

# **A Crisis of Discipleship**

**Judges 7:1-7**

**John 6:60-69**

*The future belongs to those who follow Jesus.*

A sermon preached by  
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Until the flooding rains that have come in the last few weeks, the western part of the United States has been in an extreme drought for several years. The great reservoirs that provide water for the populations of California, Arizona, and Nevada have almost dried up, and it is hoped that all the rain they have experienced in the last month will replenish at least some of the water supply in the region. Lake Powell, which provides hydroelectric power to 6 million people in seven states, has seen its water level drop 100 feet in the last decade. The interesting thing is that in the last couple of years, the receding water level has exposed a number of things that used to be on the bottom of the lake. Boats, cars, and even human remains have turned up as the lake goes dry. Apparently, the gangsters in nearby Las Vegas had to have somewhere to take people to “sleep with the fishes.” Only the fishes are gone now. The drought has exposed many things that had been hidden for years.

The coronavirus pandemic was like a severe drought for the church. It functioned to expose some things that we had tried to keep hidden for years, and we just couldn't hide any more. When the church had to shut down for weeks or in some cases months, it exposed commitments that had become increasingly shallow. For some, their discipleship just dried up. One might have thought that after being forced to be away from church for a while, when the church re-opened, the disciples of Jesus, starving for the fellowship and worship and learning and service that they had experienced in church, would come flocking back. Some did. I heard many comments when we opened back up about how meaningful it was to be back in church. But at the same time, there was a withering of the church, a drought of discipleship. Many people have been gone now for three years. They found a couch they liked and continued to sit on it. Most of those who watched online during the shutdown have either come back to church or drifted away even from online viewing. If I'm honest, I know that some people discovered that they really didn't miss church that much, and it was kind of a relief not to have to go. Most of them will not be back.

If it's any comfort—and it's not much—the acceleration of our decline because of the pandemic is not unique to First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith. The major church research organizations have documented a nationwide decline in identification with the Christian faith, attendance at worship services, daily prayer, and Scripture reading, four of the primary markers of discipleship. All are on a downward trend.<sup>1</sup>

We are in a crisis of discipleship. Should we worry about it? What can we do about it? What is our hope for the future of the Christian faith? One of my seminary professors used to remind us frequently, "Every generation of the church is potentially the last." I never forgot that, and it has fueled my ministry for 40 years. Not on my watch!

Discipleship is one of those religious-sounding words that we use but don't always understand. Our dinner church study last week started with the question, "What is discipleship?" I think it's a good word, because it describes the life of a disciple, which means "learner." A disciple is someone who is learning to be something; we are learning from Jesus how to be the people God wants us to be. Discipleship, then, is the life we lead, the things we do, in order to follow Jesus. We believe by faith, but we also do things to learn better. There are practices involved that bring us closer to Christ, because we have given our allegiance to him as our Master.

I don't know that there is anyone to blame for our current crisis of discipleship. There are certainly forces beyond our control, like our culture, like a world-wide pandemic. At the same time, I think we all could have done a better job—as pastors, as parents, as church leaders, as fellow Christians—to disciple those around us, particularly our young people.

This, too, is not a new or unique problem. In fact, it goes all the way back to Jesus himself. In the sixth chapter of John, Jesus was on a roll. He had just fed 5,000 men and their families with five loaves and two fish. From that miracle, he launched into a discourse about the bread of life. In John's Gospel, this chapter serves as the basis for Holy Communion, since there is no Last Supper in John. But when Jesus started talking about eating his body and drinking his blood, the people began to get uneasy. They thought Jesus was talking about some bizarre sort of cannibalism. They didn't understand.

Jesus said, "Oh, are you offended by that? How about if you saw me sitting on my throne in heaven? Only some of you are going to get this." And he was right. Many turned away—from Jesus! As the crowd dispersed, Jesus turned to his disciples and asked, "So, do you also want to go away?" And Peter replied, "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.*"<sup>2</sup>

The Jesus movement picked up speed, and it could not be stopped even by his death. Jesus rose again, and he commissioned his disciples to make disciples, and then the Holy Spirit came upon them in Jerusalem, and the church began to spread across the Roman Empire. But even in that first generation of world-shaking witness, there was a crisis of discipleship. Not everybody stayed faithful. In the Letter of the Hebrews, written sometime in the second half of the first century, a little later than the letters of Paul, there is evidence that some of the followers had fallen away from the faith. In the tenth chapter, just before he gives a recitation of all the heroes of the faith, the writer says, "*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*"<sup>3</sup>

I'll never forget a sermon I heard the late Dr. Fred Craddock preach on this text. It's like you have planned a church event to welcome people—children, youth, families. And you have everything prepared: dozens of hot dogs, cookies, gallons of lemonade, all ready for the onslaught of people. And three people show up. And those three are immediately embarrassed that they are the only three that were foolish enough to take the bait. Craddock envisioned this passage being shouted by the preacher standing in the parking lot as the congregation drove away, "Don't go! Hold fast to your confession! Let us not neglect to meet together! Be encouraged! Stay! Please stay."

There has always been a tendency for people to waver in their discipleship. There is always the danger of falling away. The old-time Methodists called this "backsliding." Bishop Mack Stokes used to say, "Backsliding is a doctrine Methodists preach and all denominations practice." The pandemic accelerated and exacerbated the slide, and here we are.

