

**The Disciple's Path:
YOU'LL KNOW IT
WHEN YOU SEE IT**

Mark 12:28-34

What is a disciple, anyway?

A sermon preached by
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In 2018, we spent a great deal of time and effort talking about Christian stewardship, trying to educate the congregation about the spiritual nature of generosity. And we had tremendous success. We won't stop talking about generosity in 2019, but we are going to focus on a different area of our Christian life. If 2019 has a theme, it will be the Year of Discipleship. One of the ideas and action items that I want us to be clear about by the time this year is over is the answer to this question: "What does it mean to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ?"

Our mission in the United Methodist Church is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."¹ What does that even mean? It doesn't mean that our mission is to make more church members. It doesn't take much to be a church member; you can be a church member with hardly any commitment at all. Our mission is to make disciples.

Is "disciple" one of those vague religious terms that eludes definition? Like the Supreme Court justice years ago who was trying to define obscene material—he said "I know it when I see it"²—we do know a disciple when we see one. We can see visible and measurable characteristics of the Christian life, if we know what to look for. That's the life of discipleship that we're going to talk about in an intentional way this year.

One of the images of the spiritual life in many faith traditions is walking. Our relationship with God is like a walk. The Christian life is like a path that we follow. I love to walk. On the street, in my neighborhood, in a park, walking is good and good for you. If you go off the beaten trail, a walk is called a hike. It can be strenuous, depending on the length and terrain, but walking is not painful like running. I'm not a fan of running. If you see me running, something or someone is after me!

If you want to see someplace, walk around it, through it, or in it. Walking is slow enough for you to observe and take in and contemplate your surroundings. You see more when you walk.

Walking is difficult today, because life proceeds at a dead run. We live in a culture of speed. Life is intense and immediate. I read an article this week by a young woman pastor who was talking about the Millennials, the young adults between 20 and 40 years old. Some writers are now

calling them the “Burnout Generation.” She was talking about young adults, but I think in many ways this applies to all ages today. We are suffering from what she called “optimization.” Technology and economic pressure have combined to make us feel like we have to optimize every moment, never to relax or have an unoccupied minute; we have to take advantage of every opportunity. We start this very young nowadays. Kids don’t come home from school and play in the neighborhood or in the woods nearby anymore. They have lessons—music, dance, sports, tutoring—there is not a free afternoon. Or play dates are organized so that the kids are never without supervision. High school students don’t just take college entrance exams any more. They take courses to help prepare them for the test, then they take the exam multiple times to try to improve their score. It’s a great deal of pressure.

Churches try to cater to the optimization of the culture by making everything quick and convenient. You can drive by on Ash Wednesday, and we’ll put ashes on your forehead while you sit in your car. (Actually, *we won’t.*) All our classes except Sunday School are short-term classes. We don’t want to ask too much of people because we know they are so busy.

The optimization of our time does not produce peace. It produces a stressed-out, burned-out exhaustion of mind, body, and soul, even in the very young. In that sense, discipleship is counter-cultural. We live in a microwave society; discipleship is a crock-pot recipe.³ It’s a walk down a path. It’s not something that happens in a hurry. Laura Patterson, the young pastor who wrote this article, said, “The long, slow work of sanctification is a reminder of the importance of our relationship with God and the scope of transformation. It often requires us to stop and pay attention to ourselves, to each other, and to the Spirit’s movement in the world. It is not an ingestion of knowledge (as we so often treat discipleship ministries), but a reforming of who we are into the image of Christ. It honors our created-ness and beloved-ness in a world that sees us as tools.”⁴

So we’re going to do a series—not a soundbyte—on what it means to walk the Disciple’s Path. Six weeks, five aspects of discipleship, and a

class in depth on Wednesday night. We're going to take the time to lay the groundwork for our growth as individuals and as a church. Walk with us.

The prior question of discipleship is, "What is one?" What does a disciple do? How can you spot one in the wild?

