

Understanding Discipleship

*The Rev. Cn. Dr. Rob Droste
Canon for Congregational Development and Mission
The Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey*

The Most Serious Spiritual Problem of our Time

As I've worked in and with congregations over the years, talking with hundreds of Episcopalians, it's become clear that people in our "tribe" have many questions about the words "disciple" and "discipleship." Throw in terms like "discipling" and "disciple-making" and people get even more confused – sometimes even upset! Of the many questions, here are a few:

- What *is* a disciple of Jesus? How does one think? Act? How does one live in the real world?
- Aren't disciples just people who sell everything and give it to the poor? Or go become missionaries to poor countries or inner-city missions? Or go to monasteries or convents?
- Am I a disciple?
- Aren't disciples the saints, clergy and the very rare layperson?
- Are disciples "elite" Christians?
- Are disciples pious and pray all the time and never get angry or do anything wrong?
- Who am I to "make disciples"?

Most of the Episcopalians I've come across seem anxious about questions like these. When they engage these questions, folks often get stirred up and often over-complicate the questions or pick them apart as an intellectual exercise (in avoidance!). Some think about it so much that they become paralyzed. Some just give up and hope it will go away, putting aside the question "for another time."

This is an extremely serious spiritual problem – and the root of practical problems, too. Discipleship drives our personal spiritual growth as well as the decline or growth of our local churches. It's something we must address – soon, and with a serious commitment of time, money and energy – if we are to reverse our decline and move towards a new vitality in our congregations. I am convinced that this is so central an issue that if we don't understand, accept and strengthen our discipleship, nothing else we do will work to bring the health, growth and vitality we seek. We must move from being members of a church to being gathered disciples of Jesus committed to his mission. That is, if we want to survive, much less thrive, in the changed social situation in which our church now finds itself.

Defining Discipleship for Episcopalians

Perhaps the simplest definition of the word "disciple" is, as one dictionary puts it, "A follower or student of a teacher, leader or philosopher." Others define it as a "lifelong learner." Leading scholar Dallas Willard called disciples, "apprentices of the master." Most of the Episcopalians I know are perfectly comfortable with being "lifelong learners." We value education, so we enjoy seeing ourselves as lifelong students of Jesus – as we might be of other teachers we've encountered. That's valuable, even fun, even when it's sometimes challenging. We very much enjoy mastering difficult intellectual concepts.

The problem with this is very serious, and twofold. First, the path of spiritual growth, while having a crucial intellectual component, is clearly not only about “head learning.” It’s also about “an experience of the heart,” where we enter into a relationship of love (in the case of Christians, of love of God, Jesus Christ, neighbor and self) that makes us profoundly vulnerable and changes who we are in ways we can’t predict. A focus on intellectualism may **feel** safe, but that safety is an illusion. It actually keeps the transformation of the heart at arms’ length – disabling our ability to love God fully and our neighbors as ourselves. In a sense, it pushes God out of the innermost depths of who we are. In our intellectualism, we justify all kinds of holding back. We can and do become “love cripples.” This happens all the time.

The second problem of the simple definition (that is, disciples as lifelong learners) is that it does not imply the kind of commitment that we associate with real life change. After all, most of us know that the most valuable things in life – the deepest relationships and proudest achievements – rest squarely on the depth of the commitment we have made to accomplishing or maintaining them.

Marriages, children, education, work success, recovery from alcohol or drug addiction – all of them are rooted in a kind of commitment that sacrifices many other good things we might have otherwise had. **Commitment makes life-giving choices possible.** A follower follows as convenient and/or not too much trouble. Jesus himself taught a kind of discipleship that was not concerned with convenience, comfort, or even personal safety. His claim on **his** followers, made over and over, is complete – and he makes no apologies for that at all. He loves us too much to hold back concerning what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called, “the cost of discipleship.”

With this understanding, we might then define Christian “disciples” as *“people who have made a serious commitment to learning from Jesus how to live and, to the best of their ability, do what he teaches.”*

Hopefully, this definition is a little more useful (though probably a lot more challenging!). However, it’s still not complete. It’s important to add one essential characteristic of the special relationship we, as disciples of Jesus, have with him. That characteristic is this: Christian disciples do what they do because they are **in love with Jesus**, and in that love, they trust him with everything in their lives – to the best of their ability, without reservation.

This can be very challenging to post-modern people. We have been trained by culture and by hard experience what happens when you love and trust someone without reservation – especially spiritual or political leaders. In this, we as Christians must overcome a kind of pathetic cynicism that we apply to Jesus, the only true leader that we can (and yes, should) love and trust with all our heart. A love and trust so complete that we hang on every word, even ones we don’t understand at first (or for a long time), and trust everything about ourselves – everything we hold dear, everyone we hold dear, every hope we cherish, everything we treasure – all of it, we trust to him. This is the love that breaks us free from the attachments that weigh us down, make us miserable, and give us neither present meaning and happiness nor hope for any in the future.

