



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1

Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

Disciples Take Risks

Introduction

The six weeks before Easter Sunday is the season of Lent, a time for Christians to meditate on their commitment to Jesus and resolve to be stronger and more faithful in discipleship.

Like us, Jesus' first followers were far from perfect. The Gospels often portray the twelve disciples as bumbling, afraid, thick headed, and weak. Jesus frequently had to correct their expectations of him and of their discipleship. They abandoned Jesus in the time of his greatest need. But these disciples drew so much courage and conviction from Jesus' example of self-emptying love that they left behind the lives they had known, and some risked their lives to become "apostles" (those who are sent out) to proclaim the gospel and form the church. As members of the body of Christ today, we can learn from what Jesus taught the first disciples.

Before going further, it is necessary to distinguish between the terms "disciple" and "apostle." A disciple (*mathetes*) was a student. To "follow" someone was to submit to the *discipline* of that person's teaching. Thus, many of the people, both men and women, who followed Jesus on "the Way" could be called disciples. The twelve disciples that Jesus appointed were a distinct group among all the people who followed Jesus. Jesus often treated "the Twelve" as insiders who received

special instruction and who were entrusted with continuing Jesus' mission to proclaim the kingdom of God as apostles.

An apostle is someone who is sent out with a particular message or mission. The Greek term *apostolos* literally means "someone sent out." The verbal form means "to commission, to send." In the early church, "apostle" became an official role that was distinctive from other important roles in the church, including disciple, teacher, prophet, etc. (1 Cor. 12:27–30; Eph. 4:11). The church recognized that the apostles had authority to interpret who Jesus was and what he said. Eleven of the twelve disciples became apostles (Acts 1:25), sent out into the world as emissaries of Christ. Paul also claimed the title apostle (Rom. 1:1; 11:13; 1 Cor. 1:1; 9:1; Gal. 1:1). Among others specifically called "apostles" were Matthias (Acts 1:26), Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7), and James (Jesus' brother [1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:19]), though others such as Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23; Gal. 2:1), Timothy (2 Cor. 1:1; Col. 1:1), Judas (called Barsabbas), and Silas (Acts 15:22) were also considered apostles.

Over the next six weeks, we will ponder how Jesus:

- gave the disciples the **faith to take risks** as they left everything to follow him; gave the disciples **courage** through God's calming presence; taught

that **learning and devotion** are requirements of discipleship; corrected their aspirations to greatness and taught them **humility** with the image of taking up the cross;

- sent the disciples out in twos to **work together in community**; and
- demonstrated **perseverance** in the darkest hours.

Faith to Take Risks

The first risk that Jesus' disciples took was to follow him. Later, as apostles, they would take many more risks in spreading the gospel, and some of them were martyred in doing so. But the initial decision to follow Jesus was the first risk that each one took.

Jesus called a lot of people who did not take the risk of becoming his disciples. Some were discouraged by the itinerant lifestyle and the requirement that they leave their homes (Luke 9:57–62). Some were unable to give up their possessions (Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). Jesus did not condemn these people who could not say yes. In fact, it seems that Jesus understood. He told would-be disciples that they were wise to count the cost, and he felt love for a rich young man who turned away saddened because he could not give up all he had to follow Jesus.

This session examines portrayals of people who decided to risk following Jesus and explores what this risk entailed. Some took the plunge without question, while others came to a more gradual decision. No matter the nature of their initial response, they all made a life-changing and lifelong commitment.

In some of the stories of Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Matthew 4:18–22 and Mark 1:16–20), Jesus said, “Follow me,” and they immediately left their boats to follow him. The parallel story in Luke 5:1–11 recounts how the fishermen were convinced to follow Jesus after he demonstrated the abundance of God's love in the miraculous catch of fish. Their response was immediate upon seeing this miracle. Saul of Tarsus also made a decision to follow Christ after a miraculous vision of the risen Lord (Acts 9:3–6; 1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:16). The playful account in John 1:35–51 relates more of a process than an instant decision. The disciples heard about Jesus, observed him, were curious, spent time talking to him, and then stayed with him. The disciples assumed the risk more gradually, but they took it on completely.

The Instant Risk Takers

In the Synoptic Gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the stories of Jesus calling the first disciples are stunning in their directness and simplicity. Jesus called, and the fishermen dropped everything and followed him. They left behind their livelihoods and family (the image of the father left sitting in the boat is striking) and followed him. In Luke's account, they at least got to see a miracle before deciding.

One might deem the fishermen's behavior delusional. If one of our friends or family members simply got up and walked away to follow a charismatic person who beckoned to them, we would suspect illness or brainwashing. No doubt we would try to talk sense into them or rescue them. In fact, this is what Jesus' own family attempted to do when they heard about the crowds following Jesus. They “went out to restrain him, for people were saying ‘He has gone out of his mind’” (Mark 3:21). The Gospels do not tell us how the disciples' families reacted to their risk-taking behavior, but we can conjecture from the example of Jesus' family that there must have been some concern, if not out-and-out attempts to stop them.

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Something about Jesus made these fishermen take what must have seemed to most people like a foolhardy risk. The kingdom of God overpowers some people that way. Jesus told parables about “going all in” when one finds the kingdom. In the parable of the pearl, for example, he says that the kingdom of God is like a pearl so fine that one would immediately sell everything to buy it (Matt. 13:45–46). Evidently, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John saw the kingdom of God in Jesus, and they left everything to have it.

Many people find this story bewildering. With the exception of Christians who join a religious community that takes care of their basic needs, most Christians rely on the stability of work, home, and established communities. Though Jesus said not to worry about food and clothing and other necessities (Matt. 6:24–34), it seems foolhardy to add to the ranks of people who truly are in need. Moreover, most of us would consider it irresponsible, even criminal, to abandon our families. Christians

wonder why the disciples took this radical risk and what this story has to do with discipleship today.

Did the Disciples Leave Their Families Forever?

Evidently, the disciples went home from time to time (Jesus and the disciples visited Peter's mother-in-law), and their wives went with them on missionary journeys. Paul mentions some of the apostles, including the brothers of Jesus and Cephas (Peter), were accompanied by "believing" wives (1 Cor. 9:5).

Messianic Hopes for a Warrior King

Without attempting to undermine the profound effect Jesus as a person had on these risk-taking disciples, we can consider how the historical and cultural context in which they lived played a part in their immediate response to Jesus. Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, a region in which many Jews lived who longed to overthrow Roman rule and take back their land. In Judea, to the south, Jews remained fairly stable under imperial rule, but in far-off Galilee, the rhetoric of revolt simmered. Jesus and his disciples lived in a place that had the reputation of being a hotbed for dissidents. Josephus, a Jewish historian of that time, said that almost all the armed revolts and guerilla warfare against Rome began in this region. One of the most powerful expressions of Jewish hope for freedom was the expectation of a messiah in the line of David who would restore Israel to political autonomy and holiness under God. For many Jews, the "kingdom of God" would be an actual earthly kingdom that God's messiah would establish after overthrowing the Romans. In the midst of this sort of frustrated expectation, Jesus appeared on the Galilean lakeshore, preaching the kingdom of God (Matt. 4:13–17). He called out to four fishermen (Matt. 4:18–22). Given the radical nature of Galilean messianic hope, perhaps these fishermen's response was not an instantaneous decision but the realization of a lifelong hope. We simply do not know how much they might have heard about Jesus before he called them, or if they knew anything at all.

But revolutionary hopes could not have been the whole story. At least one of the people Jesus called to discipleship was not a Jewish radical. Rather, he was a

tax collector who benefited from the imperial system. When Jesus said to Levi, "Follow me," Levi got up, left everything, and followed him (Luke 5:27). The story does not tell us Levi's reasons, but apparently he left behind his wealth, reputation, and a stable government position to follow Jesus.

Seeing Is Believing: Convinced to Take the Risk

In Luke's version of the story of Jesus' calling the four fishermen, Jesus does not immediately call them but simply gets into Simon's boat. Simon (called Peter) must have recognized something in Jesus, because he agreed to take him out from shore so that Jesus could teach the crowds, and he further humored Jesus by letting down the nets—again—after a fruitless night of fishing, at Jesus' bidding (Luke 5:1–5).

The next thing Simon Peter knew was that the nets were filled with so many fish that another boat had to come help pull them in, and there were still so many fish that the boats began to sink (5:6–7). Simon Peter saw a miracle of God's overwhelming abundance, and he was so startled that he fell to his knees and confessed himself to be a sinner unworthy to be in Jesus' presence (5:8). Unlike the story in Matthew and Mark, Luke's version shows fearful repentance rather than zealous abandon in Simon's initial response. "Do not be afraid," Jesus tells Simon. "From now on, you will be catching people" (5:10). Simon's brother and some of Simon's fishing partners who had helped pull in the miraculous catch of fish (including James and John) promptly left their boats and nets to follow Jesus (5:11). They took the risk of being Jesus' disciples because they had witnessed something they wanted to be part of, even if they didn't fully understand it.

The story of Saul of Tarsus who became the apostle Paul is a dramatic example of risk-taking discipleship. Saul began as an ardent opponent of the church (Acts 8:3; Gal. 1:13) until he had an encounter with the risen Christ (Acts 9:3–6; cf. 1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:16). Before this experience of Jesus, Saul was dragging people off to prison (Acts 8:3) and "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). Afterward, he risked everything and eventually his life to tirelessly proclaim the gospel, found churches, and become an outspoken defender of the mission to the Gentiles.

