

Matthew 28:18-20 “The Path to Discipleship”

We kicked off a new season in the church last week with a new series. I'm calling it “Moving Toward Life in the Spirit.” Last week was about moving away from shallow “crowd religion” to honest-to-goodness discipleship. But I didn't get much into what discipleship really is. So that's what we're going to try to figure out this week. So ... what do we do when we're trying to figure things out as Christians? Where do we go in this rich library of faith stories that we call the Bible when we are trying to figure out how to follow Jesus ... how to be like Jesus? That's right ... we go to the stories of Jesus, and we call those “The Gospels.” It's the first thing we read when we open up the New Testament.

Last week we made an observation about how Jesus drew crowds, but it wasn't until individuals were drawn out, or called out, or who stepped out of the crowd that they became disciples. Here's another observation about Jesus' ministry for this week: Notice how Jesus and his disciples were *always on the move*. Always. They went all over the place. "Judea, Galilee, the Decapolis, Syria, Jerusalem and places beyond the Jordan River" as last weeks' scripture said. They were out there wearing holes in their sandals. We're in Matthew's gospel this week, but what I love about Mark's gospel is that he always uses the word "immediately" to emphasize this constant movement. Yes, every now and then they took a break to catch their breath and get some rest and spiritual renewal, but then they were right back at it. There's the story of Jesus taking three of his disciples up to a mountain to get away from the crowds and pray. While they were on the mountain, they saw Jesus "transformed" or "transfigured." His appearance changed and they all felt and saw the presence of God among them. Peter said, "Wow! That was great! If this is what happens when we go up to the mountain to pray, we should set up camp and just stay here!" But Jesus said, "No." Their ministry requires that they go back to the crowds and keep moving. That's what it means to be a disciple. And if you decide to take that leap of faith ... if you decide to step away from the crowd to follow and move with Jesus, then that's what you are ... a disciple.

So let's talk about one disciple in particular here for a moment. Let's talk about Peter, the one who came up with the brilliant idea of staying on the mountain instead of moving forward and facing the crowds. He came up with all sorts of other brilliant ideas that Jesus had to call him out on too. Peter is often portrayed as the one who doesn't get it. James and John have their share of clueless moments too, but Peter is the loudest and proudest of the twelve disciples who were in Jesus' inner circle. He's the one that's usually in the middle of some argument about who Jesus likes best, or who says something that shows just how painfully oblivious he can be. He's the one who tries to put the brakes on Jesus' ministry. The one who has the guts enough or is just plain foolish enough to put his foot in his mouth and show how little faith he has whenever things start getting tough or whenever Jesus leads the disciples into potentially dangerous territory. And yet ... he's the "rock" on which Jesus said his church would be built upon. In fact, that was his nickname. "Rocky." Or if you're a wrestling fan, you could say he was the original "Rock." His name is actually Simon. Simon and Andrew were the first disciples Jesus called. Then Jesus started calling Simon "Peter," or at least that's how we translate it in English. In Greek, the word for "rock" is petros. So when Jesus calls him "Petros" or "Peter," it's like calling him "The Rock" or "Rocky," although most of the time you'd think it was because Peter had rocks in his head.

So why do the gospel writers spend so much time focusing on this disciple who seemed to be the embodiment of cluelessness? If the stories of Jesus were meant to lead people into a more mature faith, why have the disciple who gets the most "screen time" be the one who seems to be the most naïve and immature in his understanding of faith? Why is Peter, the one who seems to be Jesus' "right-hand man," portrayed as one who hinders more than he helps? I think it's because Peter is someone we can relate to. And I'm sure that was intentional on the part of the gospel writers. Being a disciple isn't always going to be easy. In fact, it's probably safe to say that discipleship is often difficult because it calls us to think and act counter-intuitively.

