

Discipleship @ 1st Pres

Being transformed together into the image of Jesus, for the sake of others

"My heart says of you "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek." Psalm 27:8

"Thus let us enter together on the path of charity in search of Him of whom it is said, 'Seek His face evermore'." Augustine, *On the Trinity*

Where have we been? What does it mean to be human?

God has been changing our perspective about discipleship.

The really interesting part is that we didn't know that our perspective needed to change, or at least not in significant ways. I mean, discipleship at its core is simple right? It's about trusting and becoming more like Jesus. Yes! But our foundational ideas about what the gospel is all about and what it means to be created in God's image affect the ways we understand that simple answer. Let us explain.

The Heart of the Gospel

The main way that our congregation has explained the gospel for years is this: "Our holy and righteous God created humans in His Image. We were made to center our lives on God and follow God's ways. But the first humans and all of us since have failed to do so. Our sin has marred our world and our relationships with creation, each other, and our Lord. Our Holy God cannot be in relationship with sin. So God the Son, Jesus, became human. Though Jesus did not sin, He took on the consequences of our sin so that through Him we can stand righteous before God. Through Him, the Spirit lives in us and sets us free to follow God's ways. Through Jesus' righteousness we will be with God now and forever. When Christ returns, God's righteous reign will be complete."

This is the way that most Protestant churches have understood the Gospel for hundreds of years. And it is true. We only stand righteous before God because of Jesus' atoning life, death, and resurrection. But we have also been convinced that the emphasis of this understanding – that of law, sin, and righteousness - is not the only faithful *emphasis*. Instead, another faithful understanding of the Gospel as portrayed in Scripture and the rich history of the church throughout the centuries is that of loving union with God: "God is an eternal community of love – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Triune God created the world and humans out of love so that we could enjoy a loving relationship with Him. But the first humans and all of us since rejected God's love and have chosen to love other things more. Our sin has marred our world, damaged our capacity to love others, and separated us from union with our Lord. But God's love would not and cannot be stopped. Out of love, God the Son became human to share God's love with us, to show us God's loving ways, to die for our selfishness, and rise to new life. When we say yes to Christ's work on our behalf, the Spirit comes and lives in us, uniting us to the Triune God. The Spirit works in and through us individually and as the church to extend God's Kingdom on earth. Christ will return one day and God's love will restore all of creation and we will enjoy perfect and peaceful union with God."

Does this shift in emphasis really make a difference?

It does. For now, consider this: if the Gospel is about loving union with God, then discipleship cannot only consist of learning about Jesus and seeking to be like Him. It's also, primarily, about cultivating our loving relationship with the Lord in the present moment. And contrary to the way our culture thinks, it is actually through cultivating our relationship with the Lord that we are transformed and energized to serve Him and others.

More than Beliefs

A fish doesn't know that it's swimming in water because it's always been swimming in water. In much the same way, we often aren't aware of the culture we are living in and the ways that it has shaped us. There are two ways our culture has shaped us that have also shaped our perspective on discipleship.

First, all of us who live in the modern West have been shaped by the philosophical idea that "we are what we think." An image of this belief might be that humans are containers with ideas inside of them. Or that we are sticks with brains (thanks to J.K.A. Smith for that image). Christians in our culture have substituted thinking for believing. We treat our beliefs like propositions that exist inside of us. The image is the same – humans are containers with beliefs inside of us.

What we believe is vitally important. But it doesn't get at the heart of what it means to be created in God's Image. If God is loving community – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – then the fact that we are made in His image means that love is fundamental to what it means to be human. We cannot help but love. Love is not emotionalism, anti-intellectual affection, or blind passion. Properly understood, love is to be for something, to be after something, to be aimed at something. Love is a word often misunderstood in our culture, so another word that could be substituted for love that might make more sense is worship: we were made to worship, we cannot help but worship, and worship leads us toward something. The image of either word, love or worship, is the same: an arrow moving toward a goal. And that goal was meant to be life with God.

Does this understanding of what it means to be a human, created in God's image, really make a difference?

