

## **We are All in this Thing Together: First Things First**

**Matthew 6:24-34**

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**Mark S. Bollwinkel**

The mission of a church is not to fill the pews, sign up new members, raise a balanced budget or keep its property maintained. Those are all good things for an institution, to be sure, but that is not why a church exists. A church exists "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world"; at least that's how we United Methodists understand it.

Believing that the love and message of the Christian gospel is contagious, if we are good at "making disciples" then we will see the fruits of that effort in our pews, membership, buildings and money. But those are secondary goals.

There have been churches excellent at those institutional benchmarks by means other than "disciple making"; churches organized around the adoration of a charismatic preacher; churches with an ideology insisting that they alone have a patent on the truth of God exclusive to all others; or churches promoting a compelling social cause that becomes their sole reason for existence.

But in the Biblical tradition the community to which Jesus invites us is about discipleship.

I am aware that for some the terminology of "making disciples" conjures images of the forced conversions that have happened all-too-often in Christian history or 'Elmer-Gantry-like-snake-oil-preachers' who manipulate the innocent selling salvation for donations; we don't have any shortage of these today.

One of the consistent admonitions we are hearing from church experts is that traditional church terminology and culture is a "turn off" to those not experienced in church life; especially those under 50 years old that are rarely familiar with church culture. You've heard us talk about these

themes before in reference to clergy robes, traditional hymns, whether we call it the "Narthex" or a "Lobby". Does the terminology "disciple/discipleship" throw up a road block for the "spiritual not religious" folk? [Would you be willing to ask some, like your kids, like your co-workers or neighbors and let me know?]

The dilemma is that we could so "dumb down" our Christian experience by homogenizing our language and traditions that we appear no different than the Rotary Club or YMCA (not that there is anything wrong with either, we just have a different reason for existence!) Or, we could become so insistent that the newcomer assimilate to our insider language and rituals that they have no interest in making the effort.

At LAUMC for these last few years we have been blessed and challenged by the vision of United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase's book The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations (Abingdon 2008). We have come to understand that his five practices so describe the heart of discipleship and the fulfillment of our membership vows as United Methodists, that we have actually organized our Church Council structure around them. We support five standing committees that resource those five practices of discipleship. Can you name the five practices?

1. Bold Mission and Social Justice
2. Passionate Worship
3. Deepening Faith
4. Extravagant Generosity
5. Radical Hospitality

We are convinced that anyone, anywhere on their spiritual journey...from new comer to old timer.....who commits to live out these five practices will be blessed as they grow in discipleship to Jesus Christ. By "discipleship to Jesus Christ" we are not talking about an intellectual conformity to doctrine or some new standard of piety. We are talking about "Touching heaven and changing earth with head, heart and hands." We are convinced that where ever we are on our spiritual journey if we practice Bold Mission and Social Justice, Passionate Worship, Deepening Faith, Extravagant Generosity and Radical Hospitality we will grow and prosper as people and as a community.

We are going to see a lot of our "Five Practices of Discipleship" medallion. It is a reminder of the interrelatedness of the five practices; can't do one without the others. It is a colorful symbol that immediately describes what we believe in and what we are called to do. On-line it is an inter-active tool that directs the explorer to areas of our ministry where they can practice discipleship:

We Share

We Grow

We Love

We Serve

We Give

Next weekend we begin a five week emphasis on this pathway/process of discipleship. We call the series "A Year of Living Intentionally".

What if we...individually and corporately.....were to dedicate the next year committed to these five practices of fruitful living? Starting with the Changing Earth Together weekend we will suspend our usual Sunday worship format to invite and engage our entire congregation into opportunities for Bold Mission and Social Justice.

During October the other four practices will be the focus of our worship and study with the intention to actually experiencing them not just talking about them. Our GroupLIFE Task Force has put together awesome workbooks and DVDs for "A Year of Living Intentionally" which will be the curriculum for all of our GroupLIFE small groups. They will offer us question sheets for each Sunday's sermon.

Speaking of GroupLIFE, we are now in the Open Enrollment period for any and all to sign up for one of the small groups. I've asked Mike Hacker to say a few words about his own experience of small group in his life and faith:

[Mike Hacker]

Good morning. First, I have a confession to make. I am . . . a former LAUMC lurker. I lurked at LAUMC for about 10 years, staying on the fringes and remaining anonymous. You know the last pews against the wall at the back of the church – the ones behind the audio-visual consoles? That’s where I sat. I’d slip into the 9:30 service, at 9:35 or so, and park myself among other lurkers and late arrivers. From way back there, before we had the video screens, you could hardly tell Pastor Mark from Pastor Dirk. Without binoculars, they looked pretty much the same.