Messianic Hopes for a Righteous Holy One

A warrior king was not the only type of messiah for which Jews of Jesus' time hoped. The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal that some Jews expected *two* messiahs: one a king like David to subdue the Romans and one a high priest who would restore right worship and devotion to God in the Jerusalem temple. Even though Jesus' disciples were from Galilee and immersed in anti-Roman rhetoric, they also had a spiritual hunger and recognized Jesus as God's Holy One. While Jesus' statement "I will make you fish for people" could be construed as a slogan for gathering freedom fighters, Jesus' words were an appeal to something much more profound and revolutionary in Jewish messianic hopes. In the context of Jesus' message to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near," Jesus was not calling the disciples to fight against an earthly kingdom but to become part of the heavenly kingdom. In many ways, this was a risk more dangerous than joining the guerilla warfare against Rome, because it involved giving up one's life in a different sort of way. It also undermined Roman authority, just like fighting against Rome did.

Believing without Seeing: Messianic Reality in John

The Gospel of John's version of discipleship is almost the reverse of the Synoptics. Instead of Jesus calling to certain people to follow him, people started following Jesus around. People followed Jesus because John said, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" (1:36), or a brother said, "We have found the Messiah" (1:41). Some of the would-be disciples seemed cautious at first. Jesus asked them what they were looking for. They asked where he was staying ("abiding"), and he told them, "Come and see" (1:39). The disciples did come and see and ended up remaining with ("abiding in") Jesus. Their decision

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to follow Jesus was not instantaneous, as it seemed to be in the Synoptic Gospels' versions. Rather, their decision came after a process of listening, watching, and being known by Jesus. John recounts this process with a touch of playfulness and humor as Jesus, like the Pied Piper, gathers a collection of curious followers who are mesmerized by him.

Messianic Hopes Realized in Jesus

The Gospel of John reflects an understanding of discipleship written a generation or two later than the Synoptic Gospels. In John, there is no evidence that people were looking for a revolutionary warrior-king messiah. Instead, the emerging church was showing signs of splitting away from its Jewish roots, from fervent hope in a messiah-to-come to full acceptance that the Messiah already has come. In John, Jesus and the disciples are still Jewish but are becoming separated from other Jews who do not accept Jesus as the Messiah. At one point, Jesus addresses some "Jews who *had believed* in him" (past tense) about becoming true disciples, but he finds that they now consider him a blasphemer (8:31–59). Jesus also encounters Jews who are on the fence; they are afraid to confess Jesus as the messiah, because they will be expelled from the synagogue (9:22).

In this troubled time, which reflects the situation of the church some years after Jesus' time, discipleship required people to break away from their families and communities even if they had never seen Jesus face-to-face. They had to believe in him through the testimony of others. Embedded in John's crucifixion narrative is a parenthetical aside addressed to the reader: "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe" (John 19:35; see also 21:24). Thus, when the disciples first encounter Jesus in this Gospel, they follow him, but they also "come and see" if the testimony they have heard is true (1:35–50).

The Gospel of John no longer waits for a messiah. The Gospel of John has found the Messiah. By the end of the Gospel, the path to discipleship no longer results from "seeing" but from "believing." Jesus tells a doubting disciple: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20:29).

Conclusion

Jesus' call to discipleship poses a challenge and a risk. Jesus calls, and some people take the risk (as in Matthew and Mark). Others experience Jesus' teaching and power and then take the risk (Luke). Then there are those who start to follow Jesus out of curiosity, because they have heard about him, and then they risk making their commitment permanent (John).

In whatever fashion a Christian becomes a disciple of Jesus, the end result is the same: there is no turning

back. We can be bowled over in an instant or take our time counting the cost, but when the decision is made, a disciple must accept the consequences of that risk, which is to continue Jesus' mission in the world.

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ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 2

Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

Disciples Learn to Have Faith

Introduction

The last session considered the disciples as risk takers, as people who boldly changed their entire life to follow Jesus. This session is about disciples as faith builders who were sometimes afraid and did not trust Jesus. Even though the disciples were devoted to Jesus, he had to remind them over and over again to have faith.

The stories of Jesus stilling the storm (Matt. 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25) and walking on the water (Matt. 14:22–33; Mark 6:45–52; John 6:16–21) are well-known examples of Jesus teaching the disciples to have faith, especially when they were up against their most primal fears. Modern readers sometimes have difficulty with these stories because we have been conditioned to be skeptical of miracles. However, if we hear these stories the way the earliest Christians might have heard them, we can better understand the powerful claim of these miracles and what they say about Jesus as the Son of God. As the events in these stories were meant to strengthen the original disciples' faith, so can they strengthen ours.

We need to first look at what “the sea” represented in the minds of the first hearers of these stories in order to understand the implications in Jesus' ability to calm the sea and walk across it.

The Sea as Cosmic Chaos

In the ancient Near East, the sea was a symbol of primordial chaos. The murky depths, raging waves, and uncontrollable forces of wind and storm suggested a great and fearful power. People believed that the world was like a flat dish with a bowl over the top, completely surrounded by water. The earth was the flat dish, and the sky was like a bowl that held the waters away from the earth. Holes in the bowl allowed rain to come down. Thus, they imagined that the waters surrounded them.

Like the Genesis 1 story of creation, the Babylonian creation story *Enuma elish* (named for the first line, “When above . . .”) begins with a formless world and water. In the Babylonian story, the gods emerged and took shape out of the water. These gods were a fractious lot. The ocean goddess, named Tiamat, planned to get rid of Marduk and other gods who were annoying her. But Marduk defeated Tiamat in an epic battle and then split and formed her body into the earth and sky.

The ancient Israelites' shared a concept of the world as a domed sky holding back the waters and were familiar with Babylonian *Enuma elish* (or variations of it) from their time in exile and captivity in Babylonia. So when they began writing down the stories of Genesis (during and after the exile), the Israelites told the story from their unique point of view. There were not

multiple, warring gods, and there was not a great battle that violently separated the waters. In the ancient Israelite story, there is one God who brings order out of chaos. God's word brings life from land, sea, and sky. And God pronounced this life and order "good."

The Sea Was No More

The image of the sea occurs again in the book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, *and the sea was no more*" (Rev. 21:1, emphasis added). Part of God's recreation of a new heaven and earth includes the assurance that chaos will be no more.

In Genesis 1, the creation story begins, like the *Enuma elish*, with a formless earth and dark chaotic waters. But in Genesis, God was already present: "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (1:2). God did not create through violence. God spoke. Light appeared in the darkness. God spoke again, and the waters parted to form dry land. God's presence hovering over the face of the deep brought order out of chaos so that life could begin. Later, this God would reveal to Moses a name by which to be known: YHWH, which means simply, "I AM." Unlike the gods of Israel's neighbors, YHWH's name did not come from the powers of nature but from a profound existential statement of ultimate being.

Another ancient story about God's power over the sea takes place in Genesis 6–9 with the narrative of Noah and the flood. God allows the dome holding back the waters to open, and the waters cover the earth again, a return to the watery chaos before creation. The only survivors are on the ark that God commanded Noah to build. The tiny ark is an oasis of life in the midst of dark, deep water, and God eventually brings it safely to dry land. This story also parallels ancient Near East flood stories, like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but Genesis reveals that God did not flood the earth out of capriciousness, like the other gods. An early Christian tradition compares the church to the ark, a boat floating to safety in the sea.

These stories are not saying that the sea is evil. The Psalms extol the sea as it lifts its voice in praise (Ps. 93:3) and the floods as they "clap their hands" (Ps. 98:8).

Psalms 148:7 says that the "sea monsters" and "all deeps" praise God. The sea was a source of bountiful food and water. However, imagery of deep, chaotic water was also a symbol of chaos, a force that only God can tame.

The Storm at Sea

The Sea of Galilee (also known as Lake Kinneret) is a large freshwater lake fed by the Jordan River and surrounded by steep hills on all sides. Still today, when cool air descends from the hills into the valley and mixes with warm air coming up from the lake, violent storms can arise quite suddenly. When the winds come from the Golan Heights in the east, the storms are so violent that the waves can be many feet tall.

Because some of the disciples were fishermen (including Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John), they had grown up by the sea and were quite adept at handling boats and rowing long distances. No doubt they were experts at reading weather patterns and had encountered sudden storms and rough waters many times. They knew how dangerous such conditions were and how quickly even the sturdiest fishing boat could be swamped and sunk. They probably knew fishermen whose boats had been capsized and lost during such storms.

First-Century Galilee Boat

Archaeologists have been studying a first-century fishing boat that sank two thousand years ago in the Sea of Galilee and was preserved by anaerobic mud at the bottom of the lake. The ancient boat reveals the ingenuity of the fishermen, who patched it together many times with whatever parts they could find. See a photo and read more at <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/people/related-articles/first-century-galilee-boat.aspx>.

The story of Jesus calming the storm at sea is powerful on more than one level of interpretation. The story occurs three times in the New Testament (Matt. 8:23–27, Mark 4:35–41; and Luke 8:22–25) with only slight variation. The disciples were rowing across the lake, with Jesus asleep in the boat, when there was a sudden gale, the boat was filling with water, and "they were in danger" (Luke 8:23). The boat was being "swamped by the

waves” (Matt. 8:24), and the waves were beating into the boat (Mark 4:37), and yet Jesus remained asleep.

