

“Confirmation for Everyone: Discipleship” Matthew 4:18-22, 16:21-26  
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City  
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Today, we’re wrapping up our mini-catechesis class, our “Confirmation for Everyone” series. This morning, I want to talk about what discipleship means, about what it is to be a disciple of Christ. Let’s begin by looking at the story where Jesus calls his first disciples to follow him. Hear the Word of the Lord from Matthew 4:18-22 (NRSV): **“As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.”** This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God.

This is kind of a wild story. Jesus walks by a bunch of fishermen and he calls out to several of them, “hey, come with me, I’m going to teach you how to fish for people instead,” and they just do it. They literally drop their nets and leave on the spot. James and John say goodbye to their dad and just go. I mean, they leave their boats and nets and whatever they may have caught that day, and they just walk away from their career and their families to follow this Jesus guy. If you find this remarkable, you’re not alone.

Scholars have long wondered about this. Why would they do this? Some scholars have guess that Jesus had already become pretty well known in this area, so when he shows up at the lake that day, these guys have already heard about who Jesus is, and jump at the chance to be his disciple. Some guess that Matthew simply chose to leave out the details because by the time this gospel is written, everyone already knew how compelling Jesus was, a whole movement had begun of people following him as the Messiah. So, there was no need to explain why these guys would immediately follow Jesus. The reader would already understand why. Others guess that they drop everything and go, because culturally at this time, it was a very high honor to be chosen to be a disciple of a Jewish rabbi, or teacher. Normally, only the best of the best

would ever be selected by a rabbi, and that would only happen after spending their entire childhood and adolescence preparing to apply to be a disciple. So, when Jesus shows up and calls these guys to be his disciples, they don't think twice since it's such a massive honor to be chosen. Yet, no matter what their underlying motives were... there's clearly something so compelling about following Jesus, that these guys immediately drop everything to become his disciple.

When we think of the word disciple, we tend to equate it with our word for student. Someone who wants to learn from the teacher. A good student's goal would be to KNOW what the teacher KNOWS. And so, in church, when we talk about being a disciple, or discipleship, I think most folks assume this to basically mean, "Christian education." Being a disciple is about learning about God, about the bible, and about what it means to be a Christian. It tends to be about acquiring information, doing bible study, and learning about God.

But being a disciple goes beyond being a student; it's about more than just knowing what your teacher knows. It's about being able to DO what your teacher DOES. This is why Jesus tells these guys, "let's go, come and follow me." Because being a disciple meant quite literally following around the rabbi, wherever they went, for years and years, until... yes, you were able to know what your teacher knows, but more importantly... until you were able to DO what your teacher DOES. There is a lovely ancient Jewish blessing that people would speak over a new disciple: **"May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi."** It meant that a rabbi's disciples should follow him so closely that they'd be caked in the dust that the rabbi kicked up with his feet as he traveled the dusty, ancient roads. Discipleship is about following.

How many of you guys are younger siblings? I'm the oldest in my family. My sister, Jessica, is three years younger than me and for many years as children, Jessica drove me absolutely bonkers. She copied everything I did and followed me everywhere I went. Jessica dressed like me, pretended to talk like me, she tried to walk like me. Jessica would declare that she liked all the same things I did. My favorite color was suddenly her favorite color. My favorite ice cream was her favorite ice cream too. If I went out to ride my bike, well of course, she too wanted to ride her bike. It was intense guys. Anybody else have a little sibling that used to copy them? My parents used to

remind me that copying someone is really the highest form of flattery, but at 13, I just wanted a little space. Anyway, I decided to cut off all my hair one summer, and of course, she did too. But the joke was on her, because it was the worst haircut either of us had ever had. **SHOW Picture** (Don't even get me started on the matching teddy bear sweaters. God bless the 1980's)

When we're talking about being a disciple, this kind of fervency and desire to follow is what we're getting at. Discipleship is never just about what we intellectually KNOW about God. Discipleship is also never just about what we've come to BELIEVE about God. Sure, we can and should know loads of information about scripture and tradition, we can affirm that believe God to be good, that God created and sustains the world, believe that the teachings of Jesus are true—all of that is well and good—but being a disciple means something more. A disciple believes all that and then actually drops their nets to follow Jesus. A disciple says, if my teacher says to love others then I am going to love others. A disciple hears his teacher say, 'give your money to the poor,' and they actually empty their savings account. A disciple observes their teacher suffer for the sake of another, and then they go and do the same. A disciple says, if my teacher cuts their hair, then I'm cutting mine.

And it is precisely right here that the rubber meets the road, friends. Because sometimes following Jesus is hard. Sometimes the things that Christ expects we will do; they push us right past our comfort zones. Very often, the way of living like Christ will lead us into direct confrontation with our culture or the values we've been raised with. Being a disciple is not something you can just add onto your existing life experience. Jesus asks for our total allegiance... in fact, he asks for our very lives.

After several years of being his disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John, they've experienced discipleship firsthand. They've watched their rabbi teach and heal the masses... and they've been expected to do the same. They've learned a ton, and they've also practiced a ton. Over three years of following Jesus around, and they're covered in the dust of their rabbi. But things begin to shift as Jesus approaches his death and resurrection. By the time we near the end of Matthew's gospel, being a disciple comes with some pretty high stakes for these former fishermen.

In Matthew 16:21-26 (NRSV) here's what we're told: **"From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?'"**

Jesus tells his disciples, "Things are about to get really tough. I'm heading to the cross, to my death and in the end, my resurrection." But Peter will have none of it. Peter's the mouthiest disciple, and I happen to love him for it. He just says what we're all thinking. He tells Jesus, "No way. We're not doing that. Dying can't be part of this plan." Jesus rebukes him, pretty harshly, and tells him, "Your perspective is way off. You're seeing things based on your own, human, cultural lens... but God doesn't see that way. Death and resurrection is where I'm going and if you're going to be my disciple, death and resurrection, is where you're going to. Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me."

