

LIFELONG Discipleship Formation

“The righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God based on faith.” (PHIL. 3:9B)

Lectionary Text: Mark 1:9-15

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

¹² The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;⁵ repent and believe in the gospel.”

It is a fallacy to believe that after one becomes a disciple of Christ, everything becomes smooth and easy. On the contrary, the life of a disciple will have the same highs and lows as the non-Christian. We all face worries around the same set of issues: medical, economic, career, relationships. To put things even more plainly, the spiritual life of the disciple will have highs and lows as well. There will be moments when we feel the spirit has just descended on us and that God has just spoken words of love and acceptance. There will be moments when we feel parched, in the wilderness, wondering where God went. There is a temptation to pride in the first and a temptation to despair in the second.

Lifelong discipleship means staying the path and accepting all obstacles. The Holy Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness for a time of deprivation. He stayed the course and saw God’s will being fulfilled afterward.

How can you relate to this passage in your personal walk? In the communal life you share with your congregation? What do you (and your congregation) need to change in order to walk the path God has laid out for you?

Outward Incarnational Focus

“The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (MATT. 7:14)

Lectionary Text: Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16 (also Romans 4:13–25)

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” ³ Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴ “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

¹⁵ And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

Surely, Abram felt done; spent. He was 99 years old! Abram had heard God’s voice all those years ago, promising children, promising a future and a legacy in a new land. He and Sarai had left home and struck out in faith. Many good things had come of it. So had many trials. It had been a full life. He was ready to turn inward, to let the events of the outside world take their own course—without him.

But God speaks again. God repeats the same promise, unfulfilled these many decades. There will be children, grandchildren and descendants’ beyond number. Nations shall come from you. *“Behold, my covenant is with you!”*

Moreover, God gives Abram and Sarai new names! Now they would be Abraham and Sarah. They would see God’s promises fulfilled. Still more wonders were to come.

If the people who live near your church were to give your congregation a descriptive name, what would it be? What are you known for by outsiders? And if God were to give your church a new name, reflecting God’s intention for you, what would that be?

Ecclesial Health

“The body does not consist of one member but of many. God has so arranged the body that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.” (1 COR. 12:14, 24B–25)

Lectionary Text: Exodus 20:1–17, John 2:13–22

¹³ The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. ¹⁵ And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons, “Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.” ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” ²⁰ The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

There is a tension between these passages. The Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 represent the law God gave to Moses. The people in the temple courts in John 3 were there to give people what they needed to obey that law at Passover-time. Yet Jesus drove them out. Why?

We Presbyterians are known for doing things “decently and in order”. We work hard on making our Book of Order the best it can be. We have careful rules in place to govern how that happens. Most of our churches have by-laws, manual, policies and customs.

Try this exercise. Make two lists. On the first list, put down all the ways that your congregation has benefited from ‘playing by the rules’. How has this helped build trust, set expectations and respect the consciences of individual members—especially those that dissent on some particular issue?

On the second list, put down the ways that creativity in your congregation has been suffocated by your rules. How have people felt shut out of decision making? How have badly-designed rules (or a lack of clarity) allowed some people to misuse their power?

[EXTRA CREDIT: Do this same exercise considering the relationship between your congregation and your presbytery.]

Finally, if Jesus came to your church, which “tables” would he flip over?” What rigidities would he dismantle? What chaos would he bring loving-order to?

Intentional, Authentic Evangelism

“We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God.” (2 COR. 4:7)

Lectionary Text: Numbers 21:4–9 and John 3:14–21

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.⁸

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world,⁹ that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

Here are exaggerated two strategies for evangelism that are doomed to fail.

- “We in the church are perfect and you outside of it are awful. You need to become like us.”
- “We in the church are a little embarrassed at how awful we are. But you outside of the church are perfectly great. Don’t change a thing. (But won’t you come volunteer on our committees? ;-)”

There are a host of reasons these two statements would result in failed evangelism. At the core is the flawed assumption that people inside the church are completely different from those outside it. The truth is that we have our humanity in common. And humanity has a long history of messing things up, both inside and outside the church.

