

Part 2: Trained in Groups

Matthew 5:1-11

Jesus' Pathway of Discipleship

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Sunday, May 14, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Before proclaiming the word, I have three things I would like to say. First, I encourage you to seriously consider participating in the upcoming All-Church Retreat in October. That retreat will focus on our church's future and the strategic direction and ministry that we intend to take. Our guest speaker will be helping us to go in those directions.

This series of sermons on the pathway of discipleship that Jesus leads us on are in anticipation of our future: to track with Jesus through the gospels about how Jesus made disciples, moved us from being touched by his grace, and accomplishing the mission in the world to which he calls us to go.

Thirdly, I would like to acknowledge the tremendous gift and generosity of the deacons for this special bouquet of flowers in honor of my mother-in-law, my wife's mother. It is a gracious act on their part, as well as the artistic preparation of how these are put together by the flower ministry, to give such a wonderful acknowledgement today. My wife and I want to say "thank you."

Let us pray. Now Lord Jesus Christ, will you bless us, because we are poor in spirit, and we hunger for your kingdom. Bless us because we do mourn, and we need your comfort. Bless us because we desire to learn. May we inherit the earth that you prepare. Bless us as we hunger and thirst for righteousness, and fill us with your presence through Jesus Christ and the power of your word. Amen.

We can learn a lot by watching the dynamics of a small group of people who are focused on their mission. It was a corporate team exercise in team development and an unfortunate accident had happened. A small group of eleven people had found themselves dangling over a cliff on rope. Ten were men and one was a woman. Together they decided that one of the group would need to let go in order for the other ten to survive, or the rope would break. Needless to say, they could not decide together who should let go. Finally, the woman gave a really touching speech, saying how she would give up her life to save the others, because women are used to giving up things for their husbands and others, sacrificing for men and not expecting anything in return. When she was finished speaking, the whole group of men were so moved that they clapped.

While crowds may be safe, if you get into a team and you go on a mission, it can be dangerous. Fulfilling the mission of Jesus Christ requires that we move out of the crowd and into a community that follows Jesus on the pathway of discipleship. We began this series by declaring that the grace of God comes through Jesus Christ. Jesus pours out grace upon us in his life, in his death, in his resurrection. People who heard Jesus speak and saw him do miracles were moved by his gracious presence and gracious power. Men were invited to follow him, and women were healed of evil spirits and diseases; and they were overcome with the desire to follow and learn of him.

The grace of Jesus seeks us out, pursues us, invites us into his presence, heals us, exorcises evil from us, teaches us, trains us, demonstrates life for us, gathers us into communities and families so that we might be able to go on mission and ministry adventures together. As we continue to read in the text that was read just a few moments ago, in Luke, chapter 8, we see that, right after Jesus is leading this group of twelve men in discipleship and this group of women alongside of them, he is teaching a certain parable of the seeds, the soils, and the sower.

In that parable, there is an explanation of the parable after a certain event happens. If we read the black print in relationship to the red print (the words of Jesus), we get a description of the actual process Jesus is following to do discipleship. Verse 4: When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to Jesus, he taught them in a parable; and then you see the parable of the seeds and the sower. A few verses later, in verse 9, it says: Then his disciples, after he had finished teaching, asked him what this parable meant, and he taught them the meaning, saying, "To you disciples, it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but to others, the crowd, I speak to them in parables, so that, looking, they may not perceive, and listening, they may not understand."

These are some hard words from Jesus. And then later on, in that same chapter, in verse 19, Jesus is confronted outside of a meeting by his mother and his brothers. Someone lets him know that they are out there, and Jesus has this to say: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." This concise movement is a summary of the way that we are moved from the grace of Jesus Christ into the mission of Jesus Christ. And in between those two actions is a whole process of discipleship —where Jesus invites the disciples out of the crowd and into close proximity with him; where he can answer their questions; he can converse with them about faith and life; and he can mentor them as he walks with them into the future.

Discipleship is the move from the crowd to the group or the family. It is the move from anonymity to intimacy. It is from watching what Jesus does, to doing what Jesus teaches. It is a movement from the formality and distance of seeing Jesus, to being up-close and personal, and a part of Jesus' family. The grace of Jesus, because Jesus is the leader and the older brother of the community, draws people into that community. It draws people into the community so that they can seek and find. They can knock and have the door opened. They can hunger and thirst for righteousness; and Jesus is close enough to them to show them, and model for them, and teach them what righteousness is about. Jesus is the center of the group. This community does not exist without Jesus being present. Jesus is not only the elder brother, but Jesus is the leader of the community. The group gathers around Jesus and knows that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus is the source and author of all things. Jesus is the master teacher and the mentor

—and the group comes close to Jesus.

Jesus' grace moves those to listen and hear, to watch and see, because they know that Jesus has authority. I believe that parents are called in faith, on behalf of Jesus, to lead their families. They, in a sense, are the surrogate representatives of Jesus as they teach their children the pathway of discipleship. This is also true for leaders of groups of faithful people. Parents and small group leaders have great impacts on the discipleship of the people who are in their families and communities.

