

DISCIPLESHIP IS FOLLOWING

Yesterday, the Grove held its monthly Lego Club led by Sam Park. For one hour a month, kids ranging from 4-12 get together and dig through a pile of Lego bricks to find the exact right piece they need to create their masterpiece. It's fun to see the kids get creative, share pieces, play with each other, and talk about what they are building. Something interesting that I've noticed happening ever since Lego Club started was that most of the kids end up building the same thing as the each other every month. One month it's a car, one month a boat, one month a spaceship. Yesterday, most of the kids and even one adult were working furiously at building a hideout. What's even more interesting is that these specific projects are never assigned by Sam or another adult. One kid will start building a hideout, then another sees what he or she is doing and decides they want to make a hideout, and so on and so forth until they all end up working on the same project.

As I was thinking about it, there seem to be a desire within all of us to follow somebody and to do what they do. This might be because we admire that person; when I first started playing guitar I wanted to be like Jimi Hendrix; to me he was the best guitarist who ever lived. Now, of course, I just want to be like Reed Jones. Sometimes, we follow another person because we are unsure of what we are doing. When we were in Detroit last

summer working with MDS, I was on a group assigned to putting up drywall in a basement. I had done drywall before, but it had been a long time, so I appreciated getting to watch Arlis and Earl for tips on what I should be doing. And sometimes we follow someone just because it seems like that's what we are supposed to be doing. Two of our cats have grown up around our dogs ever since they were born, so sometimes they do very dog-like things. I was walking home from Lego Club yesterday and as I rounded the corner to my street Quinn, our border collie, spotted me and let out this ferocious howl. Well apparently, according to Erin and Rachel, when the dogs started barking outside one of our cats inside the house decided that she should also start growling, like a dog would.

Following is in our nature.

Over the last couple of months, we have been discovering how to be a healthy church by being a well-balanced church. And in that process of discovery, we have considered what it means to find balance in worship and in mission. We are now moving into our third topic, discipleship, which is just a big fancy word that simply means to follow after another person. This could be a student to a teacher, an athlete to a coach, one kid's Lego project to another, or even a cat to a dog.

In Christianity, a disciple is a person who follows after Jesus. Jesus gives us the simple call to discipleship in **Matthew 4:19**

when he says: "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." Essentially Jesus says if you want to be my disciples, follow me and do what I do.

That's a basic understanding of discipleship, however, living out "following" is whole lot more complex. Article 17 of the 1995 Mennonite Confession of Faith helps flesh this out a little bit by explaining discipleship in this way:

We believe that Jesus Christ calls us to take up our cross and follow him. Through the gift of God's saving grace, we are empowered to be disciples of Jesus, filled with his Spirit, following his teachings and his path through suffering to new life. As by faith we walk in Christ's way, we are being transformed into his image. We become conformed to Christ, faithful to the will of God, and separated from the evil in the world.

Some phrases that stand out for me from that article: take up our cross, filled with his Spirit, following, suffering, new life, transformed, conformed, and separated. Those are some strong and challenging words, and yet that is exactly what we are called to in following Jesus.

With all of this in mind, where do we even start the journey of discipleship? Discipleship begins by deciding to follow Jesus. This morning we are going to consider what it means to follow Jesus in discipleship by exploring the three-step process of

following. Following starts with Confidence (Belief in Jesus), Confession (Declaring Jesus is Lord), and Commitment (Baptism).

1) Confidence (Belief in Jesus):

Confidence means to actively believe that something is reliable and true. Discipleship of Jesus Christ begins simply with the confidence that He is who He says He is, that is, that He is the Son of God, and that He has done and will do what he has done and will do. That means we believe that He lived, died, and rose again in order to save us from the consequences of our sins, which is death, and that he will someday come again to judge the living and the dead so that those who are His true disciples might return to a full relationship with God in heaven. Jesus tells us in one of the most famous passages in all of Scripture that if we believe in Him, we will be saved.

John 3:16-18 (NIV)

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

As we see in this passage, discipleship begins simply with belief in Jesus. Believe in Him and be saved.

Transition: As we discover later in the book of John, however, merely believing in Jesus is not enough. In John chapter 12, Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the final time and is speaking in the synagogue. He reveals his identity as Son of God and that His mission was to die on their behalf. Because of this, certain leaders in the temple believed Jesus' words to be true. But, because of their fear of what the Pharisees might do to them, they refused to say anything.

John 12:42-43

⁴² Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved human praise more than praise from God.

They believed, but they weren't yet willing to follow Jesus. It wasn't their belief that revealed the true condition of their hearts; it was their unwillingness to declare their beliefs that led Jesus to say that they were more interested in man's praise than God's.

We are told in **James 2:19** that belief in and of itself is not the primary virtue of discipleship because anyone can believe.

“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.”

Discipleship may begin with Confidence, or Belief, but that belief has to be taken one step further. It must be CONFESSED.

