

The Path of the Disciple

(Four series that fit together)

The stated mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This won't happen by accident; we don't fall into discipleship. It requires effort and intention and a disciple-making plan. We at Discipleship Ministries invite each congregation and worshipping community to develop an intentional discipleship plan in their local context. There are resources and mentors that you can access on our website to help you develop and implement your plan. Please call upon us to help you if you have not already begun such a journey (<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/discipleship-system-example>).

The Worship Team at Discipleship Ministries invites you to consider reflecting on this discipleship journey in the first half of this long Ordinary Time season. There are four distinct parts to this reflection, each designed to help the community consider the whys and wherefores of taking our mission seriously. We invite reflection on the joys and the struggles of following Jesus as we live out our faith in this confused and confusing world. And through it all, we offer our fully engaged worship to God as we gather week by week, confessing and renewing and recommitting ourselves to being disciples of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

So, join us as we worship together and reflect on the path of the disciple.

The Weight of the Call

Part One of “The Path of the Disciple”

A disciple is a follower. That means there must be someone to follow and that someone wants followers. Considering that, in the gospel accounts, Jesus said “follow me” more often than he said, “believe in me,” we can be confident that there is a call to follow laid upon anyone and everyone who seeks to draw closer to Christ. It could even be argued that the whole of the life of faith is wrestling with that call to follow him.

Yet even a cursory reading of the gospels will reveal that Jesus never undersold this call. He never tried to convince us that following was an easy or a simple thing. There is effort here; there is sacrifice demanded; struggle and lifelong commitment are needed. So, we begin our summer worship contemplation with consideration of the weight of the call. What is being asked of us, we who seek to be disciples of Jesus Christ?

Throughout this four-part series, we listen again to the call of the whole people of faith, when God called Abraham to be the beginning – the genesis – of a new nation. Then we lay this ancient call alongside the words and deeds of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew as he confirms and enhances and redirects the call to be the church at work in the world. But here in part one,

we are especially mindful of the radical nature of the call to leave everything behind and to live into a new reality, only then to discover the added responsibility of inviting the whole world to come to know the one we follow. We are to live as witnesses, not hidden away tending to our own souls, safe and secure behind the walls of our sanctuaries. We aren't called to safety, but to a risky and transforming faith that leans into the kin-dom of God daily. Jump in as we consider the weight of the call.

Second Sunday after Pentecost - Trusting the Unknown

June 11, 2023

[Genesis 12:1-9](#); [Matt 9:9-13](#); [18-26](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

The journey begins this week. Movement is a key element to worship in this series. Movement through the flow of worship – from gathering to proclamation to response to sending; movement within the worship – greeting others worshiping with us, coming forward for prayer or anointing or sacrament, standing and sitting and kneeling, maybe even a dance signifying the joy of the journey; and ultimately the movement from worship to world where we carry the gift we have claimed out into the community around us. How do we signify movement, the journey of faith?

This week, we focus on the starting point, hearing and responding to the call. Even when it scares us, or challenges us, or asks a lot of us. Are there those within your community who have launched a new ministry or taken a step out in faith? This might be a time to let them share their testimony, to tell the story of hearing or feeling or sensing a call from God. They might share the obstacles that they have overcome or still wrestle with. There can be an invitation to join or to support with prayer or resources, but the emphasis is on hearing and responding this week. And on being daunted or overwhelmed by the risk involved.

This would be a good time to commission a mission team or to receive a report on the work of those who have traveled and the lessons learned or experience gained. It may be a time to commission each member of the worshipping community to the call of discipleship, reminding everyone that our faith is not an occasional thing, but a true calling or vocation.

Worship could also include space for listening. Not all are convinced that they are being called. So how can we find ways of hearing God's call? Prayers of petition, of invitation, can reside next to moments of silence that give the Spirit the opportunity to speak to our souls in the safe space of the loving community of faith. When we deepen our relationship with God in Christ, we come closer to being able to trust in the unknown.

