

A New Beginning for Discipleship

January 9, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

John the Baptist was a pretty fiery preacher. He dressed in a modest robe of camel hair with a leather belt around his waist. He was known to eat all-natural foods: grasshoppers and wild honey (Matt. 3:4). There were those who thought, "This is it – the great prophet has come!" Israel has not had a prophet in over 400 years, and now here he is, looking much like they would have imagined the prophet Elijah looked like. There were others though who were trying to make something of John that he was definitely not. He was not the anticipated Messiah. He was not the one that the Israelites expected to come in and take Israel back from the Roman Empire by military force. He was not the one who was foretold in Scripture who would bring God's salvation to all people (Luke 3:6).

No, John was the one who was sent to point to the one who was to come, one who was so great that John was not worthy of even untying the thong of his sandal. You see, John's baptism was one of water, a baptism of repentance. The one who was coming after him would baptize with the Holy spirit and fire, a baptism of salvation. There was quite the difference. A baptism of repentance could only point out what was wrong, and could persuade people to turn away from their sin. A baptism of salvation would be able to remove the power of sin altogether, burning away the power of sin as a purifying fire burned away the impurities in metal.

John the Baptist painted a pretty stark picture. There would come a time of separation of the good from the bad. He used an agricultural metaphor that would have been quite familiar to his audience. A winnowing fork was used on the threshing floor to separate the good wheat from the useless chaff. The winnowing fork would gather the good and bad together, toss the whole mess in the air, and then the wind would carry away the useless chaff. Interesting, isn't it, that the Holy spirit is often referred to as "the wind." Once the wind causes the separation, then the useless chaff gets thrown into the fire. For John, the Messiah would be one who has "*his winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but*

he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Again, a pretty stark image. Perhaps an image that comes across as too stern and judgmental for our usual interpretation of who Jesus is. Yet, it is an image of Jesus that John wanted us to have.

The next scene we have Jesus coming to John the Baptist, not with a winnowing fork in his hand but as a man who wanted to be baptized. In one gospel account John was on the verge of refusing to baptize Jesus because he felt that Jesus should be one to baptize him, not the other way around (Matt. 3:14). Yet, Jesus insisted that he be the one baptized by John "for it was proper ...to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15).

We could understand John's objection because his baptism was a baptism of repentance, and Jesus had nothing to repent of. Jesus knew he needed to be baptized, though, to identify with those who were dedicating their lives to God. Another reason that Jesus was baptized was that it marked the beginning of his earthly ministry.

Likewise, when we are baptized, it marks the beginning of our earthly ministry. When Jesus was baptized, it confirmed his purpose for being here. He had come to save all humankind, and it would begin with first the baptism, then the temptation, and then being sent out into the local community and beyond to share the good news of the kingdom. When we are baptized, we enter into God's kingdom, represented here on earth through the church, and then we embark on a lifelong journey of discipleship.

I went to a workshop this last week about discipleship, where the leader got interactive with those gathered. Similarly, I would like to get interactive with you this morning (I know, a risky venture for any preacher). I'm going to ask a few questions and I'll ask you to shout out the answers.

What is the purpose of the church? (Hint: Jesus talks about it in Matthew 28:16-20). We are to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Or, as the United Methodists have put it: "our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."