It does. It makes a difference in many ways. For now, consider this: if we are shaped by what we love, then discipleship is reordering our loves so that we are aimed towards God. The habit of loving God is formed by more than the beliefs we put in our heads. Habitually loving God is formed through practices (including learning), structure, and the community within which we participate.

Second, all who live in the modern West also view life through the lens of individualism. We are convinced that our personal choices bear more weight than the community or institutional structures of which we are a part.

Our choices are important. But our ability to choose doesn't capture all of what it means to be created in God's Image. If God is loving community – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – then the fact that we are

made in His image also means that we are communal beings. Most would respond “or course” to this statement and point to the importance of church community and small groups. Yet our communal nature goes beyond the need for a small group. It also speaks to the fact that, like it or not, we are shaped by the communal structures we are a part of, including their values and cultures. These communal structures include our work places, our families, our schools, and our larger society.

Does this understanding of what it means to be a human, created in God’s image, really make a difference?

It does. It makes a difference in many ways. For now, consider this: the local church is a community that can be intentionally structured in such a way to shape our lives toward the love of God.

What changes when a person becomes a disciple?

The expansive answer to question #2 is EVERYTHING!

- We have been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son, Jesus (Col. 1:13).
- We become children of God, born of God (Jn. 1:12-13).
- We are made co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17).
- We are a new creation and ambassadors/emissaries/representatives of God in the world (2 Cor. 5:17 & 20).

Expansive answers can be difficult to apply to daily life, so here are some other ways to describe what changes when we become disciples.

Apprentice of the Master

To be a disciple is to become an apprentice of a master teacher. The New Testament model for this is to live with the Master from a desire to become like the Master and to experience a re-orientation to love what the Master loves - to join His love for all creation. The disciple pays close attention to everything the teacher does and says and applies it in her or his life. The goal of the disciple is to become like the Master.

A bit dated model of this from popular culture is the relationship between Daniel-san and Mr. Miyagi in “The Karate Kid” movies. The master trains the disciple not only in specific skills, but also in the art of living. Mr. Miyagi teaches Daniel both the physical practices of karate and his way of living and being in the world. He teaches by demonstration, modeling, and inviting Daniel to live alongside him. He doesn’t give him a how-to book on karate and send him to the library. As Daniel matures, he becomes his own expression of the life of his teacher.

Jesus’ repeated invitation to people is, “Follow me” (Matt. 4:18, 8:22, 9:9, 16:24, 19:21; Lk. 9:59, 61; Jn. 10:27, 12:26, 21:19, 22). Those who took seriously this call left their previous way of life and stayed with Him, watching, learning, and eventually doing what Jesus did (Mt. 10). His invitation was, in the end, to

give up their lives, by which He meant not only their daily routines but also their patterns of thinking about life and God. What was of ultimate value to them shifted as they lived with and imitated Jesus. Jesus modeled for them a life of intimacy with God that released them into freedom. They no longer had to live self-protected, self-focused, self-centered lives. He called them to a total re-orientation of what they loved and desired.

Reorientation of Love

Another way of describing the effects of following Jesus on a disciple is that their hearts move from being disordered: loving and becoming attached primarily to things other than God, to rightly ordered: loving God preeminently and the creation in proper proportion. Jesus addresses this directly in Mt. 22:34-40 when a religious leader asks Him which is the greatest commandment. His reply is to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

So we can talk of discipleship as heart training or heart reorientation. Augustine describes a well-ordered heart by saying that it loves the right thing, to the right degree, in the right way, with the right kind of love (J. Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted*). This is not speaking of primarily an emotional realignment. It is describing a whole life transformation in which we grow more and more to value and want what our Triune God values and wants.

Brought into Community

Jesus' call to those who became the twelve disciples was initially to each of them as individuals to make a decision to follow Him. With that decision He brought them into a community that was centered on him and it became their school of transformation. The school of transformation was in session as they traveled together, ministered together, bickered with one another, and tried out what Jesus was teaching them. As they experienced life together under Jesus' leadership, they began to change and to understand what and how He loved.