On a literal level, it is remarkable that Jesus could have remained asleep when a storm howled around them and waves were crashing into the boat and filling it with water. The shouts of the disciples and creak of the oars as they battled the waves, the sting of the pelting rain, the slap of the cold water rushing over the sides of the boat, and the violent pitching of the small craft should have wakened him. Some commentators say that Jesus must have been so exhausted from teaching and healing that he was able to sleep through it, and others suggest that he slept because he knew he had nothing to fear from the storm, and this was the beginning of the disciples’ lesson in faith.

The panicked disciples woke Jesus and asked, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4:38). Jesus “woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’” (4:39–40). The disciples were amazed, but they still did not quite understand: “And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” (4:41).

Most readers probably identify with the frightened disciples. They were in great danger, afraid for their lives, and Jesus was not responding to their plight. He was completely out of it—asleep. This is the way panic feels: the situation is dire, there is nothing we can do, and our prayers seem to go unheard. Jesus, don’t you care that we are perishing? Why don’t you pay attention and get us out of this?

But Jesus is not as concerned about the storm as he is about the disciples’ lack of faith. In Matthew’s version, Jesus rebukes the disciples first, not the storm: “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” (Matt. 8:26). Then he rebukes the wind and sea and produces a dead calm. The disciples see this miracle but still do not have the kind of faith Jesus expects: “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?” (Matt. 8:27). Does Jesus really expect them to believe that he can calm the wind and sea with a word? Does Jesus really expect this kind of faith in us?

The primordial story of God bringing order out of chaos in Genesis 1 underlies this miracle story. If God can divide the darkness and light, the sea and land, and

create life with only a word, then God’s Son can calm the wind and sea with only a word. We of little faith still find this to be unbelievable, and yet many Christians attest that prayer does have the power to calm inner storms of fear and doubt. When a person looks back on a life-changing experience, he or she often can see how Jesus was there the whole time, even if it seemed like he was asleep. Even in the midst of disaster, even when people die, Jesus is there, reminding us to have faith. Many Christians find comfort in imagining “Christ asleep within my boat, whipped by wind and still afloat.”¹ The imagery of the church as a boat at sea with Christ inside is also a powerful reminder that disciples of Jesus must have faith that God continues to work to bring order out of chaos.

Walking on Water

The story of Jesus walking on the water is a stumbling block for many Christians who not only disbelieve that such a feat is possible but wonder why this demonstration of superhuman power was necessary. Was Jesus just showing off?

Again, Genesis 1 is the starting point for interpreting this story. Just as the spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep, Jesus came walking toward the disciples on the water. Jesus, like God, hovered over the face of the deep. When the disciples saw him, they thought he was a ghost and cried out in terror. But Jesus told them not to be afraid, for “it is I.” In the Greek text, Jesus says *ego eimi*, which means “it is I,” but it also means “I AM.” In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, when God tells Moses his name, the Hebrew YHWH is translated into Greek as *ego eimi*, “I AM.” Among the earliest Christians were Jews that used the Septuagint as their Bible, and they immediately would have heard the name of God in Jesus’ words, “I AM.”

Just as in the story of Jesus calming the storm, this story tests the faith of the disciples, who must recognize Jesus for who he really is and not by their expectations. In the Gospel of Mark, when the disciples see Jesus walking on the water, “he intended to pass them by” (6:48). They were afraid, but Jesus called to them, got in the boat, and the wind was stilled. Interpreters have wondered why Mark includes the information that Jesus was intending to pass them by. Jesus saw them straining at the oars, against the wind, but he was going to walk right by them. Perhaps if we read this

story in the context of the story of Jesus asleep in the boat, we can see what was happening. Jesus expected the disciples to have faith, and his presence should not have been necessary. They could do this task without him, as they would have to do when he was no longer with them. But when they asked him, he readily got in the boat, and the winds were calm.

Jesus expected the disciples to have faith sufficient for their need, and yet he was quick to help them when they faltered.

There is also the curious context of the story: Jesus had sent the disciples on ahead, while he went up into the hills alone to pray. Sometime later, when he had finished praying, he set out to join them by walking across the sea. While he was on earth, Jesus was not always physically with the disciples. He occasionally sent them off to get food (e.g., John 4:7), or he separated from them so that he could pray. Perhaps the early church recounted Jesus' solitary prayer, the disciples' boat trip, and Jesus' intent to pass them by as a lesson in striking out in faith. The disciples did not need to fear heading out, because they knew that Jesus was not far away. They needed to develop sufficient faith so that Jesus did not need to coach them. Whether he was asleep in the boat or walking toward the boat, Jesus expected the disciples to have faith sufficient for their need, and yet he was quick to help them when they faltered.

The Gospel of Matthew includes another dramatic test of this faith, initiated by Peter. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, Peter said "'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' And Jesus said, 'Come.'" (14:28–29). There is an aspect of "truth or dare" to this story. Peter got out of the boat and began walking on the water toward Jesus, but when he saw the wind, he was afraid and began to sink. He cried out "Lord, save me!" (14:30) and Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (14:31).

Peter was successful as long as he was looking at Jesus and trusting that it really was Jesus. Underlying that identity, Jesus was "I AM." But as soon as he noticed the wind and was distracted from looking only at Jesus, he began to sink. Peter's short walk on the water is analogous to a short period of true faith that Jesus has the power to bring order out of chaos. But Peter was distracted by the chaos and nearly became drowned in it. Jesus saved him and asked, "Why did you doubt?" Whether Jesus said this in an exasperated, reprimanding way or as a means of helping Peter begin to articulate what led him to doubt, the ending of the story resolves with both Jesus and Peter safely in the boat and as the wind calms down.

The graphic imagery of Peter seeing the wind, beginning to sink, and crying out for help, followed by Jesus immediately stretching out his hand to catch him, is a powerful example of prayer. Many Christians have prayed this story in times of trouble and despair, when their own attempts are too small, the wind too strong, the waves too high, and their fear too great. And Jesus is right there—why do we doubt?

Conclusion

The disciples were called to have great faith. As apostles, they would go out into the world to heal, teach, perform their own miracles, and, most importantly, tell the story of the power of Jesus to a chaotic world. Even though Jesus was no longer physically with them, they believed that he was with them in spirit, giving them strength. Those of us who would be disciples of Jesus must also ask for faith and practice being faithful by examining our doubt and believing in the power and goodness of "I AM."

Note

1. Miriam Therese Winter, "Joy Is Like the Rain," ©1965 by Medical Mission Sisters, Philadelphia: Vanguard Music Corp, http://www.hymnary.org/text/i_saw_raindrops_on_my_window.

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Disciples Take Time to Learn from Jesus

Introduction

The previous two sessions have recounted dramatic experiences that tested the disciples' faith and resolve as they left home, family, and livelihood behind to follow Jesus. This session turns to the faith experience of people who did not leave home and family to become disciples of Jesus. The story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–12:8) does not take place on a storm-tossed sea but in a quiet home. These two women disciples were not named among the twelve core disciples, and yet they were also devoted followers of Jesus.

The story of Mary and Martha augments the Gospels' story of the pattern of discipleship in several ways. First, Mary and Martha demonstrate that sometimes the disciplines of listening, learning, and worshiping are more necessary than doing, teaching, and serving. Second, these two disciples did not travel with Jesus; they ministered from their home. They allow a glimpse at the early Christian house churches. Third, they are examples of women who followed Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke: Disciples Who Both Listen and Serve

When Mary and Martha welcomed Jesus into their home (Luke 10:38–42), Mary listened at his feet (in the posture of a disciple) while Martha served. The word

used for Martha's service (*diakonia*) is the same as the one that describes ministry and discipleship elsewhere in the Gospels and in the letters of Paul, when some of Paul's coworkers are described as "deacons" (*diakonoi*). Mary's role of listening (*akouein*) illustrates another important aspect of discipleship: hearing, sitting at Jesus' feet to learn from him. To "sit at the feet" of a great master was to be a disciple. The word "disciple" (*mathetes*) literally means to be a pupil. Jesus often pairs "hearing" and "doing" in the Gospel of Luke. He redefines his family as those who "hear the word of God and do it" (8:19–21, emphasis added). He exhorts crowds of people that they must both *hear* and *do* God's word (6:46–49 and 11:28). Mary and Martha are like two halves of an ideal disciple: one acts and serves while the other listens and learns.

But in this story, Jesus says that Mary has taken the "better part" (10:42). The only reason this response does not come as a surprise to us is that we are so familiar with the story. Some interpreters have speculated that Jesus gently chides Martha not because she is serving, *per se*, but because she is overly anxious and distracted by her service. She is unable to attend to Jesus' words. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing" (10:41–42a). Moreover, Martha wants Jesus to

make her sister stop listening to Jesus so that she can help: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me” (10:40). But Jesus replies that “there is need of only one thing,” and “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (10:42). It would be a mistake to conclude that Jesus meant women disciples should only listen passively and not serve actively. Nor is it very likely that Jesus was saying that the “need of only one thing” meant that disciples should only listen and not serve. However, in that moment, he is teaching Mary and Martha (and us) that our service can become so distracting, so full of endless tasks and anxieties, that we neglect taking time out to listen attentively to the Lord. Our activities can become more important to us than prayer, reading, and study, and so our discipleship is out of balance.