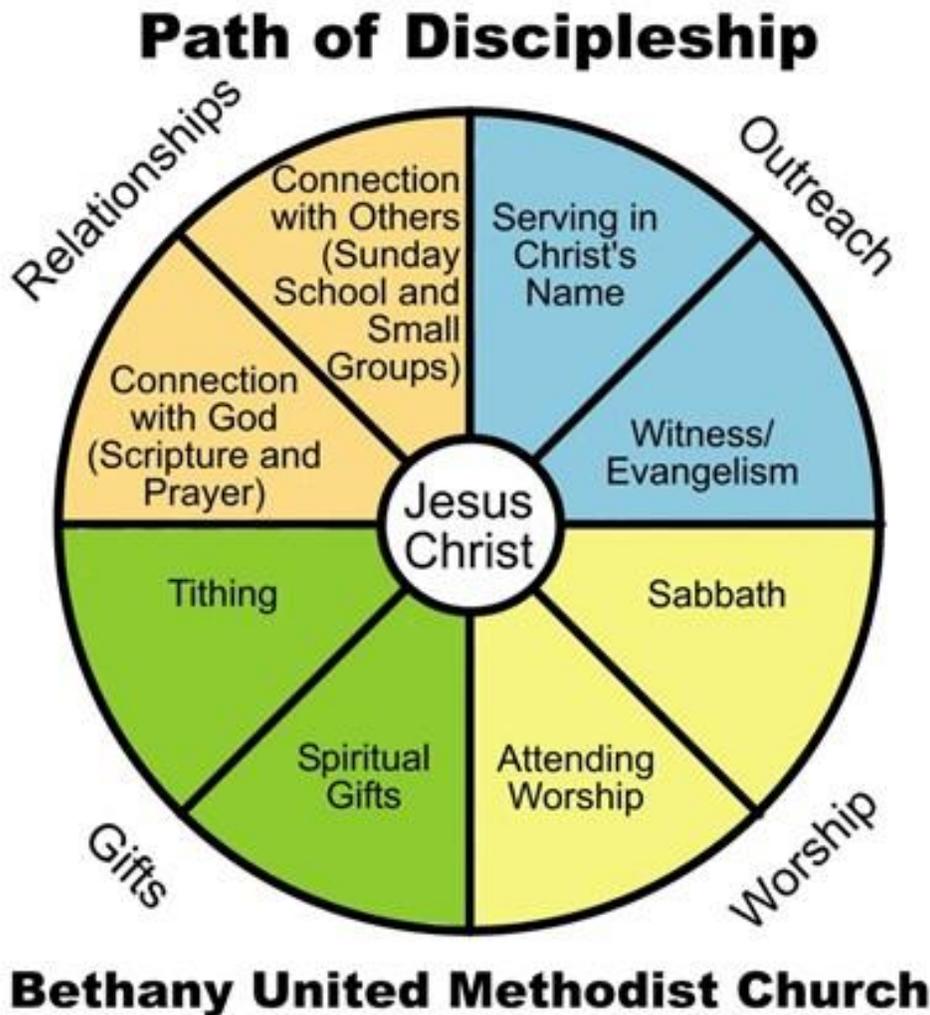
What does it mean 'to make disciples'? I mean, if you had a person you were talking who had never heard the word "disciple" before, how would you explain it to them? (Some people may say, "following Jesus" or "trying to become more like Jesus.")

What are some marks of discipleship? In other words, what might be the signs to someone else that you were attempting to be a disciple of Jesus? (Some might say, "prayer," reading the Bible," "fasting," "getting involved in Sunday School or small group.") In the United Methodist Church when someone is taking a vow of membership, they promise to support the church in five ways: through their prayers, presence (that is, not being absent from the rest of the church), gifts (monetary as well as spiritual), service (as in mission work and in ministries within the church), and witness (the last one we usually forget, but it involves sharing with other people about Jesus). In other words, we can't just be disciples ourselves. We are called be disciples who make disciples.

My next question is not one for you to share out loud, but one that I would like you to consider for this next week. I am going to give you a little homework.

My next question is, "How are you doing in your own walk of discipleship?" If we are honest, we cannot say we have arrived or that we have finished our walk of discipleship, although we may have given people that mistaken concept when we have confirmation class or membership class. We might give people a certificate and people think, "Well, good. That's done." Some people think that once they become a member of the church, their job is done and then we never see them again. No, discipleship is a lifelong journey that only ends when we are united in eternity with our Lord and Savior. And, I don't know about you, but I want to be in with the useful wheat and not with the useless chaff that gets burned in the unquenchable fire.

Some years ago our church came up with a visual image for our path of discipleship. There is a copy of that included in your bulletin this morning, and I would like to go over that briefly with you.



(After briefly reviewing this, then ask the question) Where along this path would you like to work on this year? Just write it down for yourself next to the image. And then ask yourself, What is my next step in seeing this happen? (Give example on prayer, or attending Sunday School, or something along that line)

Could you imagine what Our church would be like if everyone here made one small step toward being a more faithful disciple? What a wonderful New Year's resolution that would be!