In the same way, as we become disciples of Jesus and live together in the community of First Presbyterian Church we, too, can be changed to have well-ordered hearts. Through Jesus' unconditional love for each of us and His modeling and instruction we learn to care for each other to the point of sacrifice. We can love one another more than we love our own lives. And as God loves all of humanity and all of God's creation we are shaped to love these as well.

Scriptural Descriptions of Discipleship

"For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Gal. 2:19-20

Prior to meeting Jesus, Paul counted on adherence to the law to gain salvation. He released his faith in righteous living and moved to trusting in Christ for his life. What is it to which we adhere to try and gain

salvation? Becoming a follower of Jesus (disciple) means releasing all other efforts to secure life now and in the future and trust in Christ. Also, Paul talks about the spiritual reality that with his faith in Jesus, Christ now lives within him. He understands this as an actual transaction that the Spirit of God now is within him and is his life.

*"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, **are being transformed into the same image** from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." 2 Cor. 4:17-18*

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" 2 Cor. 5:17

This text is about a change in perspective toward self and the rest of creation, including humanity. As disciples we're being formed and brought into Christ's cosmic mission to redeem the entirety of creation.

What is a maturing disciple?

The last question, "What changes when a person becomes a disciple?" did a great job of laying the groundwork for this question: A maturing disciple is someone who has said "yes" to God's love in Jesus Christ and has become an apprentice of Jesus. Our apprenticeship is a lifelong journey of transformation to become like Jesus through the Spirit, growing to love the Triune God above all else and loving others and creation as the Master does. But let's dig a little deeper so we can open ourselves up to transforming and faithful apprenticeship.

First, notice that the question is not "What is a mature disciple?" Maturing is a process. There will be no point for any of us, this side of the fulfillment of God's Kingdom, when we can say we are completely mature in Christ. This means that no matter how long we have been a disciple and no matter our age, there will still be maturing that God wants to do within us.

Second, we are not the primary agents in our transformation. If that were the case, discipleship would be a road to continual disappointment and frustration. Thankfully, God is the primary agent of change. It is the Holy Spirit that transforms us. Specifically, the Spirit forms us to love and worship God above all else, and forms us to love the world and humanity as God loves the world. While it is the Spirit that changes us, we have a role to play (Philippians 2:12-13). Our role is to remain in Jesus' love (John 15) by ordering our lives to be open to the Spirit's work.

There are a number of ways that we open ourselves to the Spirit's work. Sometimes these are called the spiritual disciplines. We can also call them practices or habits. Though the name changes the idea is the same: we structure our lives in ways to remember God's Story of love through Jesus Christ, to experience God's presence, to listen for God's voice, and to let God's Story fill us and shape us. We do this both individually and communally.

In our church community and tradition over the years, we have emphasized learning about God. Learning is vital to transformation. It is one of the practices we engage in to open ourselves up to the

Spirit's work. Yet it is not the only practice, and it is our hope that our congregational discipleship will include additional ways to open ourselves up to God's transforming work, individually and communally.

Finally, ordinary life is the primary school of discipleship. Our relationships – encouraging or difficult; our place of work – a sweet spot or less than ideal; our situations – hoped for or unexpected; these places are the circumstances of discipleship. In the ordinary, God gently or not-so-gently reveals to us the places where we are not like our master Jesus, the ways in which our love is not rightly ordered towards God and creation. These are the places God reveals our unlikeness and also the places in which God wants to transform us. Spiritual disciplines, or habits, in the midst of our daily lives draw our focus and love back to God where it rightfully belongs and they help us to love others well.

What are the marks of maturity?

There are tangible ways to know that we are being transformed into Christ-likeness. The big picture is that we become more like Jesus: loving and desiring God above all else and loving people and creation as God does (Matthew 22:34-40). Let's put some legs on what love looks like.

Jesus tells us that when we remain in Him, the Spirit will produce fruit in and through us: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). The fruit is the natural overflow of being with and loving our Lord. The fruit includes joining God's cosmic mission of redemption: using our God-given gifts to serve others, to seek the Kingdom of God, to share the good news, and to love self-sacrificially. The fruit includes our attitudes and daily actions that grow out of our communion with the Triune God: we grow to become more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled (Galatians 5:22-26).