This love and trust do something very special as well. They make it possible for us to desire to know the will of God for us – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and actually **to desire to obey it**. Obedience, of course, is a challenging word in a culture that teaches self-centered disobedience at practically every turn. But for the one we love and whose love we feel, we are fertile ground for obeying his teachings, attitudes and commands – and in that, we find that his love really does lead to a life of perfect freedom.

Here’s what happens to our definition of Christian discipleship when we add this concept:

Christian disciples are people who have fallen deeply, even madly, in love with Jesus, the Savior and Lord who returns their love and gives so much more. Grateful for that love and all Jesus did, and does, to show it, disciples commit themselves to trust for a lifetime, becoming eager to learn all they can from Jesus about how to live and ready to obey his commands as best they understand them each day.

Better, I think, but it lacks one last essential point. I call it “The Disciples’ Secret.”

The Disciples’ Secret

There is one last point that must be made about being a Christian disciple – and it’s one that Episcopalians typically find very challenging. (Be sure to read to the end, because it’s super important.) This is sad, because it’s also the secret to personal spiritual growth (which, by the way, is the secret to congregational health and growth). That point is this. ***A Christian disciple, every Christian disciple, is supposed to help other people become disciples of Jesus. Nobody gets a pass.***

There are no exceptions.

Most people are familiar with Jesus’ command in Matthew 28 to “Go and make disciples of all nations.” It’s not just in Matthew, though. In Mark, Jesus tells his disciples that he will make them “fish for people.” In Luke, they are told to go out into the world ahead of him and proclaim the good news. In Acts, he says “you will be my witnesses to all the world.” In John, Jesus says “My Father’s glory is that you bear much fruit,” which I interpret as changed lives, starting with their/our own, and that “a grain of wheat must die” to yield 30, 60 and 100-fold.

While we resist it in our Episcopal culture, it contains an exceptionally important secret. That is this: the fastest way to grow spiritually, in love and closeness to God and faith in God, is to help others grow in that faith. It’s what I call “The Disciples’ Secret,” because you don’t see it unless you stop resisting Jesus’ command and accept that he gave the command, over and over, because it was in our best interest – because it is the source of the greatest blessing of all: closeness to God.

The way I like to ask it is this: while you may be reluctant, for a variety of reasons, not to want to “convert” anyone to Christianity, wouldn’t you at least like to help people grow spiritually? You’re aware of their temporal suffering – wouldn’t you at least like to help with their spiritual suffering, the meaninglessness, isolation, loneliness and despair that cripple so many people and actually cause so much temporal suffering? Wouldn’t you at least like to help bind up the spiritual wounds of people when you have the surgical kit always at hand and the skill to use it?

And that leads us to this definition, which I hope you’ll take to heart.

Christian disciples are people who have fallen deeply, even madly, in love with Jesus, the Savior and Lord who returns their love and gives so much more. Grateful for that love and all Jesus did, and does, to show it, disciples commit themselves to trust for a lifetime, becoming eager to learn all they can from Jesus about how to live and ready to obey his commands each day as best they understand them. By helping others grow spiritually, they heal the spiritual suffering in the world that is so painful and desperate – and they are themselves blessed with rapid, deep growth in the Spirit.

Where to From Here?

There are several steps you can take right away to consider deeply what this definition might mean to you. Try to balance your head and heart, and don't over-intellectualize. Just keep things simple and heartfelt. Pray them as you would talk with a friend. (Some people even write them as letters to God!) This is also a great exercise for vestries.

1. First, write about the ideas included in the definition above and the thinking leading up to it. Try to go as deep as you can about what excites, confronts or confuses you – and what gives you hope or fires you up.
2. Read the six questions at the bottom of p. 302 and top of p. 303 in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Called "The Presentation and Examination of the Candidates," these six questions actually put into words the ancient commitments made by disciples since the very early days of the church. Take time with each of them. Write several pages about **each** question. What do they mean to you personally? What's challenging about them? What's exciting? What's surprising? What's hopeful? What do they make you wonder about? Where is God in them?
3. Review the Baptismal Covenant on pp. 304-5 of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Start with the five baptismal promises – they are a great summary of how a disciple is supposed to live. The Apostles' Creed, with which the Covenant starts, is a great summary of what disciples are supposed to believe – ideas in which they put their trust. Which one is easiest for you? Which one is hardest? Which one gives you hope? Do any of them make you feel despair? Where is God in them?