

“Lessons I’m Learning”

Matthew 28:16-20

June 13, 2010

As many of you know, I have been in training over the past few months. It is a part of a conference program called the Matthew 28 Initiative. It is based on the scripture that was read this morning. “*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.*” (Matthew 28:19-20) We have entered this program because so many churches have failed to make disciples for years. And when we do not make disciples, the church dwindles and eventually dies. So for congregations that have grown tired of the status quo, we provide advice and prescriptions to try to help them move forward. But when I sought approval from Staff Parish and Ministry Council for my involvement in this training, one condition was that I would share what I am learning. And that brings me to this message.

The number one job of the church is to make disciples. There are many other good things that a congregation can do, such as we are doing with the work camp to Red Bird, the Northeast Clothing Bank, Helping Hands, and Habitat for Humanity. They are very good, very helpful ministries that give us the opportunity to put our faith to work and share the love of God in practical ways. The mission statement of the United Methodist Church is to “*Make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World.*” Through these ministries we are helping to transform the world, but that does not alleviate us of the responsibility to make disciples.

Many congregations, maybe even most of them pride themselves on being a friendly church. By that, some mean that they are friendly to every one that they already know. But in truth, if we are not making disciples for Jesus Christ, friendliness doesn’t count for much. A greater goal is not to be a friendly church, but a church where people can easily make friends. We first become a friend so it is easier to introduce them to our friend Jesus. Through friendship we have the opportunity to extend an invitation that others might become disciples in the kingdom of God. And we are called to make disciples.

Jesus said, “*Go into all the world.*” And yet many congregations would rather stay put. Where we sing “*Standing on the promises of God*”, often we don’t do it. We would rather sit on the premises rather than stand on the promises. Now consider that in a 3 mile radius around this church, there are over 8,000 people who do not have a relationship with God. Think about that, within 3 miles, there are over 8,000 people who are on their way to Hell. These people are your neighbors. And some of them are your family. Yet knowing that, and often we try to ignore it, but even though we know it, so many congregations, so many Christians adopt the Bo Peep method of evangelism, “*Leave them alone and they will come home.*” No they won’t. For “*Faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.*” (Romans 10:17) If we do not take the Word of Christ, the Good News of God to them, they will never become the disciples who can come alive in Christ. And we are called to make disciples.

So how do we go about the business of making disciples? That’s a good question, for in many ways evangelism has a bad connotation for a lot of folks. “*I’m not going to go knocking on doors. I’m not going to be pushy or threatening. I just can’t do that.*” OK. I can appreciate that. But it doesn’t have to be like that. Harry Denman was one of the great evangelists of the last 100 years. Every year at annual conference an award is given in his honor. And by the way, he wasn’t a pastor. He wasn’t ordained. He

was just a caring Christian. Now I have heard that when Harry came into town for an evangelism event, one of first things he would do was to go to the most popular bar. He’d walk in, introduce himself to the bartender, and explain that this particular church would be having evangelistic services in the coming days. And then he would ask the person to pray for him and his mission. Inevitably, the individual would say, “Me pray for you. You’ve got to be kidding. You ought to be praying for me.” And Harry said, “OK.” And then and there, in the most popular bar in the area, Harry Denman would verbally pray for the bartender. Rather than pushing Christ into the life of another, he found ways to be invited in. And we need to learn to do that as well, because we are commanded to make disciples for Jesus Christ.

So how do we do that? Well, when I thought about that, I realized that God had been teaching me what needs to be done through a series of encounters. Like it often is with God, I didn’t fully realize it at the time. There were things that I didn’t see, that I didn’t understand until I looked back. And I do have to offer a disclaimer, because these are things that happened in my life. I have talked about them before, and perhaps you have already heard them. I’m sorry that you have to listen to them again, but I think that there is value in these stories.

