

## **DISCIPLING**

Series: Mission Possible

John 1:29-51

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I tried a little exercise this week that you may want to try sometime. I thought of things I do, things I am involved in, and then tried to remember how it is that I got involved in the first place or why it is I do different things. In other words, what was my initial motivation? I discovered that in almost every case someone else put me up to it. It was surprising. Not that I had gotten involved in this or that because of others, but that others were behind just about everything I could think of.

I chose to go into the ministry because of call, of course, and because church was already a big part of my life, and because my father was in ministry and I watched him, but also because other clergy spoke to me about it and encouraged it. The rumor that I chose this career because I couldn't get another job is only partially true. I got involved with scuba diving after a friend invited me on a trip to snorkel in some amazingly beautiful waters where I caught the bug. I pursued a pilot's license after a friend said let me take you flying so you can see why I love it so much. I accepted the invitation and fell in love with it, too. It goes beyond career and hobbies. So many places I have traveled to got on my list because someone who had been there said you just have to go, it's amazing. Restaurants I have tried, movies I have seen, and books I have read have usually been recommended by others. As I scrolled through a mental inventory, I was overwhelmed by the number of times I could say I did that because so and so put me onto it. Try it yourself and see if you have the same experience.

I am making this point because today we are talking about making disciples, bringing others to Jesus, leading others to become followers of the Lord, and the absolute best way to do that is to invite another to share your experience, to put others onto Jesus.

Now, some alarm bells might be going off in your head. This idea of sharing Christ with others can make us a little uncomfortable, maybe a lot uncomfortable. You may have had a bad experience when someone else tried to overshare with you – shoving religion down your throat. Sadly, evangelism has gotten a bad name because so many evangelists are just, well, annoying and overbearing. We also have some social taboos to overcome. Religion and politics are considered inappropriate topics in social settings. Not to mention, we want to be culturally sensitive. People hold a wide range of beliefs and it is impolite to attempt to impose our beliefs on them. There are legitimate reasons for wanting to keep quiet about our faith.

Ah, but there are also good reasons not to be quiet, the biggest reason being that Jesus commanded us to speak up. At the conclusion of the gospel of Matthew, the resurrected Jesus is about to ascend to heaven and gives the disciples final instructions. These instructions are known as the Great Commission. He told that ragtag group, “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.” There it is – the command to speak up. Marching orders for believers. Go and make disciples. Now, that was no more comfortable for the first disciples than it is for us. Their fellow Jews did not want to hear about Jesus. They had crucified him for a reason. Gentiles had plenty of other gods to focus on, thank you very much. But a command is a command, and Jesus did not say go to wherever there is a waiting, receptive audience. He said go everywhere.

The Great Commission is so significant that nearly all Christian mission statements include making disciples as at least part of the mission, if not the sole or primary mission. Making disciples for the transformation of the world is the United Methodist mission statement and, oh, by the way, it is the conclusion of our mission statement. We say we are devoted servants, drawn to Jesus. Great. That speaks to who we are, who we are striving to be. What do we do, though? Well, as Jesus-drawn servants, we are dedicated to making disciples. That is the task to which we are dedicated, on which we are focused: making disciples. As such, it is not an overstatement to say that everything else we do should have that end in mind. If it does not somehow contribute to making disciples, then why are we doing it? If we get busy with all kinds of things that have nothing to do with disciple-making, then we are distracted disciple-makers, not dedicated disciple-makers.

Jesus said that this is our mission and we have said that this is our mission. But then comes the inevitable question. Just how do we do that? How are we supposed to make disciples?

First and foremost, we simply invite people into relationship with Jesus. I began by saying that so much of what I have done in life has been because of the invitations of others. The same holds true here. More times than not, people meet Christ because someone introduces them.

Consider our gospel lesson this morning. It begins with John the Baptist. Now John had his own disciples or followers. One was Andrew. After Jesus had been baptized, he stayed in the area. When he would pass by, John would point to him and say to his disciples, there is the Lamb of God. In other words, he is the one you should be following. Andrew took the hint and went after Jesus. Once he experienced Jesus, Andrew went and found his brother, Simon Peter. He told him that we have found the Messiah and introduced his brother to the Lord. Jesus himself called Philip. Philip, in turn, found Nathaniel, testified for Jesus, and invited Nathaniel into relationship. In this account a

spiritual leader pointed to Jesus. A new disciple then invited a family member. Another new disciple invited a friend. And so the circle grew. No one browbeat anyone. No one cornered anyone. They simply shared their own excitement, putting others on to Jesus.

