

“What Are We Doing Here?” Matt. 4:18-22; 18:16-20 9/23/12

Recently a 7 year-old boy in Plain City, Utah was adamant that he didn't want to go to church. His parents weren't persuaded and insisted that he would go. So, when they weren't looking, he hopped in the family car, pulled it out of the driveway, and took off down the road! Not long after, police began receiving reports of an erratic driver in a white Dodge Intrepid. When the deputies spotted the car and turned on their lights and sirens to pull him over, he refused, leading them on a low-speed chase through the streets of Plain City. Apparently the slow speed was a result of the boy being unable to reach far enough with his foot to depress the gas pedal any further! He would scoot down to push on the gas and then sit back up to see where he was going. He finally found his way back to his driveway, pulled in, jumped out of the car, and ran into the garage to hide. He later explained that he just didn't want to go to church that day... And I suspect that he is not alone in his lack of enthusiasm for church.

What are we doing here, anyway? What's the purpose of the church? What it is that are we supposed to accomplish? What's the point?

Our Session has been reading a book entitled, Changing the Conversation: A Third Way for Congregations by Anthony B. Robinson. He believes that many of us mainline churches have lost our sense of purpose. He believes that loss of purpose has left us drifting and frustrated. He writes, “Lacking clear and compelling purpose, congregations (and clergy)

tend to become reactive: they try to respond to every need, itch, hurt, and crisis that comes along. And that is a recipe for burnout, because people's needs, itches, and hurts are limitless and endless. Moreover, when there is a lack of shared purpose, congregations and clergy tend to become too focused on keeping everyone happy and together. Instead of being the captain and crew on the *Mayflower*, the vessel bound for a new world, the church begins to look more like the *Love Boat*, which goes nowhere but promises fun and entertainment for all!..."

Later, he cites the work of Michael Foss, who likens the expectations of many church members to members in a health club. You pay your dues and expect certain services and privileges to be available to you provided by the trained staff. Members may bring a guest occasionally, but only those who have paid their dues have a right to the services of the club. In this view, the purpose of the church is to meet the needs of its members and to work hard to keep them all happy. Sound familiar to anyone?

This is a very different view than the biblical view of the church! Biblically, the church exists for one central purpose: to make disciples. Our GPC mission statement reflects this when it says, "*Gettysburg Presbyterian Church believes that God calls us to invite people to faith in Jesus Christ, and equip them to grow as His fully devoted followers.*" That's what a disciple is, a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus

spent a great portion of his three years in ministry developing devoted followers. Listen to this little story from the beginning of his ministry.

¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. (Matt. 4:18-22)

Notice how Jesus recruited his first disciples. He simply invited them to follow him. And they did! These followers would not only learn important theological truth, but by following him, they learned a whole new way of life. As they watched him, prayed with him, assisted in his healing and teaching, listened, and discussed the issues of the day, they were learning a new way of living with new values, priorities, and responsibilities. And those first disciples were so impressed by him that they invited others to join them in following Jesus. For example, when Levi, the tax collector, was invited to follow Jesus, he immediately left his tax booth and followed him. Soon afterward he threw a big party so that all of his tax collector friends could meet Jesus, too! He wanted his friends to follow Jesus. Disciples are like that.

So, Jesus spent a lot of his time and energy making disciples. But that's not the end of the story. Listen to what Jesus said shortly before he returned to heaven.

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:16-20)

Following his resurrection, the disciples obeyed Jesus and went to the place he had told them to go. That's a good sign that they had actually learned something about following him- they obeyed his word! Once there, Jesus gave them authority, and commanded them to go and make disciples, to initiate the new disciples into his service by baptizing them, and to teach them to obey Jesus' teachings.

This is known as the Great Commission. It is our mandate, our marching orders, the purpose for which the church exists- to make disciples- fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

But how does that happen? How do people become disciples? Traditionally, we think of attending worship and Sunday School classes, but

people become devoted followers of Jesus through a variety of practices.

Listen to the rest of our mission statement:

As disciples we:

- study regularly
- pray daily
- witness boldly
- live faithfully
- serve passionately
- worship weekly.

Over time these practices shape who we are, making us more like the one we follow. Which ones come easiest to you? Which ones have helped you to change and become more like Jesus? Which ones are most difficult for you? Which ones have you neglected? How could you be more faithful in these practices this year? Although most of these practices can be done alone, it is often helpful to have someone to assist us with them.

When traveling in Mexico, I've been intrigued by the frequent road sign, "Obedezca las senales." "Obey the signs." However the language barrier can make that a challenge in some cases. Stop signs and speed limit signs look like our signs and are pretty easy to understand. Signs that say "No Estacionar" or "No Rebase" (No Parking or No Passing) are a little more challenging. There are also the signs that say "Topes," often appearing along a major highway. If you don't understand those signs,

you're likely to lose the suspension on your car, because they indicate that a giant speed bump is approaching rapidly. And then there are the three standing sticks with an empty 2 liter Coke bottle hanging in the middle of them. That indicates that there is a turnoff from the main road! How are you supposed to know that?

When learning the ways of a new country, it can be helpful to have a guide, someone who knows the way things work there, who understands the language. It's the same thing with these practices of discipleship. Guides can be very helpful and they can come in a variety of forms. Spiritual directors, mentors, Sunday School teachers, pastors, and small groups can all be good guides for us as we learn these practices of disciples. Who could help guide you to becoming a better disciple?

At GPC, we're working to make sure our energy and resources are supporting our central mission of making disciples. And that can be challenging! Remember the animated movie, "Up?" It concerns a young Boy Scout named Russell and his emerging relationship with an aging widower voiced by Ed Asner. One of the things I love about the movie is that the dogs in the film often wear a device that lets humans understand what they are thinking. One of the ongoing gags in the film has to do with the dogs. They might be working hard, carrying out their assigned tasks like they should be, when all of a sudden, they totally lose focus, tense up,

and say, “Squirrel!” The presence of a squirrel completely distracts them from whatever they should be focusing on!

As a church, we’re in the midst of sharpening our focus on making disciples, working hard to avoid chasing squirrels which may look very appealing, but actually distract us from our mission. How can we more effectively make disciples here in Gettysburg and around the world? What are we doing that may be nice, but doesn’t really help us achieve our mission? Our leaders need your prayers as we take on this challenging work of discernment!

There is also work for you on an individual level. I would like to challenge you to make or renew your commitment to be a disciple, a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ. We can offer the programs to help you grow, but you need to be committed to making use of them! A number of years ago, a Belgian queen visited Poland while it was still under Communist control. Everywhere she went, she was accompanied by a guard from the secret police. Since she was a Catholic, she attended mass several times while she was there. On one occasion, while she was kneeling in prayer, she noticed that her guard moving his lips and saying the prayers along with her. Surprised, she asked him, “Are you a Christian?” To which he replied, “I believe, but I don’t practice.” She then asked, “Then, are you a Communist?” To which he replied, “I practice, but I don’t believe.”

As disciples, we seek to align beliefs and practices. We need both!

Are you a disciple, a devoted follower of Jesus Christ? What do you need to do to keep growing in your commitment as a disciple? What is your next step? Why not get started today?