Mary’s choice to sit and listen at Jesus’ feet was “the better part” that would “not be taken away from her” (10:42). There are times when listening and attending to Jesus is better than checking things off the to-do list or trying to make sure everything is “just perfect” or thinking we have to be busy every minute to impress Jesus. Jesus modeled the balance of listening and doing in his own life. He made the important decision of which disciples would be among the twelve after he had spent the night alone on a mountain in prayer (6:12). And it was only after prayer that he came down the mountain to teach the crowds (6:17). Though crowds of people pressed around Jesus to hear the word of God and to be healed (e.g., Matt. 5:1–2; Mark 4:1; Luke 5:1; John 6:1–2), the Gospels record that Jesus was often in the habit of withdrawing from the crowds to pray, usually in a secluded place (e.g., Matt. 14:13, 23; Luke 5:16; 6:12). In the story of the transfiguration, Jesus withdrew from the crowds and took only three disciples with him up the mountain to pray, where they observed Jesus speaking and listening to Moses and Elijah, two of the great teachers of Scripture (Matt. 9:28–37). Jesus modeled the need to withdraw for prayer and study. He balanced active ministry with prayerful attentiveness to God’s word. The disciples also took time to receive Jesus’ teaching (Mark 4:33–34; 10:23–45; 11:12–26; 13:1–37). Jesus gave them extra instruction so that they could carry out his mission. The Gospels describe the disciples as being “with” Jesus (Mark 3:14; Luke 9:18; 22:56).

The Gospel of John: Disciples Devoted to Jesus

The Gospel of John provides a deeper look into Mary and Martha’s relationship with Jesus. This Gospel shows how Martha’s strong faith becomes stronger, and Mary’s devotion turns to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is.

John provides more details about Mary and Martha. They live with their brother Lazarus in the town of Bethany. That Mary, Martha, and Lazarus must already have had a close relationship with Jesus and great faith in him when the story opens becomes evident when they send word to Jesus in a simple, intimately worded message: “He whom you love is ill” (John 11:1–3). In this message, there is no begging, negotiating, or doubting. They do not have to ask Jesus to come—they simply state what is happening, and they know that he will.

Mary and Martha are disciples who model confidence in prayer. When Jesus arrives in Bethany too late to cure Lazarus, Mary and Martha each say to Jesus: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21, 32). This sounds like a reproach and a statement of faith rolled into one. They clearly believed Jesus could have healed their brother, and they both expected that he would come in time to do so. That he did not would seem to be an example of unanswered prayer and an occasion to start doubting Jesus, but instead, it leads them to the next level of faith in Jesus.

Lazarus as a Disciple of Jesus

Some interpreters have speculated that Lazarus is the mysterious “disciple whom Jesus loved” (the Beloved Disciple) who reclined next to Jesus at the table (John 13:23) and to whom Jesus entrusted his mother’s care at the crucifixion (19:26).

In this story, it is Martha, not Mary, who listens and learns from Jesus. Martha tells Jesus that even though he did not arrive before Lazarus died, she knows that God will give Jesus whatever he asks (11:22). Jesus assures her that her brother will rise again, and Martha responds that she knows this will happen “on the last day” (11:24), because Jews in her time believed that the dead would rise on a future day of general resurrection. This teacher-disciple interchange sounds like a

test. Jesus tests Martha (your brother will rise again). Martha's response sounds like a dare (God will do whatever you ask). It is clear to Jesus that this disciple is ready for the next step of faith. When Jesus tells her, "I am the resurrection and the life. . . . Do you believe this?" Martha replies, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (11:25–27).

The Anointing Woman in Luke

The story of Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair (John 12) reminds many readers of the story of an unnamed woman in Luke 7:36–50 who is identified only as "a sinner." This woman bathed Jesus' feet with her tears and kissed them before anointing them with oil. Because of her great love and faith, Jesus forgave her of her sins (7:47–50). Some interpreters have identified this woman as Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus cured of seven demons (8:2), but the story does not make that connection clear. Nor do we know if there was more than one occasion when a woman anointed Jesus' feet or if Luke's story is about Mary the sister of Martha.

In John's Gospel, as in Luke's, Mary takes her place at Jesus' feet, but this time in a posture of devotion that reveals how profoundly she understands who Jesus is. In the Gospel of Luke, she merely listens to what Jesus says; in the Gospel of John, she acts on this learning. Mary takes a pound of costly perfume, anoints Jesus' feet, and wipes them with her hair (12:1–3). The fragrance of the incense filling the room is reminiscent of incense used in worship and the spices used in preparing a body for burial. Jesus recognizes that she had bought the perfume for the day of his burial (12:7). That Mary anoints Jesus before his death is a sign that she understands that Jesus will soon go to die, an insight that the twelve disciples had great difficulty understanding. Judas questioned why the costly ointment was wasted (12:4–8), and the disciples did not understand why he was riding into Jerusalem until after Jesus was glorified (12:16). In the Gospel of Mark, when Peter gave his confession of faith, he also questioned Jesus about his having to suffer and die (Mark 8:31–33). Mary's act of devotion in anointing Jesus before his

death proves her understanding of the deeper meaning of his suffering, death, and resurrection.

Home Talent

The discipleship of Mary and Martha differs from that of the itinerant disciples, because they are depicted always at home. They do not go with Jesus; instead, Jesus comes to them. Instead of going out to proclaim the gospel and heal, they provide hospitality and a space for quiet learning and devotion.

After Jesus' resurrection, the apostles founded Christian communities that initially met in homes called "house churches." Christians gathered for a common meal that included the Lord's Supper, heard stories about Jesus, and studied Jesus' teachings. Sometimes they read letters from an apostle that included instructions and encouragement (the letters of Paul were written to the churches he founded for this purpose). We do not know if Mary and Martha hosted a church in their home after Jesus' death and resurrection. To have a group come together for a meal, worship, and instruction would have required a very large house, and the Gospels simply do not say how wealthy they were or what sort of house they lived in. But in the Gospel accounts, their home life reflects a space where learning and worship took place and where service took a back seat to devotion.

Mary and Martha illustrate the prayerful, educational, and devotional side of being a follower of Jesus that would be a model for the house churches:

1. Mary and Martha provided an example of strong faith in Jesus: they believed that Jesus would come when they needed him. They sent for Jesus to help them when their brother was ill and dying (John 11:1–2), and they were ready to make the next step in faith when Jesus required it.
2. They knew how to celebrate Jesus' presence with them. Martha served a dinner for Jesus (John 12:1–2), and perhaps she also was serving him in this way in Luke 10:40. The early Christians met for a fellowship meal in which they commemorated the Lord's Supper and prayed for Jesus' presence with them.
3. They were eager to learn from Jesus. Mary sat at Jesus' feet and "listened to what he was saying" (Luke 10:39), a posture of discipleship that Jesus

called “the better part.” In a time of overwhelming grief, Martha talked to Jesus about hope and the meaning of resurrection (John 11:20–27).

4. They showed devotion to Jesus. Mary anointed him in an act of lavish devotion (John 11:2; 12:3–8), a form of praise and worship that acknowledged her full understanding of his coming death and resurrection.
5. They made statements of faith (John 11:21, 32). Martha confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, Son of God, and that he was the resurrection and the life (11:21, 25–27, 32).

Women as Disciples of Jesus

Popular Christian literature tends to paint a very bleak picture of the role of women in first-century Judaism. Based on selections from rather obscure early Jewish writings, some Christian interpreters have claimed that Jewish men universally regarded women as inferior and unworthy of learning. Therefore, these Christians conclude, Jesus was a very unusual Jewish man in accepting women as disciples.

We now know that these depictions of men’s attitudes toward women are not entirely accurate and certainly were not proscriptive for everyday Jewish life. The writings in question contain scattered misogynist attitudes that do not reflect Judaism as a whole. Evidence now shows that women went to the synagogue along with men and that they were not separated by gender as they worshiped and learned together. In fact, ancient inscriptions prove that women were leaders and benefactors in their synagogues. Girls whose families could not afford tutors would have learned the Scriptures from their parents at home, particularly from their mothers and other female relatives.

Before narrating the story of Mary and Martha in chapter 10, the Gospel of Luke has mentioned that there were women who traveled with Jesus and the twelve disciples: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and “many others, who provided for them out of their resources” (Luke 8:1–3). At least one of these women was married (Luke says she was the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza), an indication that they had left their homes and families behind, as had the twelve male

disciples. We know very little about these women who traveled with Jesus except that they helped support his ministry financially. Some interpreters have suggested that when Jesus appointed pairs of missionaries to go to every town (Luke 10:1), these pairs might have included women and/or married couples.

Mary and Martha are not named among the women who traveled with Jesus. We do not know if they were among the seventy missionary pairs in Luke 10:1 or even how much they might have provided for Jesus out of their resources. However, we do know that they modeled a discipleship of learning and worship that Jesus called “the better part.”

Conclusion: Disciples as Learners

The Old Testament is filled with testimony about the need for ongoing attentiveness to God’s word: “Make me know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me . . . for you I wait all day long” (Ps. 25:4–5). God commanded the people of Israel to recite God’s words to their children and to talk about them at home and away (Deut. 6:6–7; 11:19). Education and study has always been a mainstay of Jewish life, and this value was passed down to the early Christian communities. In 2 Timothy 1:5, we hear that Timothy’s faith is the direct result of what his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother Lois taught him. Timothy has known the sacred Scriptures from his childhood (2 Tim. 3:14–15). The apostle Paul encouraged Christians to study the Scriptures that were “written for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4). That Christians took time to gather for study and worship and passed down the teachings of Jesus and the apostles to future generations is evidence of their understanding about the importance of learning and growing in faith. Families and worship communities continue to provide the space and resources for learning about the faith for those who follow Jesus today.