PREACHING NOTES

We're talking about "call" this summer. Go back to some of the introductory notes if you want to know more about the whys and wherefores. If you've gotten this far, then we'll assume you're on board at least in the short term. But we still need to spend some time talking about the *what*. What is a call? What does it mean to be called? What does it feel like or sound like? And is it really something we want?

A call isn't always easy to carry. It sometimes sends us to places where we might not want to go—or at least to places we aren't too sure about. There are too many unanswered questions in responding to a call—even a call that comes from the one we call Lord. The difficult thing is that those questions never quite go away. We might be years into following this call, and suddenly the questions come back. "What am I doing?" "What have I gotten myself into?" "If this really is a call from God, why isn't it working out better?" These are only some of the questions that come to us. You might have your own that you want to share. Or not share. Just wrestle.

The other thing that is important to keep reminding folks is that hearing a call from God is not something reserved for the clergy. It comes to us all—to all who want to follow this path; to all who want to become disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It might be a call to a place, to a task, or to a way of living. But in all of it, there is a call to a relationship. What you're doing, preacher, is premarital (for those just starting out) or marriage counseling (for those who've been at this for a while). To consider our call is to consider life—a new life, a new start, a destination unknown to a degree.

During the sessions before the wedding, as pastor and couple, we try and figure it out. We sit and talk about what married life might be like. Sometimes, I got the impression that I was speaking an alien language to the young couple seated on my couch in the office. They'd smile and nod and try to keep their brows unknit. It's hard, I know that. It's hard to imagine that there might be occasions when they wonder if this marriage thing is a good idea after all. It's hard to imagine that there will be moments when the one over whom they are all googly-eyed now might become the source of their greatest frustration one day. So, they would sit politely while I set some ground rules or lay some foundation that someday just might be a lifeline if they remember them. I've often wondered what sorts of conversations take place when couples leave my office as we prepared for their wedding. "Can you believe that?" "Like, yeah, as if we would ever disagree on anything!"

It is hard to imagine your destination during momentous occasions like a wedding. Oh, we do, or we try to imagine. But our imaginations are too limited or too slanted or too twisted by a culture that depicts loving relationships in too few ways (for my liking anyway). I have often said that my purpose during premarital counseling is to try to talk them out of it. OK, I'm pretty

subtle about it, but that is in the back of my mind when we talk. Because if I can talk them out of it, then they probably shouldn't be getting married in the first place.

Most of the time, I can't talk them out of it. Most of the time, they go through with it, even though their vision is limited concerning where they are heading. They launch off into this new way of being without much clue about what they are doing or where they are going. Some folks talk a lot about the number of marriages that fail. I'm amazed by the ones that succeed. Most of the couples I talk to are woefully unprepared for what might be ahead of them. Yet, we celebrate the launch of this new life with tears and with joy. And then we wave goodbye as they set off to a new life, a new land without so much as a MapQuest printout. They just heard the call, and they went.

Newlyweds are like Matthew in the Gospel text. Matthew was just minding his own business, as messy as that business was. And some guy walked by and said, "Let's go." And Matthew went. What? Really. Yeah, he went. He just up and left the booth. There were folks standing in line waiting to pay their taxes, and Matthew just left. How long did they stand there waiting for him to come back? I mean, you don't skip paying taxes because the taxman wandered off, do you?

We don't get much of Matthew's story here. Just a verse before Jesus is off at dinner again, hanging with an unsavory crowd and trying to get his point across to the less unsavory people. We don't know what Matthew was thinking or why he was such an easy mark. We don't know if he was thinking about his job, tired of the abuse he suffered at those who didn't want to pay their taxes – and who does want to pay their taxes? Maybe he was upset by what he forced people with little means to do in order to keep right with the law of the oppressor. Or maybe he didn't think that at all. Maybe he thought he was good at his job, moving up in the messy corporate world. Maybe he was used to following orders to get ahead and Jesus used that tone of voice that his bosses used, that certainty, that authority. And he was halfway down the street after the guy before he started to think, "Wait, what am I doing?" He heard the call, and he went.

Like Abram. You thought I'd never get there, didn't you? You thought I was lost in my own rhetoric. Well, it happens sometimes, I confess. But getting lost seems to be a part of the job; part of the calling that we people of God have. At least the potential is always there to veer wildly off track. Abram is a case in point.