Most of the Moses/wilderness stories in the Hebrew Scriptures point out how we human beings cannot handle things on our own and need to rely on God. In Numbers 21, this is represented by complaining-people overrun by fiery-poisonous serpents. They need to look at the serpent-on-a-pole provided by God not to die. John 3 pulls forward this metaphor to speak about Christ.

A better evangelism strategy might go something like this...

- “There are definitely times when I feel unable to handle life. Instead of recriminating myself or lashing out at others, I am deeply comforted by the knowledge that ‘*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.*’ God is willing to accept all of us just as we are. The present moment is the starting point. Better yet, there is deeper love that beckons...”

[EXTRA CREDIT: Challenge people to imagine what they could say to an unchurched person about their faith. Then share that story with a good friend that they trust. This is kind of a “test drive” for giving your own testimony.]

Spirit-Inspired Worship

“These people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote.” (ISAIAH 29:13)

Lectionary Text: Jeremiah 31:31–34

³¹ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Too often we view worship as something that we do according to a formula. *“Call to Worship, Hymn, Confession, Bible, Preaching, Offering, Benediction, etc.”* Worse yet, we may view it as something that someone else does for us. *“The praise band and the preacher perform—and we listen.”*

Jeremiah 31 reminds us that the goal of worship is to know God. We can see this in the discussion of the old and new covenants. In the past, perhaps it was enough to know some formulaic things about God, some rules for life and worship. None of those things are bad, but God is promising something new and better. In the new covenant God will write the Law within our hearts, so that all of us will know God intimately. Our faith will be strengthened that we know that we are loved and forgiven and being transformed by our God.

To me, worship is two-way. We do offer ourselves to God--and our formulaic worship structures *help* us do that. But God offers God’s self to us as well. In worship, we make ourselves present, waiting to see how God will work in us. Our understanding of God’s love increases—and our hearts echo in reply. We speak and we listen. We love God and God loves us. *“Come, Holy Spirit; Come!”*

When was there a time when you were surprised by something that really moved you during a worship service? You probably experienced *“Spirit-Inspired Worship”* at its best!

Caring Relationships

“By this everyone will know that you are disciples, if you have love for one another.” (JOHN 13:35)

Lectionary Text: Acts 4:32–35

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

People either get dreamy or intimidated when reading this passage (or the similar text in Acts 2:42-47). They think that this idyllic state of the church is impossible for us today—OR they feel guilty that they aren’t selling all their property and giving it to the church. Both of these reactions allow us to keep this passage at arms-length. What is helpful about “Caring Relationships” is that it isn’t all-or-nothing. We have all had experiences where people have cared for us. We have all had moments when we have cared for others in meaningful ways. To share those stories in the context of a church is to express the ways in which Christ calls us into true community. We are called to deepen our faith and for that deepening to be expressed in our relationships with each other.

The story in the Presbyterian Mission Agency Study about “Steven” is especially appropriate for this discussion. Who is there in your congregation that you minister to, but don’t invite in? Who is on the margins of your congregational life? Growth happens from the margins.

Empower Servant Leadership

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers.” (MATT. 9:37–38)

Lectionary Text: 1 John 3:1–7

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

⁴ Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.

As the song title says, “Love is a verb.” It is an action that one takes. This passage begins with the premise that God loves us first: *“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.”* This kind of agape-love expects no reward. It is an action that does not demand repayment.

When we practice servant-leadership, we act toward others as God has acted toward us. We serve them without expectation of repayment. While it is true that our service bears testimony to Christ, we must not assume that our service, our mission or our outreach will yield some tangible increase in church membership or revenue. We act as servants for the sake of Christ alone.

In this we also practice leadership; for we are called to live in a different manner. As the latter portion of our passage states, we avoid sin, while purifying ourselves and practicing righteousness. While not expecting repayment, we may hope that this different manner of life gives a good testimony and attracts the interest of others who want to join with us.

When have you observed someone doing a good deed but expecting some kind of repayment? How is that different from the kind of hope that anchors us in Christ?

When have you observed someone acting in an unexpected manner that inspired you? Where do you have an opportunity to act as a servant leader in the next month? What about your church?