It was a Tuesday. I was walking through the sanctuary in Windsor when the Lord called to me and I said, “Yes Lord, here I am.” And the Lord said, “Come to me and worship.” And in faith I began to walk up the aisle to the altar, and as I started up the steps to the altar the Lord said, “Wait! Stop right there on the steps. There bow down and worship me.” And so I knelt on the steps and began to pray, but as I began I immediately became uncomfortable for my body was wider than the steps and I began to wobble back and forth, trying to keep my balance, and soon I was more focused on the steps than the Lord. Then God spoke to me again saying, “Do you see how difficult it is to almost come to God? Now come to me, wholly and completely and bow down before me.”

And I quickly got up and went to that altar and bowed down and lifted up praises to God and as the words were still on my tongue I could feel the power, the Spirit of God descending all around me, filling me and lifting me and the Lord said, “Now rise, O child of God, rise and go and tell the people, AThus says the Lord your God, for too long you have almost come to me, you have come close enough to look upon my altar but you have bowed down on the steps, and it has been difficult for you and for me. Kneel on the steps no longer. Now is the time to come to me wholly and completely. Now is the time to bow down before me so I can touch you and bless you and fill you and make you truly a child of God.”

If we are to make disciples for Jesus, we first have to come to Jesus wholly and completely. Toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “*Many will say to me on that day [the Day of Judgment], ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*” (Matthew 7:22-23) It is not a matter of just knowing who Jesus is. We cannot almost come to Jesus. We can’t just come close enough to see Him. We have to come to Him wholly and completely. It is a matter of knowing Jesus, wholly and completely. It is only when we know Christ intimately, that we can be His disciples. And it is only by being disciples that we can go forth to make disciples. And we are called to make disciples.

Late on a Wednesday afternoon I decided to deliver copies of Sunday’s service to the people who

would be taking part in it. The roads had been cleared of the snow that fell earlier in the week so I figured the journey would be quick and easy. Grabbing my jacket and copies of the services I hurriedly journeyed off. I made two deliveries and then my mind wandered off in some different direction, forcing me to miss the turn onto Snyder Road. No big deal, I could take Messersmith, a mostly dirt road that was now packed with snow and ice. My car started sliding to the right so I hit the brake and turned to the left. But just as soon as I thought everything was all right, the car slid to the right once more and came to a stop. I tried to back up. I tried to go forward, but the wheels just spun. I was stuck. Here I am sitting in a car on a road in the middle of no where, on a road no sane person would take, which partly explained my presence, the engine’s running, the car’s in gear, but we ain’t going nowhere.

I got out of the car and walked around front to see how badly I was stuck. Suddenly my leg disappeared in the snow. That meant I wasn’t just stuck on the ice, I was also stuck in a ditch. I didn’t even know if the right front tire was still on the ground. Maybe there was something in the trunk that would be helpful. So I turned the motor off and opened the trunk to discover nothing. There was a blanket there but I didn’t think it would help so I looked for another possibility. I thought, maybe if I start the car, put it reverse and get out and push it a little; it might be enough to get it moving, to get a little traction. I know it was a stupid thing to do but I was on a roll here. So I started the car, put it in reverse, went around front and pushed the car and it worked. I pushed that car hard enough to close the door. The wheels didn’t budge but the door closed. So I thought, the heck with it. I’ll turn off the car and go for help. It was then that I remembered that special safety feature my car had. When you start it and put it in gear, the doors lock, they automatically lock. Now I thought I was foolish before, getting stuck on this back road. But now I am standing on the back road, beside a locked, unoccupied car that has a full tank of gas, is running and in gear, but not going any where.

When Bishop Felton May heard this story, and let’s face, you can’t keep an experience like this quiet, he said it sounded like the church. We take some wrong turns, go down some wrong roads, make some mistakes, do some foolish things and then we try to correct things all by ourselves, without reaching out or calling out to others. Now as we sit on the side of the road, not even close to the center of faith where we need to be, we see that the church is functioning, it’s running, it’s holding its normal services and meetings, but some feel locked out, and even when we have every thing in gear, we’re not getting anyplace. In many places the pastor is outside, pushing as hard as possible but without any success. And further, that pastor is locked out from the real controls that might make a difference in the direction of that congregation.