This is the beginning, of course, of the saga of the patriarch we know as Abraham. But he doesn't get that name until later. For now, he is just Abram. He is the son of Terah, who just died in Haran, which wasn't really home. Terah was from Ur, further south and east, almost to the Persian Gulf. But now we're in what would become Turkey, a long way from home. Yet it became the new home. But it was the home Abram was asked to leave. He was asked to complete the journey his father started. Chapter 11, verse 31 says Terah set off for Canaan, but only made it to Haran.

You know what that's like. You had a dream; you were going places; you were going to accomplish things; you had worlds to conquer and dragons to slay, so you set off. But somewhere along the way, you settled in Haran. You didn't accomplish all that you had imagined, but you did well. You didn't conquer worlds, but you helped make a home for yourself and your family, and that was enough. What seemed so clear and so compelling some years ago now seems like a dream you begin to lose when you wake up. You remember that it was wonderful, heart-pounding stuff, but the details slip away like the morning mist as you suit up to face the day.

Did Abram hear those dreams from his father as they sat around the fire in the evenings? Did the lure of that original, unknown destination work its way into his soul as he tended the flocks? Genesis twelve says God called. What did it sound like? Was there a deep rumbling voice that formed words in Abram's soul but was thunder to everyone else? Was there, as there so often was in the Bible, a dream that refused to fade in the morning dawn? Or did God sound like Terah, talking of Canaan as though he had been there and was hoping to get back some day?

How do you know? That's the question we ask so many times. How do you know it is God and not the secret desires of your own heart? We want to know; we want to be certain. They always sound so certain in the Bible. Or do they? "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Does that sound like certainty? Oh, sure the narration says, "Now the Lord said to Abram..." But what is said? Go! And there is more about what is being left behind than there is about the destination. "To a land that I will show you." "Will show you," not "am showing you," not that I've written out here in these directions, no printout map with a line drawn from where you are to where you'll end up.

God doesn't seem to ask for certainty. We don't have Abram's inner dialog in this story; we don't have the questions he must have asked, at least in his own head and heart. All we have is his action – "So Abram went..." That's it. He went, and he believed. He went as the Lord had told him. And his uncertainty got him into trouble in just a few verses. He took the wrong steps at least as much as he took the right ones. But he went. And that is what God wanted, apparently.

God doesn't want us to wait until we are certain. God doesn't want us to figure it all out first, to download the maps and chart our course; he wants us to move. "Move where?" we ask. Anywhere. Somewhere. As the Lord has told us. We don't know everything, but we know some things. We know God asks us to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly. We know that Jesus said *blessed are the peacemakers* and that when you do it to the least of these, you do it to him. Maybe that isn't enough to build a life on, but it is a start.

And along the way is a blessing. Not just at the end. There is blessing in the going, blessing in the following, blessing in the unseen destination. A wedding is not the only task I have tomorrow. I am also helping another couple renew their vows. It has been five years of

marriage, and they want to claim one another again. Maybe they can see a little bit further and want to recapture the promises that held them for so long. Or maybe they want to reorient themselves again to make sure they are still on the path that leads to blessing.

Or maybe they heard that voice again, that voice that might be God or it might be their love for each other or some mysterious mixture of the two – maybe they heard that voice and want to follow.

Third Sunday after Pentecost - Is Anything Too Wonderful?

June 18, 2023

[Gen 18:1-15](#); [Matt 9:35-10:8 \(9-23\)](#)

Color: Green

PLANNING NOTES

What incredible, almost impossible-to-believe event has happened in your community? What stretched your understanding of God at work in the world? What blew your mind with wonder and joy? Grab hold of that today and celebrate the goodness of God at work in your midst. This is a day for giving God thanks for the heights your congregation has been able to reach, only because of God's grace and presence among you. This is a day for recognizing that even the everyday miracles of service and healing and transforming have been taking place among you because nothing is too wonderful for God. It is time to give God thanks and praise for all that has been and is happening and will happen among you.

