

**Luke 18:18-30**

<sup>18</sup> A certain ruler asked Jesus, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ <sup>19</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>20</sup>You know the commandments: “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother.”’ <sup>21</sup>He replied, ‘I have kept all these since my youth.’ <sup>22</sup>When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ <sup>23</sup>But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. <sup>24</sup>Jesus looked at him and said, ‘How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’

<sup>26</sup> Those who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’ <sup>27</sup>He replied, ‘What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.’

<sup>28</sup> Then Peter said, ‘Look, we have left our homes and followed you.’ <sup>29</sup>And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, <sup>30</sup>who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.’

We turn our attention these coming weeks to the idea of ‘Making Disciples’, to how we are formed as disciples. In our case as an Anabaptist-Mennonite congregation, this is generally where already lean, toward emphasizing discipleship:

- toward more emphasizing right living over right believing;
- more emphasizing a life of faith in which we grown and change over time, than a particular moment of conversion (we might more talk about “a life of conversion” than a moment of conversion)
- more emphasis of seeking faithfulness to who we understand Jesus Christ to be

In some preaching podcast, I can’t remember where, the person being interviewed said one downfall of most preachers is that they end their sermons the same way 90% of the time:

That a Lutheran preacher, for example, is likely to almost always end with a call to grace (or a word of grace)

A Baptist preacher, is likely to almost always end with a call to salvation.

And a Anabaptist-Mennonite preacher, is almost always going to end with a call to discipleship.

When I heard that I thought, “No, I don’t do that. I am more diverse and creative than that.” But, a quick examination revealed to me that yes, I almost always end with some call to a life of discipleship: a call to action, or self-examination, or word of hope (to keep us from being too discouraged as we try to keep being faithful disciples). All that to say, this is a place where we emphasize – some might say ‘over-emphasize’ – a life of discipleship. And perhaps we might take this sense of discipleship for granted, so we will try to bring it to the forefront in these coming weeks.

First, let's define our term a bit, *discipleship* – to be a disciple means to be one who is “a student, a learner, a follower of someone.”

Despite our culture's increasing quest for individuality, we are likely all disciples of someone: it might be Adam Smith, or Karl Marx, or the Framers of the Constitution. You might be a disciple of a particular professor or teacher you had, or a yoga instructor, or pastor, or author or activist – or someone else whom you have particularly tried to mold your life after. At the very least, you are likely a disciple of someone in a particular area of your life: for instance, if you are a painter, you might be a 'Bob Ross' disciple. If you work with the homeless community in Boise, you might be a disciple of Henry Krewer, who is a disciple of Dorothy Day, who is a disciple of Jesus Christ.

But of course in our setting, we are specifically talking about being followers, students, and learners of Jesus Christ.

And so, in perhaps the most obvious sermon introduction ever, when we speak of discipleship in our setting, we are speaking of being followers, students, and learners of Jesus Christ.

When I have done baptism sermons, I have used the phrase to speak about the choice of baptism, as **“Give as much of yourself as possible to as much of God as you understand.”** And still, I have not come to hear a better understanding of Christian discipleship than that, “to give of as much of ourselves as possible, to as much of God as we understand.”

There are other ways of thinking about discipleship out there: dying to self, living to Christ (what this ancient baptismal fount represented); having Jesus as our personal savior; being a slave to Jesus (as Paul puts it, I think). But what I appreciate so much about this concept of discipleship so much is that it necessitates continual change, continual learning, continual growth. *Giving as much of ourselves as possible to as much of God as we understand*, is journeying concept – it is a ‘always in process’ concept. Because it has two variables: 1) Who we understand God to be, and 2) how much of ourselves are we able to give to that understanding.

Who we understand God to be will, hopefully, continue to change and grow over time. Some see this as the story of the Bible. Richard Rohr says that the story of the Bible is the story of God breaking into human history and changing us bit-by-bit. He says, “the Bible charts this growth and change: God becomes less violent, less punitive, more inclusive, less tribal.”<sup>1</sup>

William Paul Young, the author of the book (and now movie) *The Shack*, says who God is understood to be is continually evolving and changing over time. We see this throughout scripture, where the people always think they know who God is, and then God breaks into their story and says, “That is not who I am...let me show you who I am.”<sup>2</sup>

The people of Israel come to be certain that their God is a God who demands sacrifice, to which God says, “No, that is not who I am – I require justice, kindness and walking humbly with me.”

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<sup>1</sup> From his interview on the podcast, The Bible for Normal People. <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.podbean.com/e/episode-2-richard-rohr-a-contemplative-look-at-the-bible/>

<sup>2</sup> From his interview on The Bible for Normal People <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.podbean.com/e/episode-41-william-paul-young-reimagining-the-god-of-the-bible/>

The people come to be certain that God is primarily for their nation and their people group, and Jesus says, “That is not who God is” and tells them the story in which a Samaritan is the hero.

