

## *A Member or a Disciple?*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on Ash Wednesday, (17Feb), 2010.*

First in the Lenten sermon series *Old Disciples and New.*

Text: Luke 9:62 “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.” ~Jesus

We begin a Lenten sermon series tonight on the disciples, old ones and new ones. We will look at some of Jesus’ earliest followers to get to know how Jesus transformed them into disciples. These are not just the first twelve who came to be known as apostles. There are a few who were not part of the twelve. There were fishermen, a business woman, a tax collector and some we do not know what they did before they met Jesus. We will meet Simon Peter, Lydia, Andrew, Thomas, Levi, James and John Zebedee, Mary Magdalene and Judas Iscariot. These are the ‘old disciples’ in the series’ title. Who are the new ones? You and I are! Ms Reynolds and I will help you get to know the old ones but with an eye toward helping you develop your own discipleship through this our church. We want to talk about a number of things in this series:

- How did Jesus himself make disciples in that first generation? How do we in our generation?
- How is the perspective of a disciple of Jesus different from other ways of looking at life?
- How long does it take to become a disciple and what is the role of the church in that process? Why is a relational community key to the process?
- How is a person called to be a disciple of Jesus?
- Do we have to *surrender* to God to become a disciple?
- And, finally, are you a disciple and would you like to become a better one?

About ten years ago the United Church of Christ produced some materials for congregations like ours to help with church growth and evangelism. A minister from one of our larger congregations in Ohio wrote a very significant essay on how his church approached the problem. He said they no longer spoke of *members* of the church but rather of *disciples* of Jesus. That is our role, he said, not to make better members of an institution but to make disciples of Jesus. It is just a word change, but it is an important distinction. Perhaps two or even three generations ago you could take for granted that almost everyone in a town and society like ours knew why the church and faith were important to family, community, and individuals. But it is no longer so. People do not just join a church because it is the right thing to do. They join a church, because they believe in Jesus and want to follow him. So the church, any church, today needs to make disciples not members.

Perhaps we should first ask what is a disciple? A disciple is a person who follows. In First Century Judaism, many rabbis had groups of disciples. The disciples learned from their teacher, not just in an academic sense. They lived with the rabbi, listened to him, observed how he interacted with others, and watched him closely over a period of years. The rabbi was not like, say, an engineering teacher. He was more like an art teacher. They learned from him not just by

listening to lectures or doing equations. They also learned by living with him. John the Baptist had disciples—some of whom later became disciples of Jesus. Many of the famous rabbis like Gamaliel also had disciples. There is one slight difference in Jesus' disciples. There was an exclusionary clause in their relationship to Jesus. Once you made a covenant with him, you couldn't go searching for another. *He was it*. In fact, even after he died he told them before he ascended to heaven, "*Lo, I am with you always.*"<sup>1</sup> The relationship of disciple to Jesus goes on forever.

And a second question is how are disciples made? In one sense it was easy for Jesus to make disciples. He seemed to have that sort of magnetic personality. He called and they followed.<sup>2</sup> Those that became disciples spent time with him, learning and listening to him, watching him. But this is 2000 years later. How do we spend time with Jesus? The answer is strikingly simple: We spend time with Jesus and learn to be his disciple by getting to know the Bible (the record of his teachings and his eye-witnesses) and by spending time with friends of Jesus (that is, in the church). Becoming a disciple is not quick and easy. There is not one class you can take and that is it. As his first disciples did, you need to spend time with him. The circles of disciples around this rabbi, the relationships that developed, the opportunity for interaction, these things were always part of the process. Today we do that by participating in a church, with other Christians, particularly with Christians who know Jesus well.

I quoted Carlyle a few Sundays ago. His church was looking for a minister and Carlyle said we want a preacher who *knows* Jesus and not by hearsay. Well, we know what he meant. There is a difference in knowing about Jesus and knowing him. To become a disciple of Jesus, we need to apprentice ourselves to a teacher who knows him first hand, who knows more than trivial facts about Jesus. Today this happens first of all by being in church, *together*. While there are aspects of individual transformation when you become a disciple of Jesus, it always requires other people to help you. There are absolutely no substitutes for regular worship, listening to sermons, receiving the sacraments, being connected with a small group of other disciples studying the Bible and learning from each other what the faith is all about. Being made into a disciple of Jesus means you also need to learn to pray and then to pray *regularly*. It helps to learn about God and yourself through the practice of spiritual disciplines.<sup>3</sup> But learning to be a disciple also requires *practicing* the faith. By this I mean going out of your way to find opportunities to serve Jesus by helping a neighbor. This technique of being made a better disciple is remarkably simple but terribly under-practiced. If you want to become a surgeon, you have to learn a lot in school, then become a resident where you can practice medicine under the eyes of experts, and after you become certified you have to keep up your skills by continuing to study, read, and interact with your colleagues on a hospital staff. And of course you can't just say you are a surgeon. You have to practice your profession regularly so your skills don't get rusty. It takes years and years to become a great surgeon. Why do we think becoming a disciple of Jesus is any easier or quicker? It may take a lifetime to really become a good disciple of Jesus.

Now it may be much easier to be a church member. You show up when you feel like it. You give some money when the plate is passed. Maybe you even serve on a committee or sing in the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:20.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Luke 5:10-11.

<sup>3</sup> Classic disciplines besides prayer include meditation, fasting, silence, alms giving, and reading scripture.

choir. But is that all there is to being a Christian? Doesn't the church exist to make disciples? Do you think you are a disciple of Jesus? Would you like to become a better one? We will study and think and pray about this every Sunday during Lent. If you have questions, contact me or Ms Reynolds to discuss your discipleship. Let's take our faith seriously and make this church a school of discipleship where everyone is intentionally working to improve our practice of Christianity. There is more and we will get to it week by week during Lent and Easter. We will meet some old disciples, learning about their lives and faith. Hopefully in the process, we will also learn about ourselves so we can deepen our faith and get us closer to one another and to God.

End

A Member or a Disciple Ash Wed Disciples Series.DOC