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ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 4

Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

Disciples Are Last: Lessons in Humility

Introduction

The Gospels tell of many instances in which Jesus taught the disciples about humility. Though becoming the disciple of a revered teacher often brought prestige and honor, this is not what Jesus' disciples were to expect. Jesus was establishing a different sort of kingdom, one in which the greatest was the servant of all.

Jesus did not meet the expectations of what a messiah was "supposed" to be, and even those closest to him did not fully understand his humility. Some of them probably wanted to help him overthrow the yoke of the Roman Empire and stand by his side as he took the throne as the anointed king of Israel. Some of them may have hoped that Jesus would root out the corruption in the religious establishment and bring Israel back to holiness before God as a priestly ruler. But instead of conducting himself like a king whose servants waited on him hand and foot, Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Instead of taking a position of authority, he emptied himself in service.

This session will explore the ways in which Jesus overturned common social conventions of who was great and who was lowly. He ate with people considered to be sinners, paid attention to crowds of common people who asked for his help, and regularly challenged the traditional views of the most revered

religious leaders. He undermined social hierarchies, challenged constructions of social class, and redefined the meaning of power: "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Mark 10:31).

Lording It Over

That Jesus' reordering of the status quo was difficult even for his closest followers to understand is evident when his disciples James and John ask to sit on Jesus' right and left hand when Jesus comes into his kingdom. Not long after Jesus told the disciples that he would be handed over to be flogged, mocked, and killed, and in three days rise again (Matt. 20:17–19; Mark 10:33–34), James and John, the sons of Zebedee, ask Jesus for this favor: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mark 10:37; cf. Matt. 20:21, where it is their mother who requests this honor on their behalf). In the Gospel of Luke, this story takes place in the context of the Last Supper, when Jesus is about to be betrayed and arrested: "A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest" (Luke 22:24). From the perspective of the narrative, the reader might well ask: What is it about Jesus' being mocked, flogged, and killed that these two upstart disciples do not understand? That is exactly the question the Gospel writers want the reader to ask,

because asking this question means the reader comprehends what Jesus is about to do.

We read these stories through hindsight; we know what is going to happen. From a historical perspective, however, the disciples would have been asking this favor *before* Jesus' death and resurrection, before it became clear to them that Jesus' kingdom was not about earthly power and glory. We, as readers, have the advantage of being able to read about Jesus through the lens of the resurrection, a vantage point the disciples do not yet have. Before the resurrection, the disciples would have been thinking in terms of obtaining honor and power in a worldly kingdom that they believed Jesus would establish. They might have been thinking back to the time of the Maccabees, when Jews successfully overthrew their oppressors and the revolutionary leaders took seats of power in the new commonwealth. The disciples remained stuck in their preconditioned expectation of what Jesus *should* do as the Messiah of God. They had not yet fully realized that Jesus was going to die a humiliating and horrible death and that they, too, would suffer and die in his service. If they had understood these things, they might not have made the cavalier request to sit on Jesus' right and left hand.

The Right Hand

To sit at the right hand of the host at the table or at the king's right side was a place of highest honor. At the left hand was the next highest position of honor. The resurrected Jesus stands in the place of highest honor "at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55–56; Rom 8:34). James and John were asking to be Jesus' favorites, to be exalted above other disciples.

Jesus confirms their miscomprehension when he replies, "You do not know what you are asking" (Mark 10:38). He asks them if they can "drink the cup," and they earnestly reply that they are able. Readers can hear the irony and hubris in their claim but also perhaps can sympathize with their ignorance in what they are saying.

Jesus tells them, in effect, "Be careful what you wish for." The places on Jesus' right and left hand, to which James and John aspired, would be occupied by two thieves hanging on crosses on either side of him (Luke

23:33). James, John, and the other disciples eventually will drink from Jesus' cup and be baptized with the same baptism, and they will understand what it means to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

The other ten disciples were angry with James and John for asking to be the greatest among them. This rivalry shows that they, too, were thinking in terms of earthly greatness. So Jesus lays it out for them: "You know how the Gentile rulers lord it over everyone, but you are not going to be that way. If you want to be the 'greatest' in the kingdom of God, you have to serve everyone else like a slave. I did not come to be served, but to serve. And I am going to give my very life for others" (Mark 10:41–45, paraphr.).

In an ironic twist, Mark follows this story about the disciples' spiritual blindness with the story of a Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. Bartimaeus also asks Jesus for a favor, but he does not ask to sit at Jesus' right hand. Nor does he take Jesus to one side to ask covertly for a favor, just between us guys. Bartimaeus cries out loudly: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (10:47). This blind man calls Jesus "Son of David," a synonym for Messiah, just after the sons of Zebedee have made a misguided assumption about who the Messiah would be. To complete the parallelism between the two stories, Jesus asks Bartimaeus the same question he just asked James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?" (10:51; compare 10:36). Instead of asking for a place of honor, the blind man says, "Let me see again." Jesus tells him that his faith has made him well, and immediately he regains his sight and follows Jesus on the way (10:51–52). He takes his place as a follower, not someone seeking glory, and thus he becomes an example of humble and grateful discipleship. No one knows if Bartimaeus later was able to "drink the cup" with Jesus, if he followed Jesus faithfully to the end and beyond, but in the world of the story, he demonstrates a kind of insightful discipleship that corrects the other disciples' blindness: he asks for mercy instead of honor. He asks to see rather than be seen.

Honor and Shame

One of the reasons it was so difficult for the disciples to understand Jesus' teachings about humility had to do with their expectation that the Messiah would be a great warrior king or high priest (these expectations are discussed in session 1). Another reason for their steep

learning curve had to do with the “honor/shame” aspects of the culture in which they lived. Though there are drawbacks to using the sociological lens of “honor and shame” to analyze the Gospels (foremost among them is that this method tends to apply “honor/shame” categories across the board without regard for regional and historical differences), it can be helpful for understanding the magnitude of Jesus’ reversals of status and social expectations.

In the Greco-Roman and Hellenistic-Jewish cultures of Jesus’ time, honor was something a person inherited from one’s parents and shared with family members. One acquired dishonor (shame) by committing crimes or sins against social and religious norms. One could bring shame to one’s entire family by misbehaving badly. The culture of biblical peoples was communal rather than individualistic. People did not see themselves as “rugged individuals” the way modern Americans do. They identified themselves with their biological families and with their national affiliation. What happened to one person in a group affected the whole group, and what happened to the group affected the individual.

In the United States, people have a sense that the behavior of one family member can bring honor or disgrace to everyone in the family, but the attending shame is not as deeply consequential. People in the highest positions of government and religious institutions weather the shameful actions of their family members with embarrassment but often without losing power and prestige, because Americans consider themselves to be individuals. The thinking goes something like this: each person is responsible for his or her own actions, and no one can control what other people do. In the Mediterranean culture of Jesus’ time, the opposite was true. An individual was defined by family honor. This culture of honor and shame also permeated the Gentile world. A famous example is Julius Caesar’s divorcing his wife, even though she was innocent, on the basis of mere suspicion of impropriety, because Caesar’s wife must be above reproach.

The Gospel of Luke goes to great lengths to show that Jesus comes from an honorable family. Jesus’ mother, Mary, is related to a high priestly family: her cousin Elizabeth is a descendent of Aaron (Luke 1:5). Jesus’

(adoptive) father comes from the royal line of David (2:4). Jesus’ Jewish pedigree is faultless: his family represents both the priestly and kingly aspects of messianic expectation. Moreover, his family exhibits exemplary righteousness that upholds the family’s honor. They follow covenant law by circumcising their son (2:21), taking him to the temple to dedicate him (2:22–24), and taking him again when he is twelve, near the age of becoming a *bar mitzvah* (“son of the covenant”), at which time he dazzles the elders with his knowledge of Scripture (2:41–51).

After Luke gives this careful portrayal of Jesus’ origins in an honorable and righteous family, Luke then documents how Jesus systemically redefines honor and shame. Jesus pleases the members of his home synagogue in Nazareth. The congregation members are impressed: “Is this Joseph’s son?” they ask as they admire Jesus’ reading. Jesus has brought honor to his family. But then Jesus enrages them by claiming that Israel’s promise is being fulfilled among the Gentiles (Luke 4:14–30). The shame of it! The congregation is so angry that they try to throw him off a cliff.

Jesus did not choose promising young scholars from Jerusalem to be his disciples . . . Instead, he selected lowly fishermen from Galilee.

In a culture that so highly regarded family honor, Jesus said some rather shameful things about his family: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (14:26). When his mother and brothers came to see him, he seems to dismiss them by saying, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (8:21). Jesus undermined the cultural norm of honoring biological family ties. He replaced the value of family honor with the value of a “fictive” family of unrelated people from diverse social classes and backgrounds. Honor and “doing for one’s own” was replaced with humility and service to others.

Jesus did not choose promising young scholars from Jerusalem to be his disciples (the kind of person

he showed himself to be at the temple when he was twelve). Instead, he selected lowly fishermen from Galilee (5:1–11). Instead of selecting exceedingly virtuous people to be his followers, as any honorable man would do, he chose a tax collector, one of the most hated of professions (5:27). Jesus was demonstrating that the lowliest of people in society were going to be leaders in the kingdom of God. In his teaching, Jesus turned social roles upside down by saying that the poor are the ones who will be blessed, not the rich. This must have sounded crazy to a culture that tended to believe God blesses good people with riches. Jesus says that those who are hungry will be filled and those who weep will laugh (6:20–26). He asks the crowds what they expected to see: someone dressed in soft robes who lives in a royal palace? He offers John the Baptist as an example of the greatest of men, and he follows this with the pronouncement that John is not even as good as the “least in the kingdom of God” (7:18–28).