Though we are all growing to become more like Jesus, loving God and others, growth will look differently for each person. Growth in maturity can happen in spurts but most often occurs gradually. Growth in maturity is also tied to our personalities and God-given gifts. For example, one disciple may have a natural disposition to gentleness while gentleness may not come as easily for another. Both need to grow in God's gentleness, but the fruit may develop differently for each. We also have different gifts, so the ways in which God asks us to share His love for others will look differently. The variances in our personalities and God-given gifts are important to remember so that while we expect fruit as a result of being with Jesus, we should be slow to compare ourselves to others. Instead, we are to encourage each other in the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

The Building Blocks of Discipleship

To be human is to be formed towards something, and everything in life is a part of that formation. As humans we are constantly being formed towards love (worship) of something. Our desire as followers of Jesus to be formed in love of God and neighbor.

Discipleship and formation cannot be relegated to part of our church life or part of our individual lives. *All our choices, attitudes, habits, and thoughts all form us either toward love of*

God and neighbor, or away from God and neighbor. While this is true, we believe there are ways we can order our lives together and individually that can create room for the Holy Spirit to form us in love for God and neighbor. We are calling these ways the building blocks and we have identified four. The four building blocks are present in Scripture and have been important to the church throughout the generations. The building blocks are postures we take that create room for the Spirit to make us more like Jesus. They are education, practices, community, and joining God's mission. Below is a brief description of each, defined with our goals in mind: conforming to the image of Jesus and learning to love God and neighbor so that it becomes our second nature (or really, our first and now real nature in Christ, unmarred by sin).

EDUCATION

In our culture, we tend to view education as acquiring information: we attend schools, we read books, we learn from experts, and we try to solve problems by gathering facts. The drive behind this pervasive cultural view is that insight and information will change us. Information is good but not enough. ***We need to be transformed into likeness of Jesus, who is our life and hope. That is the goal of education in the church. In particular, education invites us to see real reality – not just to learn true facts, but to actually see reality in a totally different way.*** Here's a picture:

In the middle of the 20th century, an Austrian scientist created a pair of glasses flipped visual perception upside down for the person who wore them (which happened to be his assistant!). At first, the assistant saw everything upside down and as you might expect, was flummoxed by daily activities like walking. But after just a week, the assistant became used to the glasses and though he continued to wear them, his eyes adjusted and he could see everything right-side up again.

We were all born wearing a set of glasses that have distorted God's reality. Those glasses are called sin: a bent towards selfishness and independence as individuals and the sinful human structures in which we live. It's more like we wear multiple pairs of glasses that distort our view of reality, for the culture and communities we spend our days in, also deeply shape us. In fact, they so deeply shape us that we do not know their views of reality are distorted.

The aim of Christian education then, is to reveal the distortion glasses that we are wearing (for the philosophically minded, we could also say that proper education breaks down our paradigms). After revealing our distortions, the aim of education is then to replace our distortions ways of seeing the world with viewing and understanding the world through God's eyes (building faithful paradigms). Like the experiment with the actual glasses, the shift can be disorienting at first, and takes practice. Unlike the experiment though, our new vision will be fundamentally better because it is God's reality. Not only will we be able to function as normal, but we will be able to enjoy and participate in life more fully and faithfully because we will be

able to see more clearly. As Paul says in Romans 12:2; *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

The goal of Christian education is to transform us, helping us to see real reality. The main and primary material for that task is Scripture. Scripture is God's living and active word, ready to speak truth and grace into our lives. There simply is no substitute to understanding and seeing *real* reality and encountering God. It is also appropriate to learn from the generations of believers that have gone ahead of us, as well as those whom we journey with now.

PRACTICES

Have you ever heard of an artist who spends all her time in art museums looking at paintings and researching the best paint brushes, but never actually paints? Chances are that you haven't heard of such an artist because no such artist would become good enough for her art to be published. This is a bit like being a disciple without engaging in practices. ***While education helps us to see real reality, practices help us to live in God's world on a day-to-day basis.***

Practices can also be called spiritual disciplines or habits. They are actions that help us form habits, which in turn form our loves in practical ways.