2) Confession (Declaring Jesus is Lord)

To confess is to make a declarative statement that you take ownership of some action, word, or deed. In the courts, to confess is to say that you did the crime and are willing to take on the punishment. Parents, you know how important it is to get your kids to confess when they've done something wrong, not to embarrass or shame them but simply that they might take ownership of their actions and learn what not to do for next time. In a religious sense, M-W Dictionary defines “confess” as to “declare faith in or adherence to.” Similarly to a court confession, when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we are letting the rest of the world know what we believe, and in doing so we are claiming ownership of this belief.

Paul tells us in Romans that confession is an essential part of our faith, salvation, and discipleship.

Romans 10:9-13 (ESV)

⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you

will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

You can't have confidence and salvation without the public act of confession because it is in the act of confession that we confirm to God and before the world what we know in our hearts to be true. Lee Camp puts it this way in his book "Mere Discipleship"

"Jesus of Nazareth always comes asking disciples to follow him - not merely "accept him," not merely "believe in him," not merely "worship him," but to follow him: one either follows Christ, or one does not. There is no compartmentalization of the faith, no realm, no sphere, no business, no politic in which the lordship of Christ will be excluded. We either make him Lord of all lords, or we deny him as Lord of any."

In confessing Jesus, we are not only saying that we believe what He claims to be true, but we are also saying that we want His will to rule over our lives. Belief then shifts from mere mental agreement to actual life transformation.

Transition: After belief and confession, then, there is one final step to the beginning of following Jesus: Commitment that comes through baptism.

3) Commitment (Baptism)

Baptism is the public act of commitment to Jesus Christ that disciples do by either being immersed, poured over, or sprinkled by water. It is the religious equivalent of a college basketball player signing a contract to be on an NBA team and saying that they will play for that team and represent its values, without all of the contract-negotiation, the trade agreements, and hopefully without the illegal activity. According to Jesus, baptism is inextricably linked with discipleship. We cannot separate the discipleship process from the act of baptism.

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

But what is baptism exactly, and why does this commitment matter in following Jesus? Article 11 from the Confession of Faith states regarding baptism:

“We believe that the baptism of believers with water is a sign of their cleansing from sin. Baptism is also a pledge before the church of their covenant with God to walk in the way of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Believers are baptized into Christ and his body by the Spirit, water, and blood.”

Let’s unpack this quickly. First, baptism is an outward sign of Jesus’ cleansing us of our sins. The washing power of water serves as a visual illustration that just as water can wash away dirt, the power of Jesus’ sacrifice can wash away our sins. Taking a deeper look at this, the actual form of baptism by immersing a person underwater re-enacts the salvation story. When you are put underwater you are experiencing Jesus’ death and burial, when you are raised out of the water you are experiencing Jesus’ resurrection into new life. Paul writes about this in **Romans 6:1-4**:

“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Secondly, when we are baptized, we are given the power of the Holy Spirit, that mysterious third person of God who dwells within us in order that we might have God's guidance while following Jesus in discipleship. In **Acts 2:28-29**, Peter says:

³⁸ Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Finally, when we are baptized, we commit ourselves to a new identity in Jesus, and in that new identity, we are joined with a community of people who have also committed to that identity. We call that community the church. Paul writes in **Galatians 3:27**: ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Baptism is our public commitment to Christ, a symbol of our forgiven sins, an invitation for the Holy Spirit to come into our lives, and an entrance in the church community of disciples.

Conclusion:

So, how do we follow Jesus? First, we have confidence in who He is, what He says, and what He did. Secondly, we confess this confidence that Jesus is Lord. And thirdly, we commit to following this confession through the act of baptism.

Maybe you're hearing some of these things for the first time and are thinking you would like to start following Jesus. Well, there is no better time than the present. Even if you don't fully understand all of it yet, if you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who came to this world in order to die and save us from the consequences of our sins so that we might someday live with God in heaven, you can then confess that you believe these things to be true and take on Jesus as the new guide for your life. And if you've believed and confessed and would like to be baptized, we are offering an opportunity for baptism during our Easter service on April 16th. If you are interested in taking these first steps of following, then please talk to Dick or I.

Now, for those of you who have been a disciple of Jesus for a long time, have believed, confessed, and committed, you may be wondering how this sermon applies to you. Discipleship requires daily commitment to believing in Jesus and confessing Him as Lord. If we aren't in the habit of claiming Jesus as Lord of our lives, and if we don't make this known anywhere outside of the church, then we are just believing with our hearts but refusing to confess because we like the praise of man more than the praise of God. And are we in the habit of daily committing our lives to Jesus, trying to live into our baptismal vows we declared to die to our old self and to be raised to new life with Christ? While we are still alive in this world that is

ruled by sin, we will always have to wrestle with our old, sinful selves. And so in the path of discipleship and following, we need to constantly be working together to remain confident, to continue to confess, and to live into our commitment.

Today, like every day, we have the opportunity to follow after Jesus either by confessing and committing for the very first time, or by re-committing ourselves to intentionally following Him as Lord and Savior. So, who do you want to follow, and what kind of disciple do you want to be?