Spirit to guide and empower them for mission. In Luke 24:35-49, Jesus appeared to his disciples, pronounced peace upon them, explained his death and resurrection, and sent them out in mission. He said to them, “*With my authority, take this message of repentance to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: ‘There is forgiveness of sins for all who turn to me.’ You are witnesses of all these things*.” Then, he promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower them for mission.

This morning’s Scripture lesson from Matthew 28:16-20 is yet another account of the commissioning of the disciples. It is the most familiar one and it has been called “*the Great Commission*.” Jesus said to his disciples, “*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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:19-20). *All these passages from the Gospels lead us to the obvious conclusion that being commissioned by Christ for mission is essential to the Christian life and the Christian church.* When Jesus ascended to the Father, he left the church with the Great Commission. The first goal he set forth for the early church was to use his all-encompassing power and authority to *make disciples*. After making disciples, these ones were to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit to signify that they belonged to God and their lives had come under God’s lordship. Then, these disciples were to be taught to treasure and obey all of Christ’s commands (28:20). The Christian church of the first century resulted from following this plan for church growth.

Yet Jesus’ great commission is not simply some nice statement from a bygone era. His commission is for us as well. More importantly, his words should cause us to pause and reflect on our purpose and mission as a congregation. What is our purpose? Is it in line with the Great Commission? Are we *making disciples*? Do we have a coherent discipleship pathway? Part of the problem is that the term *disciple* is a bit foreign to us. At its very root, *disciple* means *student* or *learner.* In ancient cultures, eager students would attach themselves to a particular rabbi or philosopher. They would spend lots of time with their teachers, follow them around, listen to their words, and observe their actions. They would seek to be like their masters by obeying their teachings and imitating their actions. This is discipleship pathway that Jesus’ first disciples took. They left everything and followed Jesus (Mark 10:28). They travelled with him and carefully watched and listened as he announced, enacted, and explained the kingdom of God. The first disciples had a three-year apprenticeship with Jesus to learn how to participate in the work of the kingdom.

Today, we cannot literally be with Jesus in the same way as his first disciples. Our discipleship pathway is not to be found on the dusty roads of Galilee. Yet even though the particulars are not the same, the heart of discipleship remains constant. *In the very heart of a disciple is a deep desire to be like Jesus*. To be a disciple one must make the decision to devote oneself to becoming like Christ. One must intentionally enroll in the school of Christ and learn from him. As a body of believers, we are *a company of learners*. This understanding of our collective identity should foster humility and co-operation among us. We will be humble toward God and each other when we recognize that we are all students of Jesus. None of us have graduated yet because the school days of a Christian are never over. Speaking of the spiritual life, the great Thomas Merton once said, “We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners all our life” (*Spiritual Direction and Meditation,* p. 59). Thankfully, the learning process is also a co-operative one, as we support each other in our efforts to become Christlike in our actions and attitudes. Yet this will also require a healthy amount of patience with God and with each other. All of us are works in progress!

Most importantly, we must remember that the inner transformation toward Christlikeness cannot be achieved through human effort. Anyone who struggles with anger knows how difficult it is to keep a cork on it all the time. At an unguarded moment, when we’re tired or stressed, it’s easy to let things slip and explode. And even if we were to control our anger, we might become prideful of the fact that we were able to do so. The kind of inner change that is needed in our lives is a gift from God. Richard Foster writes, “The needed change within us is God’s word, not ours” (*Celebration of Discipline,* p. 5). Yet if inner righteousness is by the grace of God, what role do we play in the discipleship process? Should we simply wait around for God to show up and transform us? No, I believe that we have a significant role to play.

The apostle Paul wrote, “*Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life*” (Galatians 6:8). Reflecting on this verse, Richard Foster writes, “A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He puts the seed in the ground where the natural forces take over and up comes the grain” (*Celebration of Disciple,* p. 6). Linking this image to discipleship, Foster suggests that each one of us can “sow to the Spirit” by practicing the spiritual disciplines. Some examples of the spiritual disciplines include prayer, meditation, solitude, service, confession, and worship. Through the practice of the spiritual disciplines, we are preparing the soil of our lives for God’s transforming work. In and of themselves, these activities don’t produce the needed change. Rather, God uses these a way of re-locating us to a place where he can work within us and transform us.

With this in mind, I would like to take us on a journey through the spiritual disciplines over the next little while. My deepest desire is to foster a genuine discipleship culture in our congregation and stir up the desire within all of us to be like Jesus. My plan is to preach a sermon on a spiritual disciple on each Sunday over the next little while. With each sermon, I’ll offer some reflection questions and practical exercises to reinforce the points of the sermon. As we begin this journey, I would like to emphasize once again that we are a company of learners. I am not an expert in the spiritual disciples, and I’ll be learning and practicing them along with you.

The Great Commission should cause us to think about our purpose as a community of faith. Our task is so much more than just filling our pews, increasing our membership roster, or gaining more warm bodies to perform various jobs. Jesus commands us to *make disciples,* but this divine task begins with each one of us. The popular expression, “*Be the change you want to see in the world*” contains a lot of truth. It’s easy for us to be judgmental of others and disheartened by the general condition of the world. We want to change the world, but we must realize that change begins with ourselves. If we want to make disciples, we ourselves must be disciples. The question for each one of us is this, have we enrolled in the school of Jesus? To all who decide to start down the discipleship pathway, take heart for our Lord promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age (28:20).

**A Reflection Question and a Practical Exercise**

1. Dallas Willard writes, “If we intend to become like Christ, that will be obvious to every thoughtful person around us, as well as to ourselves.” What would change about your life if you were to focus all your energies on becoming like Christ? What kind of reaction would you get from those around you?

2. Meditate on the lordship of Christ. Examine your life to see how much of it actually falls under Jesus’ authority. Instead of focusing on the cost of giving these areas over to Christ, focus on the high price you have been paying by keeping them under your control.