

"Change the World: Become a Disciple"
Acts 2:42-47

Today we focus on our call to be disciples of Jesus Christ as a way to change the world. What is a disciple? We throw this word around in church thinking that everyone knows what it really means or that there is a common understanding of it. To begin this conversation, I am going to show three video clips about the topic. The first two are about a great example of a disciple. They are about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian in the 1930s.

<https://youtu.be/oLLhZn2E8Fk>

<https://youtu.be/6KCply-HqWM>

According to his biography, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer was ordained a Lutheran pastor in 1931 and served two Lutheran congregations. In 1934, 2000 Lutheran pastors organized the Pastors' Emergency League in opposition to the state church controlled by the Nazis. This organization evolved into the Confessing Church, a free and independent protestant church. Bonhoeffer served as head of the Confessing Church's seminary at Finkenwalde. The activities of the Confessing Church were virtually outlawed and its five seminaries closed by the Nazis in 1937." Bonhoeffer spoke up against the Nazi theology and how most people in the German church believed that such theology of White superiority was good. He worked tirelessly in the resistance movement and helped many Jews escape extermination. Bonhoeffer ended up being arrested, imprisoned, and executed for his faith.

What does the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer tell us about discipleship? How is it different from how we normally think and behave?

We often like to highlight people like Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, or Martin Luther King Jr. as examples of discipleship and yet in reality Christians have struggled and failed many times to be faithful disciples. Here is a third clip with a discussion between Mike Slaughter and Adam Hamilton about how we often turn Jesus into our own image:

<https://youtu.be/-icYpKZlnjE>

What do you think? In his book *Change the World*, Slaughter shares that in his church in Ohio, only one fourth of those who attend worship are members because the expectations of becoming a member/disciple are high. "All are required to complete the twelve-week membership curriculum... Those who complete the course may choose to be baptized or renew their baptismal vows and interview with a course facilitator to ensure they commit to regular worship attendance, a cell community for accountability and growth, a place of service, and the biblical tithe." This is not because that church is mean or exclusive! It is instead because that church is trying to help people become faithful disciples.

Let's look at the example of the early church and how they went about living as disciples. The author was giving the readers a compelling summary description of the life of the early church to help them see the value in joining the church. There are several

summaries in Acts about the life of the early community. These summaries provide a general picture of the activities the new believers engaged in when they congregated under the leadership of the apostles. Today's passage is to be understood as a snapshot of the discipleship life of the community. It cannot be used to say that the early Christians all moved in together and spent all their money and time together. We can't take this summary and make it the literal ideal for churches and disciples. What we can get from this scripture is a description of what a Christian community looks like when they are living in the Spirit of God. The early followers of Christ were so focused on the love of God that their lives were so transformed for the whole world to see their amazing change. Motivated by the Holy Spirit, they generously shared what property they possessed. This was not an early form of communism because there is historical evidence that points to the continued ownership of homes and businesses by individual members. The sale and distribution of surplus assets is most likely what is described in Acts 2:42-47. This story is about how a community that is focused on the grace and love of God lives together. This was not a monastic vow of poverty. It was more of a byproduct of the early Christians' relationship with the Spirit and how they saw following the path of Jesus was to be lived. When the people experienced God's love, they were transformed to share it with others. Their hearts were opened to the needs of others among them. The Spirit of God creates not just new practices in our lives. The Spirit of God creates a whole new people out of us. The power of the Holy Spirit in the early Christian communities, as described in Acts 2, led people to break down the social barriers between economic classes, ethnic groups, and men and women. They lived in a time when these barriers were so strong and people of different social classes never shared a meal together, but the table to Christ brought them together.

So today, I invite you to consider your call to discipleship and what difference discipleship makes in your life and in the lives of those around you. Disciples are diverse and unique as each of us has a unique story and life. Yet, there are some common threads of what discipleship looks like. Slaughter writes, "Disciples model the message. They replicate the life and mission of Jesus in the world." Discipleship is a living and committed relationship with the teacher who guides us and helps us fulfill his mission. In the last couple of years, we at Batavia First Presbyterian Church have been trying to make it clear what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Here is what we have defined as our path of discipleship:

1. Grow: Our daily intentional time with God as the focus in prayer or reading the Bible.
2. Worship: Coming together with others to pray and to open ourselves to experiencing God's loving presence. Weekly communal worship that engages hearts, minds, bodies, and senses.
3. Connect: Gathering with others for faith sharing, prayer, support, friendship, and study.
4. Serve: Putting our faith into action in daily life to join the mission of Christ in the world. Sharing the good news of Christ's love with others. Giving of our time and finances.

The great and challenging news is that all of us are called to be disciples, those of us with the ability to share a lot and those of with the ability to share a little. Some of us might serve by praying for a ministry or a service project, while others might give time or money

to it. Each of us has the ability to worship, grow, connect and serve so that we continue to live as disciples of the way of Jesus.

I would like to invite you to discuss with a neighbor who is supporting or inspiring you for each of these areas. Now reflect on who you are supporting or inspiring for each of these areas of discipleship.

I would like to end with the words of Margaret Mead which embody the power of discipleship and why Jesus focused on making disciples: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Amen.