

## Exploring Discipleship

A disciple is someone whose character, value system, and core relationships are being transformed and brought into harmony with God's Kingdom as they follow Christ and encounter his grace and presence.

If there is one thing that we have learned in our world of technology and social media it is that people do not typically change their minds because they are confronted with a superior idea. Confirmation bias and fear play a very powerful role in what our brains allow us to accept and/or reject. Because of this we often talk about the need to come close to others. We remind ourselves that in order to really be open to change we must have proximity and relationships with those who are different than us. We also must be willing to listen to stories that do not line up with our own experience. We have to create margins in our lives that allow us to reflect on our worldview, on our self-perception, and on our own frailty, limitations, and brokenness. We do this because we know that our own biases and fears cannot survive proximity. Relationships and encounters give us the opportunity to challenge our worldview and embrace a new way.

Jesus spoke of our need for encounter in order to embrace a larger truth in John 8:31-32 when he was speaking to his disciples. He said, "If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." I understand his phrase, "Continue in my word..." to mean that we continue to follow him. Continue to trust him enough to walk in obedience to his teaching. Ultimately, Jesus told us that all the commandments could be boiled down to two things - love God and love each other. If we practice those things we will walk in his word. As we do that we will have an encounter with Christ and that encounter will transform us...ie. set us free.

Unfortunately, this understanding that true transformation and real freedom are the result of proximity, relationship, and encounter has not made its way into our models of discipleship. Too often when we think of making disciples we think of presenting ideas/doctrines in a bible study or classroom setting. We think that downloading the right information that will lead to knowing the truth and somehow that acceptance of new information will make us free. I have heard countless stories of people who took this to heart and filled themselves with all the information their faith community told them was truth only to find their lives falling apart. It is not just stories of others that I have heard, it is my story too. Jesus says, "If you continue in my word..." but the church often says, "If you believe these correct doctrines..."

It is not truth that leads us to an encounter and consequently sets us free. In fact, we all know many folks who have a firm grip on the truth but whose lives look nothing like Jesus in terms of their love for God and others. According to Jesus it is trust that leads us to an encounter and out of that encounter we understand a little more about who God is and how God relates to us and the world around us. As we walk in trusting obedience (loving God and loving others) and have these encounters then we begin to live our way into understanding (*read Truth*) and this whole process is setting us free. So the goal of discipleship is not downloading truth but instead is creating space in our lives for encounter.

In his book *Responsible Grace* Randy Maddox tells us that John Wesley had a relational anthropology. In that he explains that human flourishing and wholeness exist when our relationship with God, with others, with creation and with ourselves exist in harmony with one another (68). Those four relationships in harmony lead to the shalom of creation. When sin devastated the created world, it severed and distorted each of these relationships and the result has been chaos. In this state of separation our human faculties that were born in the image of God failed to bear the likeness of God. Sin is the result of broken relationships and salvation is the result of restored relationships. It is not simply belief that makes us whole but rather participation in God's Spirit moving in creation reconciling the broken things. As we know, the word we translate as "faith" could also be translated as "faithful." Salvation is born out of our active participation in allowing God to reconcile us to God's self, to one another, to creation, and to our own soul. This is what discipleship is all about. Our human faculties are made whole and God's likeness in us is restored as we live into reconciliation. It is not salvation by works because it is God's grace that does the transforming. Our role is simply positioning ourselves to be transformed. We make ourselves available and we surrender to the work of Christ and in that encounter, we are healed.

In our earlier definition of a disciple we said that following Jesus was at the heart of this journey. It is Christ's life that shows us how to live our own. As we seek to develop a discipleship ecosystem we will do well to focus on the rhythm that we see modeled in the life of Jesus. That can serve as a starting point for our own spiritual journey. In chapter 6 of Luke's gospel he introduces us to one of Jesus' rhythms that I believe ripples backwards and forwards from Jesus' life to show us the rhythms that lead to human flourishing. In Luke 6:12 the first thing Jesus does is go up the mountain to pray. He spends the night reflecting, being present and engaged in the moment. He knows that it is in these times (even when it feels as if nothing is happening) that the breath of God breathes life back into his soul. The writers of the Gospels tell us that Jesus would often get away to have this time. There is an intimacy here, self-awareness, and a connection with God that reminds us that we are the beloved and that God has not abandoned us. These

times transform us and shape us. They invite God to reveal to us our motives, our thirsts, our idols and our pain. It is in these times that we can welcome God's acceptance and grace, knowing that God does not require us to change to be the beloved. The twist is that in the acceptance and peace we are changed, healed, liberated and redeemed. As Phileena Heuertz from the Gravity Center says, "Through activism we confront toxicity in our world and through contemplation we confront it in ourselves."

After spending the night in prayer Luke says that Jesus went down the mountain and gathered his disciples. Even Jesus needed community. In another place Jesus tells his disciples whenever two or more are gathered and focused on Christ then he is present with them in a unique way (Matthew 18:20). Two or more...this means that there is an encounter with the presence of Christ that is unique to a community that is focused on Christ. Although our times of personal contemplation are important, we must seek out community because in community we encounter Christ in a unique way that cannot be found when we are by ourselves. Transformation happens in the presence of Christ and the presence of Christ is uniquely experienced in community. Community is more than a gathering. It means living authentically and vulnerably with one another. It creates a space for us to accept those who may not see the world the same as we do. It gives us the opportunity to hear stories that may contradict our own experience and open us up to the possibility that life is much more complex and mysterious than we think. Finally, it allows the opportunity to practice things like forgiveness, boundaries, and honesty - reminding us that we are all somehow connected to one another.

Once Jesus gathers his disciples we are told he travels down the mountain and encounters a large crowd. Jesus has compassion on the crowd and begins to serve them. In Matthew 25 Jesus tells a parable and at the end, as he is explaining it, he tells his disciples that when they cross boundaries and serve those typically considered to be on the "outside" they are actually serving him. We have an opportunity to meet Christ in the faces of those we serve, they become the manifestation of Christ to us. Community and contemplation are both vital and yet they are unable to give us the encounter with Christ that compassion and boundary crossing gives us. Those we serve are as much Jesus to us as we are to them. There is solidarity in serving. We go not as the empowered one's bringing privilege and temporary reprieve from their suffering, rather we go as fellow broken human being's desperately in need of wholeness and transformation.

*Contemplation, Community and Compassion*...each movement uniquely touches a part of our humanity. Each practice brings us into an encounter with the presence of Christ that transforms us in ways the others could not. Each practice is essential to a holistic transformation that impacts all of who we are and fundamentally restores us to the dream God had in mind when God began the creation project. Our discipleship ecosystem must take each of these practices into account. We must find a way to disciple people into having these encounters with Grace if we are to truly see the likeness of Christ in the lives of disciples.

