

Why It is Still the Right Word

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It's key to our Christian heritage, but when I hear the words, "disciple" or "discipleship," a part of me goes a bit cold. I can still picture my high school Bible Club. A few of us would gather faithfully during lunch, struggling to name what being a Christian meant, wondering how it made us different, and of course, how we might witness to the other kids at school. Discipleship came with its list of "shoulds," including reading the Bible daily, praying a lot, and following the vague call to be more pious than the average kid. The best we could do with that tall order was to be serious and try to live out a verse we did not understand about being in the world, but not of it. Needless to say, our Bible Club didn't spawn revival or revolution. Probably the greatest gift I got from my teenage efforts at discipleship was that I started to keep a prayer journal, which has been a steady companion all of my life.

In fact, those dutiful images obscure the radical aliveness to be found in the gospel vision of discipleship. Think about the drama of those fishermen, exhausted from working all night, wondering if all of their hours of labor would be fruitless –when this strange guy on the beach calls out to them to try the other side of the boat (which they had likely just done!) and lo, there were more fish in the net than they could handle! Then this miracle-making guy invites them to join him in a new venture, fishing for people's hearts and minds. In the biblical scene, they seem almost like zombies, leaving their nets behind them, following this new guy without looking back. The charisma that Jesus had must have been something!

The disciples were also a motley bunch, and not exactly disciplined. Because we get to hear the inside story, we know that they were uneven just as we are: eager to follow, yes, but also jealous, impatient, petty, and dense. Jesus had to keep reminding them to listen more deeply and not to be sucked into superficial piety or worldly notions of power. Yet, as Nadia Bolz-Weber says in what Alice read, this new kingdom Jesus was revealing

would not be about perfection, but about compassion and healing—newness looking like every act of forgiveness, the finding of a sister or brother in the stranger, and reconciliation tried again and again. After all, our teacher Jesus washed the feet of the disciple who would betray him.

Before Jesus actually began his ministry, he was most likely a disciple himself of John the Baptist, that wild-eyed prophet preaching by the River Jordan. John believed that God would at any moment descend with catastrophic fury, wiping away all evil from the earth and creating anew—so John called folks to enter into the cleansing waters of baptism in order to repent and ready themselves for God’s soon coming. That Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist is as certain as anything historians know about Jesus, so we guess for a time, Jesus must have been under the guidance of John. But Jesus would later declare something different about the nature of God’s inbreaking. As scholar John Dominic Crossan says, Jesus revised John’s proposal, preaching that instead we should pay attention to God’s waiting upon us, rather than our waiting for God to do something dramatic—that is, we should pay attention to God’s revelation of the Kingdom of heaven coming on earth *through us, in our communities, in our politics, on this earth*, that is, in real time—or in case we didn’t get it the point: now! Jesus named the fundamental question like this: How is the kingdom of God coming alive here in this very moment?

The role of a teacher/Messiah/prophet as discipler has been a critical linchpin at the birth of most religions and sects, schools of thought, and ethics. Buddha had followers, as did Confucius. The Hindu tradition has long held up the idea of *guru* as key to the spiritual transformation of the seeker. A guru is more than a teacher; she or he is someone to be revered, a "counselor, who molds values, shares experiential knowledge, is an exemplar in life, an inspirational source who guides the spiritual evolution of the student."¹ A guru asks not only for the ears of a listening soul, but the imitation of a follower—because as a spiritual guide, the guru has drunk deeply of the truth and incarnates wisdom from her or his soul.

¹ Joel Mlecko, "The Guru in Hindu Tradition," *Numen* (29:1), 1982.

While the writer of John's gospel would rightly take issue with any equivalence, the ideal of guru is helpful in understanding Jesus' mission of discipling others. In the prologue to John's gospel read today, likely a hymn of the Early Church, the Evangelist eloquently explains the need for the incarnation of Teacher-Messiah in human form. For, how could we come to know God? How could we receive the divine Light, given our limits as creatures? We needed help. In Jesus, "God pitched God's tent in our midst." The Word, the Light, became a living Teacher to accommodate human comprehension; thus, God became one of us, in the flesh.