Kathy Ireland, the supermodel, has this to say about her mother, in terms of the influence of her mother in her life: Kathy says, "When I was 18, I started modeling and traveling on my own to photo shoots all over the world. Like many teens, I was rebellious, and didn't think that I could learn anything from my mom. But once, before a trip, my mom slipped a Bible into my suitcase. Out of boredom, loneliness, and jet lag, I just picked it up and began to read it. So many passages were relevant to me. That Bible changed my life, and I credit my mom with giving me faith." The guidance that her mother gave to her as a teenager—of being subtle or quiet about the persuasion of faith—is a good example of how a mentor parent can help a teenager embrace faith.

Susannah Wesley is well known as the mother of a whole family of very well-educated and successful church leaders, including John and Charles Wesley. Susannah Wesley saw her ten children as a kitchen congregation. She was committed to the discipleship of every one of her children – seven daughters and three sons. She not only met with them as a group every day and taught them in terms of the Bible and theology, science and math, reading and writing; but she also met with them individually—to hear their concerns, their questions, and to have a conversation with them. It was out of this deep experience of discipleship that John Wesley started the entire Methodist movement of small groups—because he understood that peoples' lives change when they're in deep, intimate, family of Christian community. It was Susannah that showed him the way.

I credit my wife, Vida, to having a very strong sense of mentoring our two teenage daughters. There were crucial moments where they needed to have clarity of boundaries and direction, but a lot of flexibility. She has that tremendous ability to be structurally organized and enduringly stretchable—strong, but adjustable. On one particular occasion, our daughter Tonya, our youngest (more of our prodigal), decided she wanted to have a body piercing. We gulped; we talked about it, and it was Vida's guidance that we give her some direction, but that we find a way to help her to do it without hurting herself. So Vida went with her to the piercing place and helped her to make sure that she was pierced in a place that was not going to do any damage, which is right up here above her eye. So when you see her today, you will still see that little apparatus that she carries above her eye. Now I'm sure I'm going to hear about this from some of the parents; but the fact is that there needs to be direction and flexibility, grace and truth, in the parenting and leadership of families and people. I credit my wife for having that kind of discernment and direction.

I learned some of that from my mother as well. She had an ability to live in simplicity; at the same time, with a flair of elegance. She was able to do personal reflection at the same time as working very hard. And she wanted to be a person of listening abilities, while her favorite words were 'organize, organize, organize.' One of the reasons I think she pulled it off is because, as the household mentor, and leader, and parent, she was non-reactive... non-judgmental... and non-condemning. She was able to handle the stressful moments without going overboard. This was somewhat reflected in a prayer that was given to me yesterday by one of our members on his mom's humility. The prayer goes like this: "Lord, help my words to be gracious and tender today, for tomorrow I may have to eat them."

It is important, in the way and grace of Jesus, that parents are reflective of the grace of Jesus as they parent their families, as leaders lead groups. The grace of Jesus draws us into these intimate communities; and the grace of Jesus draws us close to Jesus. It pulls us out of the crowd and puts us in the context of a more intimate family. It puts us into Jesus' presence and into a group of people that are surrounding Jesus and looking to Jesus for the center of their life and direction. It draws us into community as a gravitational pull, so that we together may orbit around the center of the community, who is Jesus Christ. Jesus' grace bids us to come out of the crowd and go up the mountain to sit at the feet of Jesus—close in proximity—and to listen to Jesus' words, to see his face, to feel his Spirit, to sense his soul, and to gaze into his eyes.

Jesus models for us that preaching proclamation must be connected to community; that worship leads to discipleship; that the parables are open to Jesus' being aware and receptive to questions. After all, the meaning of the word "parable" has to do with throwing out something alongside of the pathway. Jesus is on the pathway of discipleship, and he throws out this parable about the seeds and the sower. The parable is about the very thing that's going on in the moment with Jesus' relationship between the crowd and the discipleship group. There is a parallel process: the message of Jesus is connected to his method; the content of Jesus is connected to the context of his movement. The red print is very much defined by the black print, if you have a red-print Bible. The story is driven into action... and words parallel the actual work of Jesus, and what is going on here.

In the action of Jesus, people are coming out of the crowd, and they're moving into a group that is close to Jesus. Jesus clearly says to them: The crowd is never going to understand the secrets of the kingdom of God. But you all who come close to me and are in my Christian community...my small group...my family...will understand the secrets. And why is that? Simply because they ask questions. They are close enough-in to be able to wonder with Jesus about meanings. And Jesus is close enough to them to be able to answer their questions and to tell them the secrets.