As an aside, to make this kind of invitation effective, you do have to be excited about that to which you are inviting others. I have tried restaurants because someone has said you have to try it: the food is outstanding and/or the ambience is special and/or the service is excellent and/or the prices cannot be beat. I have never had anyone say you have to try this restaurant: the food is lousy, the place is loud and dirty, and the service is non-existent, but hey, it's cheap. I can't imagine I would be inspired to go even if someone did say that. If you are ho-hum about your faith, or ho-hum about your relationship with Jesus, or ho-hum about your church, maybe you should ignore this plea to be invitational. I am of the mind that it is better to say nothing than something like, you ought to try my church, it's not too boring.

On the other hand, if you are excited, if you believe your relationship with Jesus has been a great benefit in your life, share that as enthusiastically and as naturally as you share other things that excite you. Let others know how exceptional it is. Look again at John. John the Baptist did not point to Jesus saying there is a good person to follow. He said there is the Lamb of God. Andrew did not say to Peter, we have found a really interesting rabbi. He said we have found the Messiah. Philip did not say to Nathaniel that they had found a great spiritual leader. He said they had found the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote. Their invitations made clear that meeting Jesus was a game changer. That's the oomph we want to put into our invitations. Do not fear hyperbole! You cannot overstate the importance of Jesus.

Even then, of course, not everyone will respond. They may be hesitant, such as Nathaniel first responding to Philip by saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Some will outright pooh-pooh it and say no. That is just a fact. It is astounding to me how many walked away from Jesus himself. The fact is, more people will disregard our invitations than will respond. But who said that 100% response is the goal? Honestly, wouldn't you be thrilled if you led just one person to Christ this year? Then imagine if every one of us led just one person to Jesus this year. We would double the number of disciples in this body. It all begins with our willingness to share our experience with another. It begins with being ready when the opportunity presents itself to say, "Let me tell you about what Jesus has meant to me."

The first step is inviting disciples. The second step is training disciples. I was reading an article by Danny Morris, the architect of the Ten Brave Christians program. This is a program designed to help Christians learn and practice the disciplines that undergird faithful discipleship. In the article Morris talked about how he was skilled at introducing people to Christ and getting them to the altar for baptism or a profession of

faith. Then one day one of the new Christians asked, “Now what?” He had accepted the invitation and come forward to profess his faith. Now what? He wanted to know the next steps, where to go from there. Morris confessed that he did not have a good answer. He had been focused on getting people to the altar. He had not thought about what they were to do then. This is when he came up with the Ten Brave Christians program.

Answering the question “Now what?” is where the church comes in. Individually we invite. Together we train. Disciples need to know about the scripture and to learn about the faith. This learning happens mostly in small group Bible studies and discussion groups. There is a reason we have an education hour between our two services. It is a chance for people of all ages to learn and grow. Disciples need to worship. The church makes that possible. Disciples need to serve. The church provides numerous service and outreach and mission opportunities. Disciples need to be around other disciples. Fellowship and social gatherings make this possible. Disciples need to share their spiritual gifts. Here you can share in everything from music to financial management to teaching to cooking to landscaping to youth ministry. Disciples need to give. The church teaches disciplined, intentional, sacrificial giving.

You see, all the ministries of the church are part of making disciples. Discipleship is not limited to saying I believe in Jesus. Discipleship involves being an active follower of Jesus, living as Christ would have us live. Serving as Christ would have us serve. The church that answers the now what question by saying now you are on your own is a church that is not making disciples. I don’t care how many confessions of faith and baptisms they may claim. A disciple-making church creates ample opportunity for learning and practicing being a faithful follower. Those who learn and practice and develop, then, in turn, invite others.

We say that we are dedicated to making disciples. Dedication does not imply haphazard efforts. It implies laser focus and commitment.

Disciple-making is a mission. Mission possible.

Amen.