It's a lofty Christology to say that Jesus is God enfleshed—Christology being one of those fancy seminary words for one's beliefs about the nature of Jesus. At the other end of the spectrum, a believer having a low Christology might still see Jesus as special, but not different in capacity from any other human being. Personally, I carry both within me. Rationally, I see Jesus as a human like me, only spiritually gifted and uniquely called. But I still find the truth of Jesus as the divine Logos, God made flesh, compelling, calling me to worship a mystery I cannot readily defend logically.

But I have come to realize that the status of my beliefs about Jesus are much less important than my discipleship of him. I agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian and martyr: "The call is not to be saved by Christ, but rather to live a Christ-like life." Bonhoeffer goes further, "[God says] Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend - it must transcend all comprehension."

Read a few biographies, and you realize that we are all beholden to mentors, guides, prophets who have touched us with Divine grace. Martin Luther King, Jr., found his guru for nonviolence in Gandhi, as well as in the life and preaching of Howard Thurman. Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of El Salvador, began his ministry on the side of the elite, but was deeply transformed by his dear friend, Father Rutilio Grande, who was murdered for seeking justice. Romero would go on to defend the poor to his own demise. Of course, King and Romero were also disciples of the One we follow.

Though perhaps not as dramatic as these, we, too, have been disciplined by others: parents, teachers, coaches, spiritual directors, ministers, therapists, and friends. We've needed them to translate the Word of God into a way we could follow. We recognized the Divine alive through their being, which in turn sparked our own desire for God, our own fire. Jesus calls us to such a discipleship: to be a living, breathing witness to the kingdom of God that poured through his veins. It's an eternal discipleship. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus would say, "I am the Vine, you are the branches; if you remain in me, you will bear much fruit."

On the front of the bulletin, I chose an illustration of perhaps my favorite New Testament story, the Emmaus supper of two disciples and a mysterious companion. Dejected, having lost their hope, their passion, their love since their Lord, and Teacher had been crucified—the two unnamed disciples leave Jerusalem for the outlying town of Emmaus. On the way, they meet a stranger, who walks alongside them. He asks them about the recent days, and they share their despair about their beloved Jesus crucified. As he hears their account, he explains the meaning of the events from scripture. Enthralled, they beg him to stay with him for supper, and as he is taking bread, blessing, breaking it, and giving it to them, they recognize that the stranger is their Lord, their Rabbi, the very one they were mourning. And in that moment, he disappears. They say to one other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

Nadia Bolz-Weber says it well: "Grace can both sting and comfort."² And whenever we try to program grace, or organize the ways of God, we are rightly confounded. I am the granddaughter of Baptist missionaries, the daughter of a philosopher-father and of a mother who led healing prayer groups; I went to an evangelical-charismatic university and finalized my studies in a Catholic university. I keep meeting Jesus again and again for the first time, and yet, I keep finding myself called to follow him. Like one of the disciples on the dusty road with the Stranger--my heart continues to burn within, when I hear his words.

² *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint* (2013): 56-7.

Last fall, when we gathered to pray and work together on retreat, we your ministers discerned a theme for 2016, a year of “invitation.” Invitation speaks boldly to our time of transition as a congregation, but it also speaks loudly to us individually. How is God inviting you to grow, to deepen, to change?

Discipleship is not cookie cutter. I think that is what my high school Bible Club did not realize. We thought there was some particular ideal of righteous serenity we should be living, but in reality, we had pimples, raging hormones, insecurities, and bouts of immaturity. The invitation to discipleship we were being called to was not meant to be closed in or cut off from the earth or from the struggles of the world; the Divine inbreaking would be found in each broken moment. Being a disciple of Jesus was not a ticket, but a lifelong journey of salvation, new beginnings, and unexpected encounters with grace.

The thing about discipleship is that the table is roomy enough for all of us. Whether Jesus comes to you as Savior, Lord, Friend, Teacher, Brother, or Spiritual Guide, you are welcome here. Let us heed his invitation and see how we will yet be changed.