In a big church like, this it’s easy to be a lurker. Sure, you shake hands during the appointed greeting time. And you hold hands with the people sitting next to you at the end of the service and wish them a “good week”. But it’s easy and, for a while comfortable, to stay on the fringes. At the same time, it’s also awkward because you don’t get to know anyone well, your relationship with the church is superficial, and your faith experiences little growth.

My conversion from a lurker began a few years ago. I attended a couple of evening classes, including one taught by Pastor Dirk. And I signed on to help with the Good News Network kids’ Sunday School class. When Group Life small groups were formed last fall, it seemed like joining a small group was part of the natural progression to becoming more involved in church life and the next step toward developing a deeper faith.

The small group I’m in is composed of about a dozen not-so-young men, mostly dads, from a variety of backgrounds. Our small group is part discussion group, part book club, part lunch counter, and part fraternity – minus the secret handshake. Typically, we start with a “light lunch”. Food is central to our group’s gatherings -- after all, we’re Methodists, right?

So, besides food, what draws a gang of guys together twice a month on Sundays at noon and doesn’t involve watching football? For me, it’s the opportunity to connect and have open faith discussions with an interesting and extremely bright group of men who are fellow travelers on similar faith journeys. Discussion topics have included Pastor Mark’s sermons (always receiving glowing reviews, of course), how to live out our Christian faith outside of church, how to raise kids in a way that encourages them to develop and embrace their faith, and how to maintain ethical standards and do the right thing when company profits and job security are on the line. Pretty heady stuff.

Sharing personal challenges and successes is a byproduct of our discussions. We listen to each other, support each other, and celebrate each other's accomplishments. We're also comfortable enough to do what a lot of men aren't good at – asking for help. Requests for help become calls to action. For instance, when one member was moving, other members offered to help with the move. And when another member had to tend to a family emergency, other members offered to keep tabs on his kids. We've become a small community, kind of like a neighborhood, within the larger LAUMC community.

Key to allowing the group to share and exchange thoughts freely is our pact, which is based on the "Vegas Rule" – you know, what gets discussed and shared within our Group Life small group, stays within our Group Life small group. It makes for fully open and honest discussions. None of us has all of the answers to the faith questions that challenge us. But by entering into a variety of faith-related discussions, we're able to better assemble the pieces of the puzzle that lead us to finding the "Jesus moments" in our lives.

As a result of participating in this Group Life small group, I've become part of a group of men who pray for each other, do favors for each other, share highly personal thoughts with each other, and encourage each other on our separate faith journeys. I've also added new dimensions to my faith and have become more intentional in integrating my faith in my daily life. I'm a work in progress, but aren't we all?

So, if you're a current lurker (and you know who you are), a former lurker like me, or someone who's been fully involved in the church for a long time but hasn't joined a Group Life small group, check out the list of groups and pick the one that suits you. It might be a couples group, a group that works together on service projects, or a group composed exclusively of men or women. Group Life has worked for me, which is pretty impressive because I was a darned good lurker. Give it a chance -- I'm confident it will work for you too.

Thank you.

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Mark:

In our scripture lesson this morning from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches one of the most significant challenges to the spiritual life. It is as relevant for us today as it was for those who heard it 2,000 years ago.

-You can't serve God and money.

-All the worry in the world won't add a thing to your life it will only deplete your spirit.

-Don't worry about tomorrow, today has enough worries of its own.

-Seek first the kingdom of God and all else will be provided.

Let's be honest. For self-sufficient, multi-tasking, consumers such as you and me these are hard words to comprehend, let alone follow. We actually believe that material wealth can guarantee our security. We are convinced that we have the ability to control our lives and get what we want. We insist that we can have life on our terms and we want God to bless it.

And then the cancer returns. Or the spouse leaves. Or the job is shipped overseas. Or the kids end up rejecting everything we believed in.

Jesus is preaching to people investing their spiritual energy in that which has yet to occur. Brilliant and quick they can project multi-possibilities for every contingency days, weeks or months ahead. As a result they can't sleep. They need medication to maintain. The priorities of their lives are upside down.

Anxiety drives us to isolation. Faith drives us together with common purpose and meaning. And to these people....to people just like you and me....Jesus invites us to follow.

I make no apology for our passion to invite people into discipleship to Jesus Christ convinced that such will contribute to the transformation of their lives....my life....and the transformation of the world. To be a disciple doesn't mean that you have achieved spiritual enlightenment and superiority over others. It simply means that you and I have committed ourselves to the journey. To practice sharing, loving, growing, giving and service to others. And in so together.

What if we were to dedicate ourselves to "a year of living intentionally"? It could really help us put first things first.  
Amen.