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Pentecost 18, October 1, 2023

“I Am a Christian – Part 3 I Am a Disciple”

Read: Philippians 2: 12 - 18 and/or Memorize: Phil 2:13 NLT

When most Christians hear the word disciple, we immediately think of being a follower of Jesus. But discipleship can come in many categories. You can be the disciple of an interior decorator, librarian or florist. So, we to define discipleship not in our own words but rather in the words of Jesus.

He invites people without much flourish: “Follow me.” It sounds so simple, doesn’t it? But if you’ve lived it for any time as a follower, you know it is not simple. It’s certainly not simple to be a disciple when you read about how the disciples blew it.

They walked and talked with Jesus for three years, yet, as Him ministry came to its end, they abandoned Him. They failed to understand what He was saying and sometimes rebuked Him for saying things like “I’m going to Jerusalem to die.”

They had not yet integrated the idea of following Jesus into their lives. I don’t think we should judge them for that. Until the very end they were missing something that we have received, the Holy Spirit. We come at being a follower of Jesus Christ from a much different direction.

The reality is that you can’t become more like Jesus until you grow more like Him. You can’t do that until you’ve spent time in the Word. Just as we talked about two weeks ago, without spending time in the Word, your discipleship will always be weak.

Unless the Holy Spirit empowers you, it is impossible to be a disciple. Without the Holy Spirit you are just going through the motions. You may be the nicest person in the world; know a lot about Jesus and memorize a lot of Bible verses. But until you understand that it is the Holy Spirit that empowers and sustains your discipleship, it will have no power. It is when we submit ourselves to Jesus; receiving the Holy Spirit’s presence that our discipleship takes a dramatic turn.

Rainer reports on a book by Brad Waggoner called “The Shape of Faith to Come.” After examining the spiritual disciplines of 2,500 church goers Waggoner discovered a

consistent theme: Christians who read their Bibles daily were more likely to grow in all areas of their spiritual growth.

They were more likely to obey God, share their faith, serve others and learn deeper truths about the Christian faith. If you want to be a disciple, there is one sure way to accomplish that goal: be in the Word, which gives the Spirit the opportunity He needs. How much is enough? It's not just randomly nor is it about spending hours once in a while. The very best discipline for a disciple is that you are in the Word daily!

I want you to think and pray about this. On your connection card I'm going to challenge you to do that. I'm going to ask you to commit to being in the Word of God for a minimum of fifteen minutes every day. What about if I don't have time? Make it, just as you would for anything else vital to you.

Why should you do that? Because it will change your life, our congregation's ministry and the life of every person you meet. They may not immediately become followers of Jesus but, as an "Everyday Disciple – Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!" you will have an impact.

You always want to remember that becoming a disciple is a process not a destination. As you grow in the Word and become more like Jesus you recognize that growth continues for your whole life. The journey, rather than the destination, becomes vital because you get to touch the lives of people and be touched by them. Think about someone who has impacted your faith. Think about what it was they did or said that made that impact.

Perhaps the thing that struck you was somebody's love. Whenever we talk about love God's involved because He is love. When Jesus invites us into His life, He invites us into a life of love. It's easy to love those who love us, but we're called to love those who don't love us. Responding to them with anger and wrath will never change them. Most likely, they will just give us more of the same.

So, we have to have an attitude adjustment. And whose attitude do we want to have? We want to have the attitude of Jesus who, as Paul reminds us, "though He was God, was willing to humble Himself and become man." Without that step, we would not be talking about becoming like Jesus.

One of the things I hear people say to me a lot is its obvious people in this church love each other. I can't tell you how many times I've heard those words. We are disciples of Jesus Christ and Jesus says He wants His disciples to love each other.

But our love can't only be for those who are followers already. If it is only for them, we have lost the very mission that Jesus came to accomplish, call all people to faith. The love of Jesus teaches us two important lessons.

First, if "the perfect man, the one who is God Himself, chooses to associate with those deemed undesirable by the richest elite, should we not also associate with them?" Many of you know I grew up in the southeast Bronx. Going to school, there were often men sleeping on the park benches. Many people called them bums. My mom would never let us call them bums. She insisted that we treat them with respect.

The interesting thing is that because we followed her in what she did, we learned that many of them were just people who were hurting, people who didn't have anyone who cared about them. My mom showed us the way to treat people. I pray it is always ingrained in me and that I have passed it on to others.

The first lesson is those who are not in the household of faith need to be treated with the greatest of love by the followers of Jesus. It is the only power we have to help them come and meet Jesus. He can change their lives.

The second lesson we learn is be ready and eager to associate with – "and to share the Gospel with" – those who do not know Jesus. They were the people whom the Sadducees and Pharisees looked down upon because they didn't think they could possibly amount to anything. That was their mistake.

When they criticized Jesus for spending time with those "sinners," He reminded them that He had come for those who needed a doctor. He came to bind up their wounds and free them from their bondage.

The third lesson we learn, if we're going to be followers of Jesus, is the challenge of forgiveness. We all are going to experience hurt in this world. Jesus says it directly: we are going to suffer for being His followers. When people hurt us, it's easy to turn our venom on them and spew out all the things that the world talks about because that's the language they understand.

It won't move them to become a follower of Jesus because they will be receiving exactly what they expect in the world. But when we offer forgiveness, when we don't respond in spite to spite, we can be a healing to people. If we are unwilling to forgive others, we will likely become ill, spiritually, mentally, physically and emotionally. When we hold those hurts in, we allow them to hurt us, which often leads to us

hurting others. I suspect we have all experienced that feeling of hurting someone and feeling it intensely within ourselves.

I think part of our problem with forgiveness is that we are confused about what it means. Many people think that when they forgive someone, what they are saying is that what the person did is ok. That's not what forgiveness is.

Nor is forgiveness allowing someone to take advantage of you, time and time again because that is not love either. When people take advantage of others, they are really being hurtful and are often hurting themselves.

What does forgiveness mean? Forgiveness means that I give up my right to get even with the person who has hurt me. I no longer spend my time thinking about how to hurt them back. In a sense, I am taking back from them the power they had to control my life.

When I don't forgive, I always have to be thinking about that time when I was hurt. It is likely, some of you here have felt that hurt for years. You struggle with that and you wonder how you can get rid of it. The answer is forgiveness.

It may be that you go to the person and tell them that you forgive them. But it can also be, when you know that they will not accept that forgiveness or believe they even need it, simply the process of releasing that hurt and not holding it in anymore.

Perhaps our best example of that is Jesus on the cross.

As the nails pounded in; as people shouted curses at Him when He was up on the cross, Jesus does an unbelievable thing. He turns to those who had brought about this catastrophe and intercedes for them: "Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing." In that moment, Jesus freed Himself from the bondage He might have felt towards them by proclaiming the good news of forgiveness.

When we become more like Jesus, we learn to share that type of forgiveness. It is the only way we can save lives, giving those who hurt us the very thing they most need, forgiveness.

Count me in: What changes will you make to put the teachings of Jesus into action in your daily life?