For many people, Jesus’ words and actions lost him the honor that came with being a descendent of priests and kings, and worse, Jesus didn’t seem to care. He continued to associate with all the wrong people (the ones who have no honor). He liked to hang out in the seedy parts of town, where he ate with prostitutes and tax collectors. He cured lepers, who are among the lowliest and shameful of people. Thus, Luke skillfully illustrates how the “new honor” is humility. But it would take the disciples a long time—in fact, until after the resurrection—before they grasped the concept of humility, “the last shall be first.”

In the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples asked Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?” Jesus called a child to him and said that the disciples must become like children to enter the kingdom. “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:1–5). Since children were at the bottom of the social hierarchy of power and prestige, Jesus illustrates that the last shall be first is exemplified in a child, the least, or the “little ones” who believe in Jesus (18:6).

Strength in Weakness

The ultimate moment of Jesus’ disgrace and social dishonor was, of course, being crucified. In both Roman and Jewish culture, there was no more ignoble way to

die. Being “hung on a tree” was a sign of God’s curse and therefore a symbol of deepest shame (Deut. 21:23). The Romans designed crucifixion to be a spectacle of humiliation and a gruesome public warning: behave yourself or end up the same way. In Jesus’ social context, crucifixion was proof positive that he could *not* have been the Messiah. His disciples abandoned him and scattered when he was arrested. Some of them probably thought this was the end of everything Jesus had proclaimed, because their expectations had set them up to perceive his humiliating and horrible death as a sign of failure.

The apostle Paul found himself having to defend against the “scandal” or “stumbling block” of the cross. How could anyone proclaim as Messiah a person who was so humiliatingly executed? Surely such a dishonorable death was proof positive that Jesus could not have been the Messiah. But Paul interpreted the crucifixion as redemption (Gal. 3:13). He understood the way Jesus flipped conventional reason on its head. He recognized that true wisdom comes from what seems to the world like foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18–25; 3:18–23) and offensive (Gal. 5:11). Paul eventually understood from his own suffering that God’s strength comes through human weakness (2 Cor. 12:9–10). He explained that Jesus’ act of emptying himself on the cross and taking the form of a slave in humble obedience to God was the action that brought about his exaltation as Lord and Christ (Phil. 2:6–11).

Conclusion

Jesus demonstrated humility by washing the disciples’ feet. He told them that they were not to aspire to greatness, but to be servants. He humbled himself even to death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). His disciples also went out into the world as servants of the Word. Tradition has it that many of them were also martyred. With these examples of humility, disciples today must examine what “greatness” means for us and how Jesus expects us to turn the tables and raise up the lowly.

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ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 5

Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

Disciples Work Together

Introduction

Jesus did not attempt to do ministry by himself. Early on, he chose twelve companions to be his disciples and empowered them to proclaim the good news and heal (Luke 10:1–9; see also Matt. 10:5–8; Mark 6:8–11; Luke 9:2–5). In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus also appointed seventy (or seventy-two) disciples and sent them “in pairs” to proclaim the kingdom and heal in his name. By his deliberate formation of pairs and groups, Jesus demonstrated how important it is for disciples to work together.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples often went on missionary journeys as teams: for instance, Peter and John (Acts 3–4), Paul and Barnabas (13–15), Paul and Silas (15–17). The New Testament gives glimpses of the early community of Jesus’ followers as they learned to work together as the body of Christ. Paul regularly calls fellow Christians “brothers” and “sisters” in Christ as a sign that the church is like a family (Rom. 8:12; 1 Cor. 1:10), in which divisions of gender, ethnicity, and social status are overcome (Gal. 3:27–28).

This session will explore the ways in which the disciples worked together and the ways in which they struggled to maintain unity.

Were There Seventy or Seventy-Two?

In Luke 10:1, Jesus sent disciples out in pairs. Some ancient manuscripts record that there were seventy disciples, and some say seventy-two. Both numbers have symbolic import. Moses appointed seventy elders (Exod. 24:1, 9–10), Jacob had seventy descendants (Exod. 1:5), and Israel would spend seventy years in Gentile territory (Jer. 25:11–12), where the church’s new mission field lay. There are seventy-two nations listed in Genesis 10, another example of the Gentile mission field. These symbolic numbers tie the disciples to ancient Israel’s history as they go out to spread the gospel to the nations.

The Learning Curve

While the Acts of the Apostles paints an ideal picture of the early church with its members in full unity, sharing everything in common, breaking bread together while praising God, and adding daily to their number (Acts 2:43–47), other narratives in the book of Acts and the Epistles (of Paul and other apostles) show that the historical reality was much different. The number of converts to Christianity was increasing steadily, and along with this growth came different understandings about who Jesus

was and how to live out his teachings. Christians were not unified in their beliefs or approaches to discipleship. Their diversity of backgrounds and spiritual gifts strengthened the church, but conflicts between members with many different points of view also threatened to weaken it.

Jesus taught the disciples a great deal during his ministry on earth, and yet new challenges kept coming up that Jesus had not addressed directly. Some of these questions became divisive as the church struggled to find common ground. Should Gentiles be obedient to Jewish law when they joined the church? Could Jewish followers of Jesus eat with Gentile Christians? What was the nature of Jesus now that he had ascended to heaven? Was he human or divine? When would Jesus return? How should Christians live in community while waiting for Christ's return? What should the church do when one of its members sinned? How should the church appoint leaders, and what qualifications did leaders need to have?

The apostle Paul used a great deal of parchment and ink addressing disagreements within the churches he founded, because he knew that the church would not survive if its members did not work together. He knew that disagreements were inevitable, but he had to help his congregations learn how to deal with these disagreements in a constructive way. Paul had to work hard to heal the rift in the Corinthian congregation. He tells the church that the most important thing is being of "one mind" (Phil. 1:27; 2:2). Paul pleaded with two Christians, Euodia and Syntyche, to be of one mind in the Lord (Phil. 4:2). At the same time, he praises those whom he calls his "co-workers," Christians who have worked hard to keep the church growing (Rom. 16:9–21; Phil. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:2; Phlm. 1:24).

One of the most divisive issues facing the early church was whether or not Gentiles had to convert to Judaism before they could be members of the church. At this time, the church was still a sect of Judaism, so many Jewish followers of Jesus assumed that to be part of their community, one had to be Jewish, that is, follow Jewish dietary laws (which would have prevented them from eating with other Gentiles) and be circumcised. Paul, who was an apostle to the Gentiles, saw these requirements as impediments to gaining more converts. Paul had a falling out with Peter when Peter was reluctant to resume his practice of eating with Gentiles after "certain people came from James" in the Jerusalem church (Gal. 2:11–14). Paul eventually had

success persuading the Jerusalem church to ease the requirements on Gentile converts (Acts 15:23–29; Gal. 2:9), but he had to intervene when Jewish-Christians from Jerusalem convinced the Galatian Gentiles that they had to be circumcised (Acts 15:1; Gal. 2:14; 5:7–12).

Paul defended himself in the midst of conflicts with well-spoken missionaries that he called "super-apostles" who were preaching a gospel contrary to his own (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11). He had an argument with Barnabas that caused them to part ways (Acts 15:36–39). Paul had to deal with divisions in the Corinthian church where some Christians were following Paul's teachings, some were following Peter's teachings, and others were following Apollos's (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–5).

Paul's congregations were not the only ones in conflict. The letter of 1 John indicates that there had been a schism in the Johannine community and that some members of the congregation departed over doctrinal issues having to do with how to interpret Jesus as the Christ (1 John 2:18–26). We do not know the exact nature of the disagreement, but it must have been a bitter dispute, because the letter flatly states that those who have left the congregation are "against Christ" (*antichrists*, 2:18). Second Peter 2:1–2 also warns against "false teachers" who bring "destructive opinions." Clearly, the early church was a diverse group that struggled to find common ground. That the church still exists today is evidence that these early Christians received strength from Christ to work together despite their disagreements.

Antichrists

In modern usage, "the Antichrist" (with the definite article and capital "A") often refers to a satanic being that will oppose the kingdom of God in the end times. But in 1 John 2:18 and 22, "antichrist" is not a title, and it occurs in the plural: "antichrists." Antichrists were members of the Johannine church who left the fellowship because of doctrinal disputes. They apparently disagreed with the Johannine church about the nature and person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the letter says they are "anti-Christ" (against Christ) because they "denied that Jesus is the Christ." This sort of dispute over the nature of the risen Christ would occupy church councils for hundreds of years.

Striving for Unity in a Fractious World

As the church began to settle into life together as the body of Christ on earth, the church began recognizing certain leaders as bishops (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–2; Titus 1:7), deacons (Rom. 16:1; Phil. 1:1, 1 Tim. 3:8–13), prophets and teachers (1 Cor. 12:28–29; Eph. 4:11), and others.

When disputes arose over who Jesus was (like the one in 1 John) and what teachings would be normative, Christians came together to hammer out creedal statements and establish a canon of authoritative Scripture. This emerging standard was called “orthodoxy” (from *ortho*, “straight,” and *dokeo*, “to believe” or “to think”). The many church councils, like the Council of Nicea (325 CE) decided on details of orthodoxy.