"But wait," you're thinking, "How is this the weight of the call? How is this a burden or a struggle? Isn't it a good thing that God is working wonders among us?" Of course, it is! But someone had to believe that the impossible might be possible. Just ask Abraham and Sarah. Someone had to believe that God could bring life out of what appeared to be barrenness.

So, today we celebrate big dreams, grand visions. Today, we imagine what is possible with God in our own congregation, in our own community. Today, we give thanks for all that has been, even as we ask God to take us further, to equip us for more. But if you don't think that is going to require commitment and effort and energy on your part, then you aren't thinking it through.

Jesus sent the disciples out and asked them to trust that the resources that they needed to accomplish their mission were within reach. He told them to not focus on what they didn't have or what they couldn't afford, but to work with what was available to them. That level of trust is a high calling. And we often find ourselves falling short by focusing on our limitations or our lack rather than on the abundance that God has already provided to us. We are called to out-of-the-box thinking, to the creative use of resources, and ultimately to trust that we have enough and we are enough—enough to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. So,

let this worship be a time of prayer for deeper trust, for opened eyes, for willing hearts and hands. Let this time be a time of stirring us up to go and proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

PREACHING NOTES

There is nothing we like to complain about more than our work, it seems to me. And yet there is nothing more defining than what we do. It's how we introduce ourselves, how we understand ourselves. We measure ourselves by the jobs we have. I remember when I was shepherding my dad around to more doctors than I could count, I sat and listened as he answered the questions they asked over and over. There was one time when it came to that question, "What do you do?" that he seemed to have gotten tired of talking about what he used to do, or that he was retired, and he said, "I'm a woodworker!" True, he has a garage full of tools and stacks and stacks of wood (more than he could use up even if he churned out folk-art birdhouses from now until Jesus came back); true he sometimes puttered around out there; true he had plans, half-finished projects all over. So, I guess he worked in wood. It was how he wanted to define himself. It was how he saw himself now. Fifty years of pastoring didn't matter to him anymore. "I'm a woodworker," he declared in that doctor's office.

What is the work that you do that defines you? In particular, what is the work our faith demands from us? Or we might ask, "What is the calling that is on our lives?" I know it gets tricky there. Faith, we think, is supposed to help us in our lives, help us be better at whatever we do, whoever we are. It isn't supposed to define us; it isn't supposed to add responsibilities to our already overfull plates, to add burdens to our already laden backs. "Come and I'll give you rest." We look forward to heaven as a place where we'll finally be able to get the sleep we need. Rest in peace.

Besides, a few hundred years of Christian theology tried to separate the ideas of works and faith. The fear was that an emphasis on work, on our effort, would cause us to think we were responsible for earning our salvation. That our actions, our choices, our work either brought us closer to the kingdom or took us farther from it. So, to avoid confusion, we taught that what you do doesn't matter. You can't earn your place in God's house. That truth gives birth to a misunderstanding that brought about a people of faith who don't know how to be a community or how to be laborers in the harvest of the Lord.

Back up a few verses in chapter 9, you'll find Jesus working. He heals two blind men. Then he tells them not to tell anyone about it. But they go and tell everyone about it. The word spreads, and Jesus' fame grows, as does the opposition. Verse 34 has the Pharisees complaining that he is consorting with demons. The rest of chapter 9 is his response to that accusation. He doesn't argue the logic of their complaint as he does a couple of chapters later when they really start getting on his nerves. No, for now, he just works. He labors in the harvest of the Lord.

And then Matthew tells us why. We are given the clue not only to the labors of Jesus but to the motivation for our working as followers of Jesus. Jesus worked, Matthew tells us, because Jesus saw. Jesus sees us. Jesus sees what is really going on in our lives. He sees what burdens we bear, what fears we harbor. Jesus sees us. He really sees us. And even though that scares us, it shouldn't. Because he sees, and he cares. He has compassion, Matthew says. His heart goes out. He sees us in our lostness, in our emptiness, under attack by enemies within and without; and he loves us. Although we are harassed and helpless, he loves us. He doesn't say, "Well, they should have known better." He doesn't say, "You'd think that by now they would have figured it out." He doesn't say, "What a bunch of losers." He has compassion for them.