First of all, a disciple **FOLLOWS**. Generically, a disciple follows a teacher. Christian disciples follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. When Jesus called his original twelve disciples, he didn't say, "Buy my book. Take my course. Join my church." Or even "Believe my teachings." He said, "Follow me. Do like I do. Put your trust in me." The last thing he said to Peter by the sea in Galilee after the resurrection was, "Follow me."

Following is something you do with your feet, not with your head. It is an action verb. Following is a process, not an event. It involves belief, but it also involves action. When one of the scribes wanted to pin Jesus down, he asked him what the most important commandment is. What is the most important thing to do if you follow God?

Jesus said, "The first is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. The second one is to love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."⁵ In another gospel, Jesus says, "On these two commandments hang all the Law and Prophets."⁶ These two statements come straight out of Hebrew Scripture; the first is from Deuteronomy; the second from Leviticus. Jesus is saying, "I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. This is what is important. Love God—that's belief—and love your neighbor—that's action."

Jim Harnish, now a retired United Methodist pastor from Florida, wrote the book, *A Disciple's Path*, that we are using as the basis of this series and for the classes on Wednesday night. He defines a disciple as "A follower of Jesus whose life is centering on loving God and loving others."⁷ A disciple is a follower of Jesus.

In following Jesus, the disciple **GROWS**. Again, discipleship is not a microwave meal; it's a crockpot recipe. It's a long, slow work of God in us. Harnish, in the introduction to *A Disciple's Path*, makes two statements about the life of discipleship: "We believe that every follower

of Jesus is involved in an ongoing process of transformation made possible by the grace of God.” Then he says, “We follow practical methods or disciplines to grow in the love of God.”⁸ That’s why we were originally called Methodists—because John and Charles Wesley and their friends followed a method of discipleship.

Wesley loved to talk about the stages of grace. God comes to us and calls us in different ways at different stages along our path. Before we even respond to God, he comes to us with **prevenient grace**, which allows us to hear and respond to the call to follow. When we are ready, God gives us **justifying grace**, which forgives our sins and puts us in a right relationship with God. Then the long, slow process of growth can happen because God gives us **sanctifying grace**. That’s the grace of God that helps us to learn and practice and improve our Christian walk.

Wesley compared it to a house. Prevenient grace is the porch, by which we approach the house and start a relationship with God. Justifying grace is the door, by which we enter into a saving relationship with God through Jesus. And sanctifying grace is the inside of the house, where we live and grow in our relationship with God until we die and enter the heavenly Kingdom of God.

Another way to look at our growth is like a friendship. Think of a really good friend, your “BFF” as the younger people say. At first you met and got acquainted with this friend. Then you began to learn more about him or her. Then after a while you came to know the way he or she thinks, what he or she likes and doesn’t like, and you develop a relationship of trust. You don’t become BFF’s in a day; it takes a while.

I remember when I was the District Superintendent in Northeast Arkansas, living in Batesville. I got a call one day from a seminary student who was home for Christmas and just wanted to meet me, since I was his new DS. He was a young man from Cave City who was attending Duke Divinity School. His name was Dane Womack. We had a nice visit, and I was impressed that he took the time to let me get to know him a little bit.

A year later, Dane was graduating from seminary, and there was going to be an opening at First Church in Fort Smith. So I got to know Dane a

little better as we went through the process of making the appointment, little knowing that one more year later, I would become the senior pastor here, and Dane and I would work together. But here we are, three and a half years later, and our relationship is very different than it was that December day in Batesville. We have worked together, strategized together, talked about ministry and music and basketball and construction projects, and friendship and trust have developed in the course of time.

When we follow Jesus, we develop a friendship and trust over time. We grow in our discipleship, until Jesus becomes our Best Friend Forever—for real.