For hundreds of years, the standard for discernment was called “apostolic authority.” The church acknowledged that the original apostles (including Paul) were the authorities on what Jesus said and did. Whenever there was a question about how to interpret the life of the church or how the church should proclaim Jesus, their testimony held the greatest weight.

One of the biggest threats to the unity of the church was the Protestant Reformation (begun in the sixteenth century), when Martin Luther and John Calvin questioned the apostolic authority of the pope, who by tradition was the direct heir to the apostle Peter, upon whom Jesus founded the church and gave the keys to the kingdom (Matt. 16:18–19). The Reformers believed that the Roman Catholic Church had abused its authority and fallen short of proclaiming the gospel. The ensuing conflict was bitter and cost many lives. And yet, with the grace of God, the Christian community grew from this experience and continued to be a vital presence in the world and has, in recent generations, begun to find more common ground as the church universal.

Building Up the Church

Even though we are a fractious bunch of people, Christians understand the importance of community. Jesus told the disciples that he would be present to them: “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20). Particularly in American culture, where people are accustomed to thinking of themselves as individuals first, it is sometimes difficult to make a habit of relying on others and relinquishing

control to do things together as a community. But this is exactly what Jesus continually modeled in his ministry. Jesus told the disciples that whatever they agreed on, it would be done by the Father in heaven.

Paul told the Galatian church to work together and to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2). He exhorted the Corinthian church to be of one mind and body. He tells them that the gifts of the Spirit are manifested for the purpose of building up the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). Everything Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians is to persuade this conflicted congregation that everything they do must be for the purpose of building up the church. The church follows this example by gathering regularly to break bread together in memory of Christ and celebrate his presence (Luke 24:13–35; Acts 2:42–46; 20:7, 11; 27:35) and by listening to everyone’s point of view and prayerfully coming to consensus or finding a way to work together despite their differences. The church follows this example by pooling resources and talents to further Christ’s mission in the world. One of the key factors in remaining a family of believers who disagree or fall short is mastering the art of forgiveness.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gave the disciples instructions for how to deal with difficult matters as a church (*ekklesia*), and in these teachings, it becomes clear that forgiveness is of primary importance. The only way church members could stay unified as a viable witness to Jesus was to be able to forgive each other. Forgiveness was absolutely necessary, and the capacity to forgive needed to be virtually unlimited.

Jesus drew on ancient Jewish teachings when he instructed the disciples about forgiveness. The Israelites were not to take vengeance or bear a grudge but to love their neighbors as themselves (Lev. 19:18). Such mercy was not the norm in other nations of the ancient Near East. The earliest biblical law in regard to wrongdoing is “an eye for an eye.” This law was an attempt to curb the kind of retaliation that one clan might take out on another to avenge one of their members. A very early song or poem about Cain’s son Lamech seems to illustrate this custom of retaliation: “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech [is avenged] seventy-sevenfold” (Gen 4:23–24). Perhaps this is the source of

Peter's question about how often one must forgive—as many as seven times? Jesus answers, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (Matt. 18:21–22; some translations say “seventy times seven”). Jesus instructed the church to forgive to the fullest extent.

The Jewish tradition teaches mercy, because God has been merciful to Israel. The theme of God's mercy to Israel, despite Israel's unfaithfulness, echoes through the Old Testament (a few examples: Exod. 34:6; Ps. 145:8; Isa. 49:8–16; Hos. 11:8–9; Mic. 7:18; Zeph. 3:14–15; Zech. 3:4). Reconciliation between injured parties was key to maintaining community, and Christians must forgive each other as they have been forgiven by God (Matt. 6:12; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). In Matthew, Jesus counsels the disciples about what to do if an individual sinned against someone else. Reconciliation was more important than offering gifts to God (Matt. 5:23–24). The first step was to work it out between those two people. If this did not result in reconciliation, then two or three must go together to persuade the offender to repent or to ask for forgiveness. If the matter still was not resolved, it must come before the church. Then Jesus told the parable of the unforgiving steward: If you do not forgive others, why should God forgive you? Working together requires that there be no limit on how often people forgive each other, and forgiveness must be from the heart (Matt. 18:21–35). Reconciliation was an important theme in Paul's letters, as well. He asked the church to be reconciled one to another (1 Cor. 1:10) and prayed for unity (Phil. 2:1–4; 4:2).

Restoring People to the Community

One of the lessons about community that Jesus often modeled was the need to bring inside the people on the outside. In session 4, we looked at examples of how humility entailed ministering to and becoming like “the least” in society. Jesus ate with people who were considered to be “sinners,” from people who cheated others while collecting taxes to prostitutes. We do not know the circumstances that made these people do what they did, but Jesus was ready and willing to accept them into his circle of care and forgiveness.

Another type of outsiders were those blind or paralyzed or people suffering from chronic diseases like leprosy or conditions like mental illness. Before we judge these ancestors in faith too quickly, we need to

think about the ways the church still excludes people who do not fit, despite our best intentions. Recent studies on the church and disability have shown that only a small percentage of congregations are equipped to welcome people with different sorts of physical and mental capacities. Even after the Supreme Court ruling that legalizes same-sex marriage, many churches still exclude people from full participation on the basis of sexual orientation. Churches in the United States are divided between black and white congregations. While we do not term those outside our groups “unclean,” many situations of separation persist and belie our claim to inclusiveness and openness. Many people do not join church fellowship because they have a sense of being “other,” another way of being “unclean” or separate from the whole.

Jesus made it a practice to restore people to community. He brought a tax collector named Zacchaeus back into community (Luke 19:1–10). Jesus healed lepers who had been ostracized from society because of fears that their disease would spread to others. He healed the “Gerasene demoniac” of a mental illness so fearsome that the people in his region kept him chained outside of town (Mark 5:1–20). In his dealings with these outsiders and with all the people he encountered, Jesus did not show hesitation or fear. He waded into crowds, touching and healing. He recognized the image of God in each person and demonstrated to his followers that everyone was welcome in the kingdom of God to work together for the glory of God.

Conclusion

Though the church has had to struggle to maintain unity and though Christians have not always agreed with each other, Jesus' teachings about forgiveness and restoring people to community have held the church together for hundreds of years. The standard of discipleship is working together.

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ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 6

Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

Disciples Persevere

Introduction

“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Jesus’ disciples had to learn to persevere. Initially, they were not good at following through to the end. Even though the disciples pledged their loyalty and said they could “drink the cup” with Jesus, all four Gospels tell how Jesus’ closest followers abandoned him and fled for their lives when he was arrested. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. Only a few of the women and the “beloved disciple” were with Jesus at the cross.

Some scholars have suggested that the true miracle of Jesus’ resurrection was the way it galvanized these frightened, unsure disciples into a group of people with such faith that they were able to found new Christian communities and ensure that the church thrived in the face of internal conflicts and external opposition. Though the disciples once abandoned Jesus to save their own skins, they came to realize that they must take seriously Jesus’ teaching: they had to lose their life to save it. They were able to follow Jesus’ example of self-sacrificing love and devoted the rest of their lives to ministry for Christ’s sake. Some of them, like Peter, James, and Paul, were martyred for their efforts.

Jesus knew that his disciples would fail before they succeeded. He said to Peter: “Simon, Simon, listen!

Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). Peter did strengthen other apostles after his denial of Jesus. Jesus told Simon Peter that he prays for his disciples and that disciples can strengthen each other, especially after they have failed.

This session will examine some of the ways Jesus prepared his disciples for a life of ministry and proclaiming the kingdom of God. To help them persevere, Jesus gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit that still empowers Christians today.

Sent Out as Sheep among Wolves

Proclaiming the gospel and healing in Jesus’ name were not safe activities in the first and second centuries. Jesus often met with resistance, and when he sent seventy disciples out to preach and heal, he told them, “See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3). Jesus knew that some people would welcome them, but others would reject them, sometimes with open hostility (10:8–11). “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next,” Jesus advises them (Matt. 10:23). The disciples had to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (10:16). That is, they had to maintain the integrity of the gospel but be aware that there would be opposition and perhaps threats on their lives.

Jesus made no secret of the fact that following him meant taking up the cross. Matthew and Luke foreshadow Jesus' own experience of being arrested, beaten, and dragged before the authorities, both Jewish and Roman, when Jesus tells the disciples to beware of the people who will flog them and hand them over to councils, governors, and kings because of their testimony about him (Matt. 10:17–20; Luke 21:12). This danger was not merely hypothetical. Early church tradition says that James was beheaded (Acts 12:1–3) and that Peter, Bartholomew, Thomas, Simon, and Thaddaeus (also known as Jude) met violent ends as they proclaimed the gospel. It is likely that Paul was beheaded in Rome and that followers of Jesus were persecuted by the Roman Empire after the great fire in Rome in 64 CE and again during the reign of Domitian in the 80s and 90s CE. The faith and courage necessary to continue Jesus' mission under such circumstances was formidable. They met resistance from both Jews who were hostile toward those Jews who proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and from Romans who saw the followers of Jesus as troublemakers and insurrectionists. First we will discuss the Jewish situation and then the Roman one.