It's a very powerful thing to realize that the crowd never gets the secrets—only the group that comes close to Jesus. Only the family that gathers around Jesus understands the kingdom of heaven because Jesus talks with them about it. The grace of Jesus deepens that community; in the New Testament, it's called koinonia. It is the ongoing behavior of small groups and families together— that in deep relationship to the grace of Jesus Christ, they do things for one another because of love. The New Testament teaches that koinonia is about 'one anothering' – to care for one another, to learn from one another, to listen to one another, encourage one another, to challenge one another, support one another, confront one another, forgive one another, confess to one another, pray for one another, teach one another.

You notice the movement. The movement is not so much about us being dependent on one authority figure; the movement is about

the Spirit coming into the community because Jesus is there, and we will learn from each other. This koinonia is something that Jesus gives as a gift. It's the implication of the grace of Jesus as it's played out in families and communities. It is particularly focused around one discipline—and this is a crucial discipline for healthy families, healthy churches, and healthy groups: the freedom of the people to be able to come close to a source and an authority, a parent or a leader, and to ask questions. If they can ask questions, and can get responses, they can discover the secrets of the kingdom of God. And so it is that, in the discipline of asking questions...of seeking answers...of uncovering the mysteries...of stretching their imaginations and growing the mind and spirit...that Jesus helps the disciples be transformed into his image.

We learn best in small groups, as many studies have shown. One of my concerns about American education is we still rely too heavily upon the big lecture group, the big class group, the big crowd, in order to teach. And Jesus' model is clearly about teaching in small groups. Everyone knows that if you have a smaller teacher-student ratio, the students have a better chance of learning and having their lives changed. We know from this that it's not about the information; it's not just about the facts; it's about the process of how people absorb it...about the ability of the teacher and the student to enter into conversation...and for the teacher to be able to pay attention to individual students and their concerns and questions. Jesus shows us that there is a movement from being a spectator to being a disciple; that spectatorship must lead to discipleship if we're going to grow.

In the Reformed tradition, we have articulated throughout history that the center of this growth process is all about Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who interprets; Jesus is the one who is the filter through which all truth and mystery is interpreted; Jesus is the one who helps us understand the Old Testament, the New Testament, and all of life. And without Jesus' presence, it doesn't make sense. Jesus calls us into community where we can talk about it. That grace of Jesus moves us to follow and to engage Jesus along the pathway of life; to watch what he does; to listen to what he says; to learn the way that he goes; to grow in the faith that he has and the disciplines that he demonstrates, as in prayer; to be trained into his disciplines in the context of small group, community, and family.

The grace of Jesus then leads us into being a new family together. This is not a family of hundreds or a family of thousands; this is a family of a few people... the twelve... the family of a few women... those who were with him. Jesus calls those men and women to become brothers and sisters—to come close enough that they not only trust him, but that they begin to trust each other. Luke has a very powerful insight about this: Matthew and Mark only talk about Jesus leading men in group community; but Luke is outspoken in his contrasting understanding that Jesus had women who followed him. He had men who followed him, and he put the men and women together, so they could listen to each other and learn about Jesus as they walked together.

It is not about blood ties; it's about Spirit ties. Those are the ties that bind us together and are blessed. Even Mary Magdalene is a prime example of this. It's not as Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code would lead you to believe: that Mary Magdalene, the prostitute, married Jesus and had a child. That's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches clearly that Mary Magdalene was delivered of seven evil spirits and followed Jesus, in community. And in that following of Jesus, she became close to Jesus, to the point that she was there when he died; she was there when he was raised from the dead; and she was there to be the first apostle to be sent to tell the other apostles that he had risen from the dead. So Mary Magdalene is the one who is a model of discipleship and community, and a disciple who is sent on a mission to proclaim.

The grace of Jesus moves us into service. If you see a recent brochure from our Nominating Committee, you will see words at the top of it, which say simply, "Grace moves us into service." It is a clear articulation, in simplicity, of how we experience Jesus Christ; and Jesus does draw us into his ministry and mission. However, let me say that there's something that must happen in the middle of that: we must be in community. We must get out of the crowd and come close enough to Jesus that we can wrestle with the secrets of the kingdom, while Jesus trains us on how to go into ministry and mission. It is that grace that makes us activists, where we learn to do the word of God, not just hear it.

It's fascinating when you look at the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of how there were two tracks in his life that were always connected to each other. The first had to do with his understanding of theology; the second had to do with his putting that theology into practice. When he wrote the great two theological works, *The Communion of the Saints* and *Act and Being*, he was putting those two things together. The word of Jesus Christ needs to be heard in community—the communion of the saints. And it needs to be put to action as one takes responsibility and begins to act out the Gospel. He put this in more simple terms in his two other books, called *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer understood that you need to have a life together in a small community in order to have the power of discipleship and change.

And so it is with us today. We are called to be out of the crowd and into community. That's the way that we will grow in grace. And that's the way that we will be sent into mission. This discipleship pathway is our pathway into the future with Jesus and NPC.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, draw us by your grace. Pour that out upon us. Bring us into the community of trust with you and with one another, and send us into mission. Help us to fully follow you...to not be hesitant...to ask you questions... and to learn to put your word to work. It is in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who live in community forever. Amen.