This is quite the invitation, isn't it? Come and die. I want to be really clear this morning. This is still the invitation of discipleship. This is still what it's about friends. Want to be a disciple of Christ? The call is to come and die. Die to your false, broken, and sinful self. Die to all the dreams you have that don't align with the dreams God has. Die to selfishness and greed and vanity and power. Die to all that keeps you from loving God and loving others. Being a disciple will always involve giving up your life, surrendering your way to the way of Jesus. It might not be easy friends, but it is a death that comes with a resurrection promise. Come and die and find real and lasting life, find who you really are, find the promise of eternal life with God. Find freedom, and wholeness, and healing. And there really must be something to it... because we're all here. People just keep taking Jesus up on his invitation to be a disciple.

Anyone remember the Jesus Movement (**SHOW Picture**)? (You crazy hippies. Of course you do!) For those too young to know, the Jesus movement happened in the 1960-70's and was sort of a counter-cultural revival of faith, that began on the West Coast with young people. A decent little movie, *The Jesus Revolution*, came out a couple years ago, all about it. As this revival of Christian faith swept across the nation, people started calling the followers of the Jesus Movement the "Jesus People" or "**Jesus Freaks**". These Jesus people wanted to return to first century Christianity. They wanted the church to operate like the early church in the book of Acts and they wanted disciples to actually do the things Jesus called us to do. So, the popular media started calling them Jesus freaks. And though this term might have been intended as an insult, the Jesus freaks loved and embraced the term. They were a group of people that wanted to do what Jesus said to do, no matter how hard or impractical it seemed to be. If that made them Jesus freaks, well then, so be it.

Several decades later, in the early 2000's, a similar group of Christians began to be compared to the Jesus Freaks... this time they called themselves the "**Red Letter Christians**". 'Red letter' refers to the printed red words in many bibles meant to emphasize the words of Christ in the New Testament. These people were known for doing exactly what Jesus said... following the red letters of the Bible... even when it was hard or went against our culturally determined values. And even when it made other religious folks uncomfortable. I was studying to become a minister back when this group of writers, thinkers, pastors, and social justice advocates were gaining in popularity. And I have to admit it... at the time, they made me a bit uncomfortable, even if their message was compelling. I read a number of books by some of these folks, and I remember needing to put a book down from time to time to get some space to process... because the things they were actually doing with their lives confronted my cultural values, my family's ideals, and pushed against some of my own comfort zones.

But here's the thing... following Jesus will do that. I am telling you right now, being a disciple of Jesus will lead you to places you never could have imagined. You will end up doing things you didn't know you were capable of. You will end up in relationships of compassion and service and friendship with folks you never could have imagined knowing, let alone loving. That is a promise you can take to the bank. Discipleship—the actual 'following Jesus around' kind of discipleship—it will upend

your life in the most bazaar and beautiful ways. Sure, it will lead you to the cross... there will surely be some kind of death and resurrection involved... but in the end, you know who you'll end up resembling? Your rabbi. You won't just know what your rabbi knows... you'll be able to do what your rabbi does.

One of the things that feels especially important to me as your pastor, is making sure I'm very up-front with the call of Christ. I don't ever want to sugarcoat this whole discipleship thing. I'm not at all interested in this church being packed with a ton of people, who just think Jesus is a neat-o guy, and who roll in on a Sunday morning to get a little pick-me-up. In fact, I think that's gross. I think it's an absolute shame that more and more churches feel like just another place in society that's designed to cater to the demands of the marketplace, to advertise to the current consumer. I cannot begin to tell you the number of books, and ad campaigns, and marketing materials that are out there, all promising to make the church cool and desirable, all promising to grow your church.

Hear me loud and clear... I hope we are never cool. I hope we never see ourselves as marketable. I hope we're never just interested in drawing a crowd. Now, of course I want this place full, of course I want people to be drawn to First Pres... but I want this place full because people have encountered the love of God here. I want First Pres to be a place where we are constantly extending the invitation of Christ to come and die, to come discover what real life looks like. I want a church full of disciples. And do you know why I feel so strongly about this? Because my rabbi does.

Jesus was constantly reminding folks of the real commitment required of a disciple. There were often times that the crowds would gather around him, and he would start his teaching by talking about the cost of discipleship, to purposefully try and discourage those that he knew weren't really interested in following. We're told that he often spoke in parables to frustrate the listeners who he knew were just gathered for the spectacle. It's not that Jesus didn't want people to become his disciples... he came to redeem the WHOLE world... It's just that he knew that the cost of following God in this broken world would be more than many folks would be willing to commit to. And he wanted his disciples to know what they were getting into.

After one especially confrontational sermon, John tells us this: **“At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him. Then Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, “Are you also going to leave?” Simon Peter replied, “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life.” -Jn 6:66-68** Again, Peter... saying what we’re all thinking. Where else would we go, Lord. You’re the only one who has the words of life.

Yes, the invitation is to come and die, to take up our cross and to follow him wherever he leads us. But we can be assured, that resurrection life, the kind of life we are actually desperate for, is found in relationship to Christ Jesus. So, let us be clear that this is about a lot more than what we think and about a lot more than what we believe... this is about how we will live and who’s voice and way of life we will follow. May we take seriously the call to be Christ’s disciple, may we follow him. May we be covered by the dust of our rabbi. Amen.