

This Is Who We Are: Conversions and Convictions

***Our Mission: To Make Disciples of Jesus Christ
for the Transformation of the World***

[Matthew 28:16-20](#)

I heard a young Christian man tell this story recently. He was raised Catholic, went to Catholic schools, attended a religious college. He'd been active in his church his whole life. But now, as an adult, something wasn't working. His son had been born with serious medical complications, and they had been told that this child wasn't likely to live beyond the age of 5. His wife was struggling with a life-threatening illness. This man had prayed in every way he knew how. He went to church. He lived a good, "Christian" life. Why then, were all these terrible things happening to him? And maybe even more importantly, why couldn't he find comfort in prayer, or reassurance in what he'd always thought was his steady faith? He wondered, What good is being a Christian, if it isn't something that can help you through times like this?

Truth be told, I bet most of us have gone through a moment when we wondered whether somewhere along the way, we missed some important lesson about faith, and whether faith is making the difference it's supposed to in our lives. I wonder it *for* you, for the Church. I often ask myself whether it seems true that people who go to church have a better quality or depth of life than people who do not. Whether we who plant ourselves in a religious tradition—the Church—experience more love, less fear, more honesty and generosity, better relationships, than people who live without faith. Whether maybe just trying to be a good person is enough. Maybe even more importantly, I wonder whether the Church—religion—makes the world a better place in these days.

You see, even pastors doubt.

What is it we're trying to do in this enterprise we call the Church? What is the difference we are trying to make—in the world, and in people's lives? In your life?

For the whole 2100 years of its existence, the Church has taken its purpose from those final verses in the Gospel of Matthew that we read this morning. *Go*, Jesus said to the eleven disciples who remained. Some of them had big doubts. Terrible things had happened—to Jesus and to this movement they'd pinned their hopes on. *Keep going*, Jesus said. *Don't go back to your familiar, comfortable lives. Go out and make more disciples. Baptize people. Teach them what I've taught you.*

The Christian Church has always taken that "Go make disciples" message seriously. That instruction has formed the mission statement of virtually every church and denomination—Protestant, Catholic, whatever. But I think we have to ask ourselves: what does it mean to be a 'disciple' in these days when freedom to find your own way is what we value most? In a culture where your religious identity seems mostly irrelevant? What makes Christianity different from any other path to self-improvement, yoga, Rotary, whatever helps you focus on living a life with

good values? Does discipleship—being a Christian—make the quality of your life better? Does it make the world better?

The word *disciple* means, literally, a learner, a student. But in the ancient world learning happened differently than it does now. There were no books. Most people couldn't read or write. A student, in Jesus' time, was someone who stayed with his teacher, adopted the teacher's entire way of life as his own. Being a student meant to hang on your teacher's every word, follow in his steps, watch and imitate how she conducted herself with other people. Students didn't go home at night; they slept outside the teacher's door so they wouldn't miss any pearls of wisdom that might fall from the teacher's lips in the middle of the night. To be the disciple of a teacher was to commit yourself to living in the same atmosphere, breathing the same air, to experience that life as if it were your own.

What this kind of learning did was to allow the teacher to take up residence inside the student's mind and spirit. A disciple heard the teacher's voice as if it were her own, learned to see the world through that wise person's eyes. That's how Jesus' disciples learned from him: they lived with him, ate with him, prayed beside him, walked in his footsteps for three years. To *follow* is what he asked of them. Not to study a set of right beliefs or to produce enough to earn a place on the team, but to *come*, to take on his life.

Jesus wasn't the only teacher who had wisdom to offer—then or now. There were other paths to a virtuous life: the Ten Commandments. Greek philosophy. But Jesus offered something more than knowledge, more even than an example of good living. To nestle in close to Jesus' life was to experience God, close as your own breath. In Jesus those disciples saw what it looks like for the inexhaustible, ego-less, anxiety-free love of God to come to life. Outside the Temple where religious rituals happen. On the days when you're not on retreat. In a world just as it is: full of illness, poverty, conflict. By coming so close that they could feel his presence, hear his voice inside themselves, Jesus knew that those disciples too could learn to *be* a place where that love of God comes alive again and again.

When I'm gone, he said to them once, I'll still be with you. You'll find me again in the same way you sense me now. I'll be inside of you, as if you had swallowed me—like a piece of bread dipped in juice. I'll be that close.

I know that sounds abstract, hard to grab onto. There is a way in which the spiritual life can only be known, not described. It has to happen inside of you—personally, spiritually, invisibly. But like most things about the spiritual life, there's a paradox at work here. Because in another way, the life that Jesus called his disciples to was very concrete, active, real. *Do what I do* is what he meant when he said, *Go make disciples*.

What that looks like isn't the same at every time, or in every place. Casting out demons worked well for Jesus but isn't much called for these days. Here, in this place, Christians don't mark our faith by codes of conduct about what we eat or in vows of chastity. But that doesn't mean that the consequences of being a Jesus-follower shouldn't show up, visibly, measurably, in our lives.

How would you recognize a Christian here, in Campbell, in 2017? What are the marks that a life of active, intentional discipleship leaves behind?

Some qualities come easily to mind:

- Integrity, honesty, generosity, kindness. An ability to forgive.
- Knowing that we all need forgiveness from time to time, and the openness to change that comes with that knowledge.
- A willingness to let anger and hatred and violence go un-retained for the sake of peace.
- A heart, and a willingness to give yourself away, for the people Jesus recognized and was drawn to: the excluded, the poor, the sick, people with nothing to give and not much left to lose.
- Trust—a relief from the anxiety that is natural to us. Trust that no matter what happens to us, at the core of it all, there is a good God who wants good for us.

Maybe what a life of discipleship looks like in public isn't so different from what good people have always done. Maybe it's more about what enables you to live that life. You need heart and strength and courage to live and to grow those qualities. A disciple of Jesus Christ is someone who knows where to go, who to look to, where to pay attention, to find them. The Christian life is not—never been—a life of sheer determination to improve yourself, to be a good person. You don't muscle up so you can be like Jesus. You follow. You take Jesus in. And it—he—changes you. The presence of love takes up residence in your heart. Frees you from the ego and fear that can otherwise take up that space and crowd out everything else.

Sometimes that fear and ego move back in. They're always ready—standing by in good times and in bad. A disciple—the student—knows that that's the time to move in a little closer, draw even nearer to the teacher. How to listen...until you can hear that voice you have come to know as well as your own, a voice that says: *You are God's act of love, God's aliveness, in the world.*

There's a survey inside your bulletin this morning. It's there for you to fill out and put in the offering plate, or to take home if you want to be more thoughtful about it. It's meant to tell you something about the marks of discipleship in your own life. It's also designed to tell us something about how well the church is doing its work of helping you live that life.

In the United Methodist Church, the mission statement that begins "Go make disciples" is not quite finished there. This Church's mission statement adds five more words: "for the transformation of the world." This is what we do, what we are about: We make disciples of Jesus Christ—not so that the church will be a large and powerful institution, not even so that more people get into heaven. We help one another live as disciples of Jesus Christ so that the whole world might be transformed—changed for good—by the aliveness of God. That aliveness in us.

May it be so.