Jews and Jewish Christians

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,” Jesus said (Matt. 5:10). Jesus' followers met opposition from fellow Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that the “righteousness” he taught was not in a valid interpretation of *torah* (instruction or law). The Gospels indicate that Jesus frequently sparred with Jewish leaders over interpretation of the *torah*. While this sort of debate was not unusual—arguing over interpretation of the law was (and still is) a respected part of Jewish tradition—it seems that Jesus spoke with such authority that he offended many of his colleagues. The proper role in such debates was to quote teachers from the past in support of one's argument and not to take credit for one's insights. But Jesus just came out and said things on his own authority. Worse, he attributed this authority directly to God. It is no wonder that many people were offended by Jesus (Matt. 13:57; 15:12; Luke 4:14–30). Some of these adversarial responses could represent the Gospel writers projecting back into Jesus' lifetime the sort of opposition they were meeting after Jesus' death

and resurrection, when the fledgling church was trying to make inroads among fellow Jews. The reasons for Jewish hostility were not simply theological. The Jews of Jesus' time had many different opinions about how to be faithful to God. Even so, it is quite likely that followers of Jesus were considered “blasphemers” for the way they talked about Jesus' relationship with God (John 10:31–39). There were also political reasons. In this turbulent time, some Jews actively resisted the Roman Empire, but many others thought the best plan was to lay low and stay out of the Romans' way. The peacefully oriented Jews adapted and assimilated, at least to the extent that they would be allowed to keep their privilege of being able to conduct their own religious practices without Roman interference. Unlike the Seleucid king Antiochus IV, who several generations before had prohibited the Jews from keeping their covenantal rituals, the Romans were more tolerant and allowed the Jews to maintain their distinctive religious practices, as long as things remained peaceful. But the Jewish followers of Jesus threatened that balance and uneasy peace when they proclaimed Jesus “king of the Jews,” which the Romans perceived as a direct threat to Roman rule.

Jews Expelled from Rome

In 49 CE, the Roman emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome. The historian Suetonius wrote, “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome” (*Claudius* 25). Scholars are not sure if “Chrestus” is a garbled reference to Christ (*Christos* in Greek), but it seems likely, because Luke also mentions this event and names Aquila and Priscilla as two of the Jewish Christians who fled from Rome to Corinth (Acts 18:2).

Some Christians today wonder why more Jews of Jesus' time did not accept Jesus as the Messiah if they heard him preach, saw him heal, and witnessed how crowds of people followed him. These signs would seem to be proof that Jesus was the Messiah. However, according to the Jewish historian Josephus and other first-century sources, Jesus was not unique in these activities. There were many healers, exorcists, and charismatic leaders in Jesus' time. Also, many Jews

had become skeptical of messianic claims. Messiahs had come and gone (Theudus and “Judas the Galilean” among them, Acts 5:36). These would-be messiahs tended to bring trouble. When someone claimed to be the messiah and rallied others to him, the ensuing unrest often caught the attention of Rome, and Rome was known for putting down unruliness with swift violence. When a culture is already on the margins, as the Jews were in the Roman Empire, that marginal culture tends to be less tolerant of people who challenge the boundaries. Jews who claimed to be the messiah threatened the fragile existence of Jewish life in the Roman Empire. For many Jews, Jesus and his followers were just such a threat.

After Jesus’ death, Jesus and his disciples were even more suspect, because Jesus had been executed by Rome on grounds of insurrection. It is likely that at least some of the Gospels and the book of Acts were written down after the Romans had besieged and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE. Jewish rebellions had resulted in the Romans’ destruction of their most holy place, so that many Jews did not want to have anything to do with other Jews who might create more problems for their people. There is evidence that Jewish followers of Jesus were being cast out of their synagogues and harshly punished for testifying about Jesus (Matt. 10:17; Luke 21:12; see also John 9: 22). Peter, John, and other apostles were taken before the Jewish council and warned not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:1–22). When they persisted in doing so, they were arrested, imprisoned, taken before the council again, and flogged. They were released only because a Pharisee named Gamaliel reasoned that if God was on their side, there would be no stopping them (5:17–42). Rifts occurred even within families. Jesus warned: “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name” (Matt. 10:21–22). Perhaps in response to this, Jesus redefined his “family” as those who followed him and obeyed his Father’s commandments. Truly this was a painful schism within Judaism, and it eventually resulted in the separation of Judaism and Christianity. But Jews were not the only ones who persecuted the followers of Jesus.

Roman Persecutions

When a fire burned down a huge section of the city of Rome in 64 CE, the emperor Nero blamed Christians for starting it. Nero said that Christianity was a deadly superstition and that Christians were haters of the human race; therefore, they were responsible for the fire. The Roman historian Tacitus reported that Nero had many Christians crucified and their crosses lit on fire. He had other Christians mauled by wild animals.

At this point in history, the Romans evidently were able to distinguish the Christians as a group apart from the Jews. It is likely that the Romans were suspicious of them, because they were a new, upstart religion separate from the venerable antiquity of Judaism. The Romans were generally tolerant of other religions. People could worship whichever gods they wanted, as long they also made sacrifices in honor of the emperor and Roman gods. Only the Jews were excused from making these sacrifices, because of the great age and respectability of their religion. Because the Christians were becoming distinct from Judaism, they were perceived as a new religion, without the protection of Judaism’s respectability.

That Nero deemed Christian beliefs “superstitious” reveals their low standing in a world where multiple religious beliefs existed side by side. Nero called Christians “haters of the human race” because of their resistance to making sacrifices to Roman idols and to the emperor. People who did not cooperate (with the exception of the Jews) were suspected of tempting fate: the gods would become dissatisfied and rain down disaster on everyone.

The Book of Revelation

Many scholars think that the book of Revelation was written during a time of Roman persecution. The figure of Babylon is a code name for Rome. The apocalyptic visions of Christ’s defeat of the powers of darkness metaphorically describe the church’s faith that God’s truth would be victorious over Rome’s earthly powers.

Equipped to Persevere in Faith

Many Protestants find tales of persecution and martyrdom among the early Christians to be macabre. Why focus on the gory details when the cross is empty? Shouldn't we be celebrating life instead of death? But stories of persecution and martyrdom can serve an important purpose for Christians today: they show what the followers of Jesus were able to accomplish even though they had to endure all manner of hardships, horrors, and even death to proclaim the gospel. Their example challenges Christians today to keep persevering, especially since we do not face the severity of opposition that our forbearers in faith had to face.

Challenges to the church today are more insidious: secularism, consumerism, racism, apathy, and other systemic ills. The church does a great deal of good in the world, and yet in many ways, the church remains complacent. In our own way, Christians today can be just as fearful as the earliest followers of Jesus. A primary fear is that we cannot make a difference. This fear is the way in which the church abandons Jesus today. We do not run away from a mob intent on arrest and crucifixion, but we fail to stand with Jesus and do his work in the world. But if we ask, Jesus gives his disciples strength and faith.

Faith That Needs Help

The Gospel of Mark includes an instructive story of faith that needs strengthening. A man comes to Jesus to ask that he heal his son, who has an evil spirit that causes violent seizures. Jesus' disciples have been unable to heal the boy, and Jesus, in exasperation, says, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you?" (Mark 9:19). The boy's father says to Jesus, "if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us" (9:22). Jesus questions the man's hesitancy: "If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes." And the man cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (9:23–24). Jesus commanded the evil

spirit to come out of the boy. This story lets Christians know that Jesus can strengthen puny faith, if we ask.

Persistence in Prayer

The Gospel of Luke urges perseverance in prayer. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and after giving them the Lord's Prayer, Jesus told them a story about a man who kept pestering his neighbor until the man got out of bed and gave him what he needed. Jesus then told the disciples: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Luke 11:9). Later, Jesus told a parable about their "need to pray always and not to lose heart" (18:1). In the parable, a widow persisted in going to a judge to ask for justice against her opponent. The parable says that the man did not fear God or respect anyone, but he granted her request so that she would stop bothering him. Jesus exhorted his disciples to be like the widow who never stopped asking (Luke 18:2–8). The apostle Paul echoed this persistence in prayer when he wrote, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17).

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

The Gospel of John portrays Jesus' perseverance in faith. Jesus loved his disciples to the end (John 13:1). The word for "end" is *telos*, which means not only a point of termination but also "to the full extent." Jesus held nothing back. When Jesus then washed the disciples' feet as an example of how they needed to serve one another, at first Peter refused to let Jesus serve him, but then he accepted Jesus' *telos*, his complete love that reaches to the full extent, by asking to have his head and hands washed, too (13:3–9). In this intimate setting, when Jesus was imparting to his disciples his last words of love and instruction, Jesus told them he was not leaving them orphaned, that he was sending an advocate, a "paraclete" (*parakletos*), who would encourage them and enable them to continue his mission in the world (14:1–12). Jesus told them that they would be able to do greater works than Jesus himself had accomplished, because Jesus was going to the Father and would do whatever they asked in his name (14:12–14). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told his disciples that he would be with them always (28:20). In the Acts of the Apostles,

Jesus gives his disciples strength and faith.

the disciples receive the Holy Spirit to empower them to be Jesus' witnesses (1:8; 2:1–13).

Conclusion

In the United States today, not many Christians experience persecution, imprisonment, or death for their faith, and yet the task Jesus sets before the church can be difficult and arduous. Christians today experience fear, doubt, and weak faith, but Jesus has bestowed on the church the gift of the Spirit and his own prayers to

help the church persevere. The apostle Paul wrote that God's promises are always a "yes" (2 Cor. 1:18–20). God is going to bring everything to completion, and nothing can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:19–39).

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