

Choosing to Learn

17th Weekend in Kingdomtide – September 10/11, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Matthew 28:19-20 (NRSV)

¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Matthew 6:25-27, 33; 7:18, 24 (NRSV)

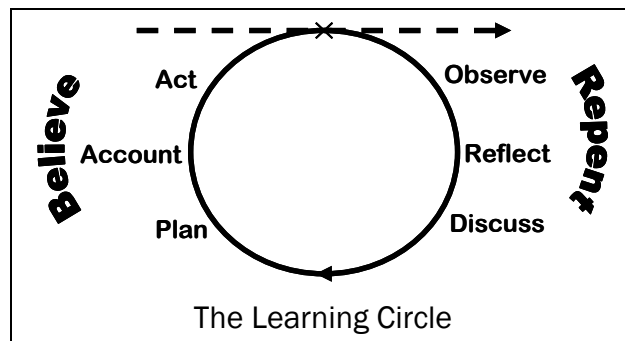
²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

²⁴“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.”



Disciples are learners. It is what the word means. Today, we turn to the circle LifeShape¹, the circle of learning. This shape guides us to a better understanding of how we can learn to be more Christ-like, to be more like our Master.

What's a disciple?

We toss the word “disciple” around a lot. Jesus charged his disciples with making more disciples. The stated mission of the UMC is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” But what does “disciple” really mean? To call someone a “follower” of Jesus doesn’t really get to the heart of it. Even “believer” doesn’t convey the full sense of “disciple.” “Disciple” translates the Greek word, *mathetes*, and it is all about learning. *Mathetes* might be translated “learner,” “pupil,” or “student.” Disciples sit at the feet of the teacher so that they can learn. What do they learn? They learn to be like the teacher, the master. I prefer the word “apprentice” as a synonym for “disciple.” “Apprentice” conveys the full sense of learning to become like our master, Jesus. Apprentice plumbers seek to become master plumbers. Disciples are apprentices seeking to become Christ-like.

How do we learn?

How does a child learn to stay away from a hot stove? Mother’s instruction might work . . . or not. But, certainly, if the child touches the hot stove, he’ll learn quickly not to do it again. Much of what we learn, and often the most important things we learn, we learn by experience. And learning by experience is a process. The child *observes* the stove, touches it and *assesses* the result (ouch!), *designs* a new approach to dealing with hot stoves (stay away!), and then *implements* what he learned. It is a circle of learning, a nearly infinitely repeated process that makes us who we are. In a letter to Timothy, Paul wrote about Scripture’s unending cycle of teaching. Scripture not only *teaches* us (shows us the way forward), it *rebukes* us (points out when we’ve messed up), *corrects* us (shows us how to get back on the path), and *trains* us in righteousness (shows us how to do a better job of staying on the path) (2 Tim. 3:16).

In *A Passionate Life*, Breen and Kallestad, show that Jesus taught his disciples to embrace the learning process that Jesus practiced himself. This process is illustrated by the *LifeShape* learning circle. There is

¹This sermon series draws upon the work of Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad, as presented in *A Passionate Life*. This book is available in *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore. Copies are also being sold in the Narthex on Sunday mornings.

no magic here, no blinding insight. The circle is similar to other ways of describing the process of experiential learning, yet tailored to the challenges of being a disciple of Jesus. Let's take a look at each step of the learning process.

A kairos moment

Hurricane Katrina has thrust upon us all a *kairos* moment like few others. The immensity of the destruction, death, and dislocation has caused us all to set aside much of what we thought was so important a few days ago, but that, in truth, matters little. We worry about and occupy ourselves with the silliest things. Perhaps the question is this: What we all learn from the *kairos* event called Katrina? What will we discover about ourselves? Will we soon return to our preoccupation with the minutia of our lives or will we be transformed by the events of recent days? Isn't this always the question.

Repent

Note from the page one diagram that the first half of the circle is about repentance, a very much misunderstood word. Repentance is about far more than being sorry for something we did wrong. Repentance is about the process of transformation and renewal. It is about turning from one way of life to another way of life, about dropping our agendas and adopting God's.

- *Observe*: The first step in repentance is to see clearly, to observe carefully. Jesus understood that his disciples were no different from you and me. We worry too much. They worried too much. Observe the world around you, Jesus told them. Look at the birds of the air. All this world and each of us is in God's hands. God takes care of the birds; he'll take care of you, Jesus said. Effective learning always begins with discerning observation.
- *Reflect*: It is one thing to see clearly. It is something else to take the time and care to reflect on what we've observed. The disciples could see that God takes care of the birds, but did they really understand Jesus' point, that they were infinitely more valuable to God than were the birds?
- *Discuss*: You can bet that the disciples discussed all this among themselves. What did Jesus mean? Could they truly give up worrying? How? We are not meant to live out our discipleship alone, we are part of a community. It is with other Christians that we work out the realities of the Christian life.