Practices help us open our lives up to the Holy Spirit's work of transforming us into the image of Jesus. A good image is one of a sail boat. A sail boat cannot move on its own. It is the wind that moves a boat. But the sails must be up in order to catch the wind. In the same way, we cannot transform ourselves. The Holy Spirit transforms us. Yet we have a part to play: we hoist our sails. Practices are ways in which we "hoist our sails" and allow room for the Spirit to transform us. What the image of the sail boat does not capture is that as we engage with the Lord, we are not only moved, we are also changed and strengthened. So the image would be more appropriately understood that as we hoist our sails and the Spirit moves us, new sails are formed so that we become a strong ship, able by God's goodness to respond readily to his love and share His love with others.

A practice-based life can be as simple as setting aside regular time to pray, confess, read Scripture, take care of our bodies, and rest. It can also involve scheduling and nourishing the relationships God has given us. It may involve examining how we view and use our time and resources. Our practices can also change at different seasons in our lives. ***Whatever the***

practices, it is important that they become habits. As they become habits, it will become our nature to live life in and through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Practices are something that individuals do, but we also believe God is calling us to commit to practices as a whole community. *Most often in her history, including our own Reformed heritage, the church has sought to provide people with a rhythm of rich spiritual practices (rule of life). While practices are not foreign to many in our congregation, practicing them together might be an area of growth for us. So for now, we will focus on a handful of practices, encouraging all pockets of our church community to learn and engage in one practice at a time on a rotating basis.*

COMMUNITY

Chances are that if you are reading this, you are not a hermit which means you live in the nitty gritty of life *with people*. It's not simply that God has placed us in community, but that God has made us communal beings: we were made in the Triune God's image, who is loving community in and of God's self. *What it means to be human then, is not only to enjoy communion with God, but each other as well.*

Community is the place in which we learn and practice loving God and neighbor. It is the place we bump up against other people and have opportunities to become more like Jesus: learning to forgive, to confess, to bear with each other, to speak truth and grace, and more. It is the place in which we encourage each other in the Lord, bear one another's burdens, and engage in education and spiritual practices together.

Here's the thing: it's easy to agree with this in theory and still keep this sort of formative community at arm's length. When we say "yes" to Jesus, we become a part of the church, the Body of Christ. In our culture, where the self reigns, it is all-too-easy to consider that community only in grand theological terms and avoid the discipline of forming and engaging with community. God's gift and desire for us, however, is for that grand theological truth to be worked out in the concrete and particular: *we are called to be a part of a group of disciples who are learning to love God and neighbor together, in the context of our relationships. That group may involve our families, friends, and other brothers and sisters in Christ. Whatever the group, it is important to our formation in Christ, to build communities that are learning to love God and neighbor together.*

This type of community, which forms us in Jesus as individual disciples and the Body of Christ, will naturally become part of God's mission of love and welcome to the world which leads us to the final stream: joining God's mission.

JOINING GOD'S MISSION

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, Jesus..." The beauty of the gospel

message is profound and all-encompassing. It is beyond our wildest dreams that by God's grace, through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to receive God's love. Discipleship does not, and cannot, end with receiving God's love. It simply can't end with receiving because ***God's love is so fierce and pure that God gave everything to love and redeem every inch of creation. When we are filled with that kind of love, we are compelled to joyfully join in God's mission to share His love and redemption with all of creation as well.*** The fourth stream is joining God's mission of redemption through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.

We join God's mission in a number of ways. We join God's mission by using our God given gifts and resources as God leads. We join God's mission as we faithfully live in and live out our vocations. We join God's mission as we extend hospitality to our neighbors and share Christ with them. We join God's mission through God's wholeness, peace, and justice in our communities and the world. ***The ways God asks us to join His mission may change over time, depending on the contexts God places us in. Along the journey, we ask the Lord, "How would you have me to join in Your good work to reconcile the world to Yourself through Jesus?"***