In many places, not only is the pastor locked out from the controls, but so is God, and God is the One who needs to be in control. In John 14:6, Jesus said, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” Jesus knows where we need to go. And we need to be on the go, for as I heard from a bishop just a week ago, “Not even God can steer a parked car.” We have to get moving, and the road to heaven only goes, must go through Jesus of Nazareth. We need to give Him the controls to our life, to allow Him to direct our life. And we can only do that by denying our will, that God’s will might come to life in us and through us. But we have trouble giving up that control.

Do you ever think about why we vote in church? Because the early church didn’t vote at all. They would pray and pray and pray until they felt directed by God’s Spirit. The book “Acts of the Apostles”

should be called the “Acts of the Holy Spirit” because it is the Spirit that is in charge, not the apostles. But today we’re often not patient enough to wait for the Spirit. To save time, to be more efficient, we vote. But we don’t vote just to save time, for when we vote, we can maintain control of the agenda and the actions. And God can be locked out. We can only be true disciples if we allow God to be in control of our lives and of our church. And it is only by being disciples that we can go forth to make disciples. We are called to make disciples, so we must allow God to control our lives.

I was sitting in the second of four nights of evangelistic services, and when I looked at the altar, there appeared before me a large block of ice. A candle appeared under the block and the ice began to melt, but as soon as it started melting the water extinguished the candle. Another candle appeared above the block. It burned brightly but nothing seemed to happen to the block. The ice remained cold and intact. Then another candle appeared, and it was joined by many other candles and they moved to surround the block of ice and slowly that block began to melt. And as it melted I began to see that this was more than just a block of ice. Something was inside. A figure, a person, and then I saw not one but many were trapped within that block. And as the vision disappeared the Lord said “Go and do this.”

I was troubled by that vision. I don’t know why but it made me feel very uneasy and very confused. So after the service ended and everyone left the church I went to the altar to ask the Lord what it all meant. And the Lord said, “Go melt the ice. But melt the ice slowly. Try to do it quickly and as the thaw begins, the ice melts and the flame is extinguished. Try to demand it from above but the flame never reaches it and the ice remains. You must go and be beside it, get close and allow the warmth of the flame to slowly melt the ice away.”

There was more to the vision, and the time may come when I tell you the whole story, but for now, understand this lesson that I am still learning. All around us there are people frozen in their habits and traditions, frozen in their wants and desires, frozen in ignorance and arrogance apart from God. And yet, in Hebrew 12:29 we are told that “*Our God is a consuming fire.*” God is the fire that can melt away the ice of traditions and desires, can melt away our ignorance and arrogance, and warm every cold heart. But so many people see that fire and turn away in fear, frightened that an angry God is going to bring down judgment, big time. They can’t imagine a loving fire that can burn away all our imperfections and sin. They cannot imagine that fire being a good thing. But we know better.

As the brothers and sisters of Jesus, as Disciples of Christ, that fire of God’s love burns within us. The prophet Jeremiah cried out, “*His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.*” (Jeremiah 20:9) We have that fire within us and we need to let it out. We can’t just demand that people come to Christ because they will just turn away in indifference. Nor can we push people to Jesus for as we get close they will simply throw cold water on our invitations. We need to get close to them, to get to know them and allow the fire of God’s love to melt the ice and warm their hearts. Then we can invite them to meet the One whose love burns within us. Then we can begin to make disciples for Jesus, and we are called to make disciples.

The Church of Jesus Christ, of which we are a part, is sent forth to make disciples for Jesus. That idea scares many, and others just don’t know how to get it done. But it really does not have to be that scary, or that tough. First we come to God wholly and completely, not just looking on the cross, but bowing down before Him, up close and personal. Then we give control of our lives over to God, over to the Holy Spirit. If Jesus is our Lord, then we have to allow Jesus to call the shots. Third, we need to not

only allow God’s love to burn within us, we need to let that love out into the world. Fourth, we go out to get close to God’s people who are frozen apart from God, to get close to them, to warm their hearts and souls. We go to invite people to come and see the One whose love burns within us. By doing that, we can strengthen the Church and God’s kingdom. We can begin to make disciples for Jesus. And we are called to make disciples. So let us go forth and begin to make it happen. And in your life, may it be so. Amen.