The people come to be certain that God is primarily concerned with the holiness of following the laws of Moses, and Jesus says again, “That is not who God is” and he and his followers break the Sabbath laws repeatedly.

In our gospel story this morning, we meet one seeking to be a disciple, a “certain ruler” the author of Luke calls him. He comes seeking Jesus and brings with him a particular understanding of who God is. He understands God to be one with a list of commandments that must be followed: to not kill, to not commit adultery, to speak the truth at all times, to honor his parents.” This is who he understands God to be, and to his credit, he has given himself to this understanding of God.

Despite this, he still comes seeking Jesus – some scholars call this a ‘quest story’, where one comes in search of Jesus to fulfill a particular mission (i.e. healing, a new understanding, acceptance, etc.). So he comes on a quest for Jesus: perhaps he is unsure if this is how to be living his life; perhaps he just wants a pat on the back and affirmation for how well he is doing in life; perhaps he knows that despite this, something still feels missing/lacking from his life. So he asks Jesus, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And Jesus gives to him a new understanding of who God is, of what is asking of him, “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor...then come, follow me.” You have thought God was only concerned with following a set of rules and laws, but that is not the full

picture of God, God is concerned with care for the poor – God is concerned that you do not value/pursue money and wealth above all else.

He is given a new understanding of God. But he cannot give himself to this. At least at this point in his life, he is unable to give himself to this new understanding of God revealed by Jesus. The only quest story of the gospels that ends in disappointment.<sup>3</sup>

We might also say that discipleship is a relationship. And when we enter a relationship, says William Paul Young, we lose full control. Whether our relationship be with a sibling, a spouse, a child, a parent – no matter how much time we spend with this person over the years, we could never contend that we fully know them. Because that person will continue to grow and surprise us. Not only this, but they will continue to be changed by the relationship we have with them. So, most of us would admit that we can never fully know someone in which we are in relationship to, and yet, we so often have claimed throughout history that we can fully know God – to have claimed that we can know exactly who God is and what God wants for us for the rest of time. But a relationship is always changing – there is always something new to be revealed and learned.<sup>4</sup>

So, in this way, discipleship is also a quest story, a story of continuing to seek God. Hopefully this is at least part of why you have continued to chose to be part of a religious community (to go

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Schertz's draft version of her *Luke* commentary for *The Believers Church Commentary* series.

<sup>4</sup> Also from his interview on 'The Bible for Normal People' podcast.

to church) – you know that there is still more of God to be understood. This is why we continue to serve at places like Corpus or with *Glocal*, or why we seek out people of other faiths and points of view – because we know there is more of God to be revealed, and we need to be with those who see the world differently to be able to see a bit differently. This is why we continue to spend time in nature, and in prayer and in contemplation – because we know that God still has much to reveal to us in the quiet moments and in how God has ordered the world. This is why we spend time in study and in looking at the life of Christ – because Jesus is always disrupting our certainty and revealing to us a bit more of who God is.

But that might be the easy part, allowing for new understandings of God – as the Rich Young Ruler has showed us, perhaps the hard part of discipleship is giving more of ourselves to this new understanding.

I have been part of a Creation Care small group for almost 5 years now with some of you here: John Wargo, Reed Burkholder and I have been part the whole time and others have been parts at different points. That group is a key place in my life where new understanding of God as Creator are revealed to me time and time again. And sometimes they are new understandings that are easy to give more of my life to, and others – they are not. For example, the past few years we have heard more and more about the impacts on God’s creation from animal agriculture. And after many, many months – it was starting to have an impact on me. And Reed kept talking about this film “Cowspiracy” and it was now even on Netflix, so I had no barriers for me to watch it. But, I knew, I knew that I was on the edge and that if I watched this film it was going to push me

over the edge to feeling like I had to make a change in my life – that I had to do more in this area. And I didn't want to do that. So, it was at least 6 months until I finally said to Jenna, "I think we should watch *Cowspiracy*."

As long and painful as it can be to come to new understandings of God, I think this piece of "giving of ourselves" to that understanding of God is still the harder part.

And hopefully this gives helps us with our sense of judgment toward others in their life of faith – we do not have to question whether or not they are disciples – only to consider that perhaps they are "giving as much of themselves as possible to as much of God as they understand" at this moment in time. It is just that they likely have a different understanding of God than we do, or that, perhaps the circumstances of their lives make them unable to give more of themselves to God – perhaps it is shame or guilt or fear; or like our friend the Rich Young Ruler, it could be a love of wealth. We do not need to claim they are not disciples, only to live out our understanding of God as fully as we can.

And so this is what we will continue to turn our attention to in the coming weeks, the ways we might continue to grow in our understanding of who God is, and to continue to seek the strength of the Spirit to give a bit more ourselves to that God – the God we meet in Jesus Christ.

Amen.