

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
The 4th Sunday after Epiphany, January 31, 2021
Mark 1:16-20, John 1:43-51
21st Century Discipleship by Rev. Sue Trigger

GOSPEL LESSONS Mark 1: 16-20 (NRSV)

16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea— for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

John 1:43-51 (NRSV)

43 The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.” 46 Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” 47 When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” 48 Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” 49 Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 50 Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” 51 And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Jesus called his disciples and their lives were changed forever. Like the one day when Jesus and his disciples walked into a bar. The waiter asked what they wanted to drink. Jesus said, “Just order water.” One time Jesus and the disciples went to a restaurant. Jesus asked for a table for 26. “But there are only 13 of you.” The host said. Jesus replied, “We always sit on the same side.” One day Jesus went up to a mountain with his disciples; and he began to teach them, saying: Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Peter raised his hand and said: Will this be on a test? We needed a little humor today. I tried to make a joke about the 12 disciples, but it dozen’t work.

Somehow I bet there were some fun stories about Jesus and the disciples that we'll never know. For now, we'll have to focus on what we do know. This morning our Scripture readings gave us two accounts of Jesus calling the twelve disciples. In each story, Jesus walks up to a man, invites them to follow him, and they drop everything and go with him. No joke.

The stories of the disciples are an important part of our Christian story. But what does it mean to be a disciple? The word disciple is one of those religious words that we often use, but don't often think about the depth of its meaning. Our first thought when we hear the word is often to think of the twelve followers of Jesus. When we think about being a disciple ourselves, we think of it as being someone who believes in Jesus, and we also think about discipleship as taking care of those in need. Those are all true, but today, let's dig deeper into understanding discipleship.

Let's start by looking back at what was happening when Jesus called the twelve. Rabbi Barney Kasdan offers a look at what it meant to be a disciple through the lens of 1st Century Judaism. Jeshua is the Hebrew name for Jesus, so when you hear the rabbi refer to Jeshua – he is speaking of Jesus. Take a look. [\(Sermon video clip\)](#)

I want to spend a moment thinking about one of the comments Rabbi Kasdan made about one way we tend to look at discipleship. He pointed out that we tend to apply a Western/Greek approach to learning to the concept of discipleship which means that we see discipleship as a body of material we learn and then you're done – you're a disciple. He mentioned the model of discipleship training as 10 lessons and then you're done. He makes a very valuable point. New member's classes are a few short weeks and then you're a member. Confirmation classes tend to be a longer time of study, usually a year, and then you can become a member. For many, completing these classes are all you need to know to be a member, and then their attendance in Sunday school classes, Bible study, and even worship drop off dramatically.

Dr. Kirby was a retired member of the church. Most mornings he could be found sitting under a shady tree whittling amazing creations from a small piece of wood. One day I visited with him and invited him to join a new adult Sunday school class I thought he might enjoy. He stopped what he was making and said, "I learned everything I need to know in Confirmation class." His comment was exactly what Rabbi Kasdan was referring to. You learn a specific body of information and that's all you need. That wasn't even true for Jesus.

If anyone could say, "I learned everything I needed to know in Confirmation class," it would be Jesus. Yet we know that he was committed to going to the Synagogue to study and wrestle with Scripture. He participated in worship and prayer and the festivals of his Jewish faith. Jesus was a lifelong student of faith. As we heard from the rabbi, this is part of being a disciple. To be a learner.

Another point Rabbi Kasdan made is that, as the word suggests, being a disciple is a discipline. A discipline that changes your lifestyle. Discipleship is making Jesus Lord of your life. It means making the practices of faith a priority just as Jesus did. Worship, prayer, Bible study, Sunday school, mission work, advocacy, all are disciplines of discipleship. Discipleship is a commitment to trust in God in all of life. In our daily decisions, in our big life decisions; it means seeking God's guidance just as you would with your most trusted friend.

Discipleship is a relationship with God that compels us to carry out the work Jesus equipped us to do. When Jesus began his ministry, he went to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and announced the purpose of his ministry. Using the words of the prophet Isaiah, he said, ""The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." As disciples, this is also our calling. The gospel of Matthew 25 reminds us of Jesus' expectations to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and imprisoned.

One more thing about discipleship. Equipping disciples is the work of all believers. Jesus called the first twelve to learn and grow into disciple makers. In the gospel of Luke, we learn that his following grew so that Jesus sent 72 followers out in pairs to share peace and tell their stories of faith with others, preparing for Jesus' coming. Jesus didn't do the work alone, neither can we all have a role to play. The way we live our lives plants the seeds of faith for our family members, friends, and strangers. An invitation to attend a church event with a friend can plant a seed. Offering to pray with someone who is going through a difficult time can give someone hope. Discipleship is team work and the more we work together, the greater the growth.

The video with Rabbi Kasdan began saying that there are over 6 billion people on earth. Of those billions, only 2.5 billion claim to be Christian. Then it asked the question, "Why has there been such little difference in our world. Many admire Jesus as a rabbi, many see Jesus as a great teacher, but few follow him as Lord". That is a truth that is painful to hear, isn't it? I don't want to assume I have the answer to this question, but I do want to offer this thought. Could it be that there is so little difference in the world because the Christian church has become focused on maintaining an institution rather than the work of making disciples? That's a very hard question. A question for the Church to consider is are we committed to making disciples? That is a very big commitment. At Grace Covenant we can explore that question by asking questions like:

Are we offering educational ministries that challenge all ages to think about what it means to have faith and what it means to be a disciple? Are we working together to help those in need? Are we reaching out to our friends and neighbors and inviting them to find the faith we have found? And are we committed to empowering

others by modeling discipleship? The last one may be the hardest, are we committed to making the worship and ministries of the church a priority? These are challenging questions but it is important that we think about them.

Discipleship is a life in relationship with God and with others. It is a life transformed and committed to Jesus Christ as our first priority. As Rabbi Kasdan said, "It is a lifestyle of making Jesus Lord, not just a body of knowledge that we've mastered, but a submission of our will to him as Lord." Perhaps that is where the answer lies to the question about why there has been so little difference in the world. Discipleship is a hard. It is a big commitment. But it is also rewarding, fulfilling, and the source of great joy in our lives. It means being part of the family of God; a family where there is comfort in sorrow, joy in celebration, support in struggle, seeking to know God as we are known by God, the promise of salvation and new life, and above all - love, always love.