Believe

As Breen notes, repentance is tough. It is why we so easily fall back to our own ways. Transformation is risky. In the face of Katrina, will we soon fall back to lives filled with minutia and random stuff? Or will we truly trust God and move forward as a changed people? The word "believe" in your NT translates a form of the Greek *pistis*, which means "faith" ~ and faith is all about trust.

- *Plan*: It may seem a bit odd to think this way, but repentance takes planning. A transformed heart must still be lived out in concrete actions and decisions. If Katrina is a *kairos* event that is to change us, how will we go about it? How will we live differently tomorrow and the next? What habits will we discard or cultivate? How will we spend differently? How will we reshape our priorities?
- *Account*: If the changes are to last, if our learning is to endure, we must be accountable to someone. If we say we are going to reshape our spending habits, we need someone, or several someones, who will hold our feet to the fire. It must be someone who loves us enough and whom we trust enough to tell us when we are headed off track, away from God and away from transformation.
- *Act*: People often overlook the fact that Jesus closed the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) with a call to action, to actually live out the life of a discipleship – the house built on rock. The Sermon is all about the shape of the Christian life, but knowing amounts to nothing if we don't live it. Sympathy for the victims of Katrina amounts to nothing if we don't take the concrete step of actually helping.

The role of a small group

Jesus organized a small group of twelve disciples around himself. Since then, Christians have always relied upon small groups as places where we can learn, in trusting love, what it really means to be a disciple. Methodism began as a small-group movement in the Church of England. John Wesley created "holy clubs" so that people might live in covenant with each other. They were accountable to one another and cared for one another as they all sought to lead more holy lives. If you are not part of a small group, we urge you to join one. We all need someone.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on learning and discipleship)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Psalm 119:1-24 The beginning of a lengthy meditation on God's teachings</p>	<p>Day 2 Psalm 119:169-176 Praising God for the gift of his law and teaching</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 2:41-52 We see Jesus, at thirteen, embrace learning and find a small group at the temple in Jerusalem!</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 5:1-16 Jesus teaches his disciples. This is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Timothy 2 & 3:14-17 Paul instructs Timothy on the importance of staying true to what he has learned.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Fall Bible Academy begins this week. It is NOT too late to register. Go to www.standrewccl.org. Please join us!

This fall, the St. Andrew Bible Academy is offering a large variety of classes at convenient times. Regardless of your personal Bible background there is a place for you in the Academy. The courses are designed to challenge those who are just beginning to explore the Bible and the Christian faith, as well as those who have been faithful students for many years. Classes begin the week of Sept. 12.

Classes include *Introducing the Bible: The Drama of Scripture*; *God Is Closer Than You Think*; *David: A Man After God's Own Heart*; *Genesis: The Beginning; Is That You, God?*; *Know Why You Believe*; *Why We Are Methodists*; and *Learning from Those Who Have Gone Before Us: A History Lesson on the Christian Church*.

September Book Recommendation

If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat, by John Ortberg

A passionate disciple of Jesus Christ lives a life built upon trusting God and acting on that trust. That means being willing to take risks, to leave our comfort zone. In this book, John Ortberg invites us to consider the incredible potential that awaits us outside our comfort zone. Peter stepped out of the boat when his Lord said "Come." Will we?

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What is your own understanding of "disciple?" What are some synonyms that you might use? In this study, I tried to make the point that a disciple is necessarily a learner. Have you thought about your own discipleship that way? How might thinking of ourselves as Jesus' apprentices help us to understand what it means to be a disciple? How might it help us to do a better job of living out our faith?
2. What is your reaction to the learning circle? Have you thought about learning as a circular process? How is this a helpful way to understand how we learn? What are your thoughts on the process as laid out by Breen and Kallestad: repent (observe, reflect, discuss) and believe (plan, account, act). Discuss your understanding of repentance and belief. How might it be helpful to think of repentance as transformation and belief as trust?
3. As United Methodists, we ought to be very comfortable and supportive of small groups. Such groups are formed for both caring and for accountability. If you have been part of such a group, you might share some stories of times and ways that being part of the group was especially important to you. How was (is!?) your group put together? How long did it take for the group to develop trust among the members? How large was the group? What advice would you give to others about being part of such a group? If you have never been part of a discipling-oriented small group, why not? No opportunity? Apprehension? How could we help people to overcome any fears they might have?