So what do we do? How can we hold fast? I know who I am talking to here. You are in church or watching online or listening on the radio. You are, at least to some extent, practicing discipleship. How can we encourage you? How can we keep your hope strong?

Let me ask you this: Is God dead? Has God lost the power and control over the ultimate destiny of the universe? Is our hope in a world that has been opposed to God since the dawn of time, or is our hope in the God who made the heavens and the earth? Has God ever taken a bad situation and turned it around to the good? (Hint: Jesus) As long as we serve a God of resurrection, we need not despair. We always have hope!

God doesn't even need numbers to succeed. I love the little story of Gideon and his battle with the Midianites in the days of the judges of Israel. Gideon was not a fierce guy; God called him while he was hiding from the Midianites in a wine press. Gideon had gathered a big army to go and battle this enemy. But God said, "Wait a minute. If you defeat the Midianites with a mighty army, people will think you did this on your own, and not because God helped you. So tell everyone who is scared to go home." Whoosh! Two-thirds of the army disappeared. Then God said, "Still too many. Take them down to the creek, and whoever laps water like a dog is your guy." So Gideon set aside 300 soldiers, about 1% of what he started with, and God said, "That's just right." With 300 soldiers and the power of God, they sent the Midianites packing, and Gideon scored a great victory for Israel and the Lord.

God doesn't need much help, because God is God. But God does need some help; because God will not act alone. So we join forces. We maximize the assets we have, and God does something good with them. Remember, the beginning of the story in John 6 was a little boy offering to Jesus his five barley loaves and two fish, and with that Jesus fed the 5,000. Even with the decline of Christianity in America over the last few years, we are not without assets: Over 2/3 of American adults still claim to be Christians. Over 40% of American adults say that religion is very important to them. (I know, there is a disconnect in those two numbers, right?) A third of American adults do attend a worship service at least once a month. And almost half of American adults say they pray to God on a daily basis.<sup>4</sup> Those are significant human assets.

First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith brings significant assets to the table. We are a strong church, compared with many. We have a full buffet of ministries that are consistently transforming lives: children's day care and preschool, children's ministries,

youth group, excellence in both traditional and contemporary music and worship, amazing outreach into the community, good financial support. These are all crucial to our success.

We are connected to the resources of the United Methodist Church, the largest Protestant denomination in the world. Through our connected ministries, we reach out to feed, help, and educate people around the globe, all in the name of Jesus.

What we have here is a foundation for revival, a probability for vitality in our church, a hope for the victory of our God!

What do we personally have to do to see this revival of vitality take place? Here is the continuing education part of the sermon. You know if you are in any kind of profession, there is continuing education to keep your skills sharp. Whether you're a teacher, a lawyer, a doctor, a mechanic, or a preacher, you have to go to school every so often to sharpen your skills. And often, your continuing education is not anything all that new. You are just being reminded of what you already know.

So here is your continuing discipleship education for today. This is not new; we have covered this material before. But it is just as important, if not more important, than it has ever been.

The vital, healthy, transformative life of discipleship includes five practices: prayer, Scripture, worship, service, and giving. Sound familiar? To be a strong disciple, you have to spend time with God in prayer. You have to spend time with God in the Word, reading and meditating on Scripture. You have to spend time with the community of faith in worship. Monthly is a bare minimum; weekly is better, because God put a Sabbath day in every week.

Service is critical to discipleship. Every disciple of Jesus has a gift from the Holy Spirit to serve the Kingdom of God in some way. Figure out your gift, and figure out how to put it to use in the church or in the community.

And finally, giving is part of the basic package of discipleship. We give our money to support the good God does in the church and the world. But we also give because it does us good. It puts our priorities in line with God. It counteracts the sin of materialism, which is a favorite for most of us.

The future of First United Methodist Church depends on the discipleship of our people, because the future belongs to those who follow Jesus. The people that practice discipleship will thrive, even through hardship. The churches that practice discipleship will be vital witnesses to the grace of God and the love of Jesus, and those churches will never die out. This year, we will be emphasizing strong discipleship, because I don't think anything is as important to our future as these simple, faithful practices that Jesus gave us in the beginning: prayer, Scripture, worship, service, and giving.

If you're a Star Wars fan, you have probably branched out into some of the side stories and prequels and sequels that are now fleshing out the Star Wars universe. If you're a fan, you have probably watched a series call "The Mandalorian."<sup>5</sup> Even if you're not a fan, you may have watched it because this is the series with Baby Yoda in it—so cute! The Mandalorians are followers of an old religion that is still followed by a few dedicated disciples, and they are sort of guardians of the values and the truth of the galaxy. The first time I saw an episode, I was struck by the simple affirmation that the Mandalorians make whenever they encounter another disciple of the religion. They say, "This is the way."

Of course, I immediately thought of the Christian way of discipleship. And of course, I immediately filed that in my brain for a future sermon illustration. Jesus said, "I am the

way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.”<sup>6</sup> This is the way. This is our hope for today and for the future. It’s not in a denomination, or a church, or a pastor, or anything else that’s not Jesus. The future belongs to those who follow Jesus. He has the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that he is the Holy One of God.

Are you in? Are you all in?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/christians-discipleship-community/>.

<sup>2</sup> John 6:69

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 10:23-25.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Favreau, “The Mandalorian,” Disney Studios, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> John 14:6.