It's appropriate that we are called the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), because like the disciples in the New Testament, we struggle with what Jesus requires of us in order to walk in his path. Not just us either ... the whole church struggles with this. How many times does it seem like some of our fellow Christians are reaching for new lows in making the Christian faith look ugly, dull, ridiculous, and oblivious? And believe me, I'm not pointing fingers at other churches. We each need to recognize and acknowledge our contributions too. How often do we willfully stand in opposition to what Jesus stood for? How often do we boldly stand against the core values of what Jesus taught ... sometimes in gleeful ignorance? Or to put it another way, how often are we like Simon Peter "the Rock?"

Let me tell you, *all* churches start out bold, visionary, generous, and creative, but then something happens along the way and we become constricted, averse to change, overly-nostalgic, fearful, and obsessed with preserving our resources and institutions. Instead of empowering others, we hoard power. Instead of defying and challenging the traditions of the powers-that-be with our God-inspired moral imagination as Jesus did, we impose tradition on others and refuse to think outside the box. We struggle to define in positive terms what faith means. We become preoccupied with formalities, and committees, and tradition. We cut ourselves off from the example of our founder and teacher, even though we still bear his name, and we dig in our heels and sing, "I shall not be, I shall not be moved" like we mean it, because we do. We go from being a movement, to not moving at all.

And what was that observation we made about Jesus and his disciples when we started out this morning? They were *always* on the move. Jesus was never static and he didn't let his disciples be stationary either. Even after his enemies crucified him for challenging their authority and traditions, he *still* kept moving! That's why Easter is the highest holy day in our faith tradition and why we affirm the resurrection. Not even death could keep Jesus down. He came back and commissioned his

disciples to go into all the world and make disciples *everywhere* ... in all nations ... in all places. Teach, preach, and baptize. *Keep moving*. And here's the clincher ... here's what this whole series is about ... "And remember that I am with you always, even to the end of the age." This is what it means to live in the Spirit. To know that Jesus is with us ... that the Spirit of the Living God dwells in and among us as we *move* towards life in the Spirit!

What does this mean for our church? It means we need to resist the temptation to be static. Remember when we first started having our discernment potlucks a few years ago, we said that every church has three paths to choose from. Anyone remember what the first one was? "Stasis." Not moving. Just doing the same thing over and over until everything and everyone fades away. Then there's legacy, where a church decides it can't go any further, but it at least gives its resources to another ministry. But honestly, when you think of it, that's just a church who recognizes that it's comfortable in its stasis but doesn't want to waste its resources. The third option is "reaching" which is another way of describe what we're talking about here this morning. Moving. Being more than just followers. What keeps us moving then? Recognizing the needs in our community and putting those first three words of Jesus' commission into action: "Go ... ye ... therefore." Why?

Because somewhere in our community, there's a teenager coming of age and asking questions for the first time. And maybe she's afraid that she's going to be rejected by her family or her church for even bringing up the questions in the first place. And maybe a few blocks over there's a grandfather whose kids and grandkids are far from God and far from the church ... and maybe he's even having second thoughts about the whole thing himself. Across the railroad tracks there might be a middle aged person who is dealing with mental illness and suicidal thoughts and is thinking, "Why can't I get my act together? Why does it seem so much harder for me to achieve anything that even resembles 'normal?'" And maybe there's a young mother on the other side of town who is putting her kids to bed at night wishing she could teach them to pray and maybe

tell them a Bible story, but what keeps her from doing so is that she doesn't want to infect them with the shame, fear and guilt that her religious upbringing instilled in her.

I'm sure you all can come up with plenty of examples too. But the point is, there are more than enough folks out there in our community in need of loving discipleship. And there are plenty of folks right here, whether you believe it or not, who have gifts and graces for ministry to provide that kind of loving discipleship. Shoot, maybe there are folks here today who are in need of some loving discipleship! You're in a good place. Three years ago, we made a conscious decision to reject stasis ... to say "no" to just giving up and waiting for the end. We decided to reach ... to move. We re-claimed our name. We affirmed that we are Disciples, and that being a disciple is not the end of the line ... it's not a destination ... it's a process of transformation in this journey towards life in the spirit. Let's talk more about transformation next week.