The labor of the kingdom becomes possible when the motivation is right. Church growth programs for the sake of church growth - or institutional survival these days - don't work. Mission work done to enhance the reputation or the status of the worker doesn't help or heal.

When Jesus saw the crowd, he had compassion. So, he turned to his disciples. Or he saw the crowd, and then he turned to the community. What's the difference between a crowd and a community? This is a crucial issue for the church today. We've been a crowd; we think like a crowd, and we act like a crowd. We've done some good work as a crowd, that's for sure. We can be proud of our "crowdness." We're not, for the most part, an unruly crowd. There's no danger of becoming a mob, which is a crowd gone wild. But we are mostly in the crowd mindset, and Jesus wants us to be a community. The laborers whom Jesus asks us to pray for come from a community; they won't come from a crowd.

What's the difference? A crowd is a collection of individuals who have come together with common hungers and needs. They occupy the same space, but each person is there to meet individual needs, to satisfy individual hungers. They might share, or they might not; that doesn't matter much. They come in and they go out, and the value they place on their gathering is on whether their needs were met or at least acknowledged. The crowd is acutely aware of the struggle of their lives; they are harassed constantly and burdened by living, and they don't know what to do about it. They are looking for a leader who will bring them some comfort and solace, and they are likely to follow any shepherd who comes along. They are like hungry sheep who hope this shepherd knows where the food is and can bring some light into their personal darkness.

A community exists for one another and is open to those who haven't yet found their way in. It isn't about meeting needs or satisfying hungers; the community is about building relationships. It is about belonging and serving. The secret that each member of the community knows is that individual hungers are more than satisfied in service to others, in hospitality that puts others before self, in setting aside personal preferences in favor of the attempt to see the other and to see the world through the other's eyes. The members of the community don't starve themselves; they don't deny their own neediness but discover themselves surprisingly satisfied by the labor in the lord's harvest. This is, in part, because the needs and the hungers change when we are taken out of ourselves long enough to love someone else. And, in part, because

the deeper needs to connect and to love and to know and be known are sometimes redefined as something more surface, like happiness or recognition.

Jesus knows that the crowd needs workers to be among them. He also knows that those workers won't come from the crowd, but from the community. So, he turns to us and asks us both to pray and to be the answer to our prayers. And then he sends us out, as he sent the disciples out. He gives us power, as he gave them power; and he sends us out to make the world more like the kin-dom of God. The power we are given isn't something mystical; rather, it is our giftedness and our resources and our experience. We have the power to impact our world for Christ.

Then, he sends us out together, which is a blessing if we would acknowledge it. We tend to think it is an individual thing, this vocation stuff, this labor thing. We tend to think we are called as individuals when we are called to labor in the vineyards. And indeed, we are each called, but we are called to labor *together*. We called, in short, to be a community and not a crowd. We are called to do incredible things, maybe even unthinkable things, maybe even things that make us laugh out loud just to imagine. Ask Abraham and Sarah if you can get them to calm down long enough to explain it to you. It's one of those scenes where you can't help but laugh along with them. They are so giddy with amusement, or with amazement, or with the sheer audacity of the promise that is laid out before them that they can barely stand up straight. Two old coots destined for the geriatric ward are heading toward maternity; it just is too ludicrous to be believed.

Maybe your church isn't called to have babies, but there is certainly a call to give birth to something in your community. Something that would give life, something that would give joy, something that would bring hope and unity in the midst of a difficult and divided time. We're too old; our time has passed; we don't have it in us; these are the excuses that keep us from following our call. I'm sure those words were running through Abraham's and Sarah's brains as they listened to these strangers make a promise. They were given a calling that was both a blessing and a burden at the same time. Giving birth isn't an easy task; just ask any mother in your congregation. But is it wonderful? Afterward, sure, but even during. Through the labor, through the pain, is anything too wonderful for God? That was the word that they clung to when it got difficult in the days ahead. That was the whispered promise that got them through the labor of giving birth and the labor of raising a child named laughter. Is anything too wonderful for God?