A disciple who follows Jesus grows, and sometimes that disciple **FAILS**. The path of discipleship is not a straight line. There are twists and turns and valleys and swamps, and sometimes we get completely off the path. Sometimes we feel like we're walking backwards. It's all part of the journey.

Only Jesus was perfect. Everybody else fails at some point. You look at the great heroes of the Bible: Abraham let another man have his wife; Moses murdered an Egyptian; David committed both murder and adultery; Peter denied Jesus; Paul persecuted believers. Everyone failed and was forgiven and made a great life for God. John Wesley utterly failed in his attempts to be a missionary to Georgia. I can look at my own life and see the times I failed; if it's OK, I won't enumerate them in front of you! You can probably name your own failures without thinking too hard; I won't make you confess, either.

But even failure is an opportunity to grow as a disciple. We become painfully aware that we are weak, wrong, sinful. We understand that we are dependent on the grace and forgiveness of God. We have strayed off the path, but we get back on the road again, and we are better for it. We are stronger; we are forgiven; we are grateful. And we move forward.

Discipleship is all about moving forward. We follow Jesus; we grow; we fail sometimes; but ultimately we can **MAKE A DIFFERENCE** for good in the world. We believe in Jesus, and that faith leads us to action. The most Methodist book in the Bible is probably the Letter of James, because it says, "*Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. ...Show me*

your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.”⁹ Helping people is in our Methodist DNA. John Wesley included ministry with the poor and prisoners from the time he was a student in college. Later the Methodists became famous for their educational efforts with children, their aid to the poor, and their medical care to those who couldn’t afford it.

If you pay attention, not a day goes by when you don’t see some disciple of Jesus making a difference for good in the world. Sometimes the difference is big, even global. Think about a man like Millard Fuller, a Christian from Georgia who got a vision for safe and comfortable housing for everyone. So he founded Habitat for Humanity, which has built over 800,000 homes to house over 4 million people all over the world.¹⁰

Sometimes the impact is much more local. I remember from my time as DS in the Northeast District a tiny little church that sat by the side of Highway 65 in the little town of Damascus. They may have had 20 people attend on Sunday; you would have thought that survival as a church would be their main priority. But a couple of ladies at that little church got a burden on their heart for the foster kids in that county. With it being such a rural area, they didn’t have much support for the foster families, and it was hard to recruit people to take a foster child. So they began to gather supplies to help the foster parents and to recruit people in the church and community and to provide a place for social workers to meet and have training for the parents and activities for the kids. A lady with DHS told me that the efforts of those volunteers from the Damascus United Methodist Church had vastly improved the services provided in that part of the county. Disciples making a difference. They’ll probably never get the Nobel Prize, but the prize they do get will be eternal.

Disciples follow Jesus, grow in friendship with God, fail and need forgiveness, and make a difference for good in the world. Why would you want to be one? Why engage in this journey of discipleship? I think deep down there is a divine discontent with this life as we know it. You might call it a spiritual itch, a hole in your soul, a hunger for meaning. Whatever. I just believe that life without God—especially in this

environment of optimization—produces burnout and despair. Discipleship gives us a shot at fulfillment, a hope for the future, and opportunity to be a force for good in the world. We can do what Jesus said—love God and love others. It’s possible. I invite you over the next few weeks to take a walk with me, to remember or even to discover for the first time, what it means to be a disciple.

¹ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), Par. 105, p. 93.

² Justice Potter Stewart, *Jacobellis vs. Ohio*, 1964, *Wikipedia.com*.

³ Analogy from Dave Ramsey, *Financial Peace University*.

⁴ Laura Patterson, “What Can The Church Do For The Burned Out Generation?” *Ministry Matters*, 1/10/19.

⁵ Mark 12:29-31.

⁶ Matthew 22:40.

⁷ James A. Harnish with Justin LaRosa, *A Disciple’s Path* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 16.

⁸ Harnish, 7-8.

⁹ James 2:17-18.

¹⁰ “Habitat For Humanity,” *Wikipedia.com*.