

Daily Discipleship (Col. 3:17)

Today I'd like to continue exploring an idea we began to consider last time we were together—it's the idea of discipleship. As Jesus started to gather his early followers, the band of disciples we know as the twelve, he didn't begin at the Temple recruiting priests and Temple workers. He didn't raid local synagogues for their leaders or Scripture scholars. He didn't even include John the Baptist into his band of disciples. Instead, Jesus called ordinary people from common walks of life to journey with him, to be with him and learn from him what it meant to live in the Kingdom of God which he was specially revealing, and making uncommonly available. That alone sent the message that the kingdom wasn't dependent on a geo-political entity, but was instead centered in him, and that it didn't belong to a privileged few, but to any and all who longed for true life and who respond to his call to follow him.

The kingdom of God is more correctly understood as the reign of God, and it takes place wherever what God desires is done. We might better grasp it as the realm of God, and that realm is defined by the range of God's will—wherever God's will can be and is followed is where the kingdom of God can and does exist. And this Jesus demonstrated as he gathered ordinary folks to be with him and learn from him, as he moved among communities in their daily rhythms addressing the various aspects of everyday life and touching the lives of people affected by the circumstances of common life—illness, inequity, the struggle to make ends meet, the attitudes and prejudices that favored some and despised others, the joys and sorrows common to life, and the challenges of relationships that arise from living in community.

In calling ordinary folks to discipleship, Jesus was making the point that life under the reign of God wasn't out of anyone's reach, and it didn't depend on any pre-existing knowledge or conditions. It didn't require a particular station in life or favored heritage. It was, and remains available to any who desire it—all are welcome to it, and all benefit by it, even those who are not yet his followers. To Jesus, discipleship was not especially religious, rather it was and is wherever one is at any given moment and concerns what one is doing in that and every moment. Discipleship, as we've often stated, is learning to live my life as Jesus would live it were he living in my place, meaning that it isn't limited to what we do "in church," as it were—obviously there are implications of this for how we live with each other as sisters and brothers in common faith—but most of our lives are lived apart from these gatherings which means that discipleship is formed and practiced in the course of our daily lives. It isn't the purview of a few who desire or are in what we would call full-time Christian service. It is the call to follow Jesus in all of life, no matter our vocation, our family situation, our social standing, our particular abilities, or our resources.

This is at the heart of what the early Christian leader Paul meant when he wrote to the Christ followers in Colossae saying, "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Whatever is all inclusive—this is not whatever you do in church, this is whatever you do, period. Jesus came to redeem creation and all within it. Because Jesus was faithful to his call, all of creation is redeemed. When you and I are faithful to our call, that redemption is realized through our presence and efforts to that end.

Since we are in such a painful moment in our national life, I believe now is a crucial time for us as followers of Jesus to live out our discipleship as never before. And because we spend so much of our time at work, I want to shape the rest of our time together today around the idea of discipleship in our work lives. I am including in this group those among us who are retired, for you also invest time in volunteer work and causes, and I'm also including in this group those among us who don't work outside the home—the kind of work involved in managing a family and household is every bit as demanding as being employed outside the home—and the principles of discipleship apply as much to these groups as to those who engaged in a profession, a career, or any type of vocation. Every vocation is included, at all levels of employment—whether you are an owner, an employee, in upper or middle management, administrative support, in the shipping department, in delivery, or sales, whether

you produce goods or provide services, in every field including government, education, science, medicine, commerce, the legal field, technology, athletics, finance, or the arts.

Work as a whole is good—it was created by God and it exists to promote the good of humanity. Its variety reflects the diversity of individuals and its various expressions reflect the distribution of labor that woven together promote the good of humanity. As we consider the redemption of creation, we realize that work is a component of creation meaning that it too is redeemed and is a place where discipleship occurs and its pursuit by followers of Jesus is a means of glorifying God. Now this isn't always apparent because we're still living in a fallen world—redemption is a work in progress and there are some aspects of this that are further along in that process than others. And while we're not always in a position to move that process along as quickly as we might hope, we always bring ourselves to that place which means that the reign of God does come to bear on our place of work within the scope of our authority or responsibilities.

In bringing ourselves into the workplace as followers of Jesus, we realize that the particular skills or abilities we possess or have acquired, are themselves gifts from God who created the capacity for them within us. Using them to the best of our ability is a means of bringing glory to God. Beyond this, however, is the character we bring into that setting. Being a person of integrity, reliable, an encourager of others is an exercise of leadership based on influence. Coupled with values such as justice, truth, humility, gentleness, and concern for the well-being of the organization and those within it, we are able to be the light of Christ in that corner of creation. In assessing our impact as disciples at work, Dallas Willard helpfully suggests that we ask the question: what is the function of the work that I do, and how can it be work in the service of God? Since God's purpose for work is to promote the good of humanity, we're compelled to consider whether our work aligns with this, for we're doing it on behalf of God. If not, then we need to consider another line of work. If so, as disciples we're reminded that true service to God is never something we do entirely in our own strength, anything we do for God is something that is done in God's strength, so, to what degree do we invite God into the fabric of our work?

Again, Paul taught that through the Spirit of God, we have the mind of Christ, meaning that we have access to the mind of the Creator as we approach the issues that daily face us in our workplace. You can train yourself to purposefully include Christ into your work by simply asking, "What do you think about this matter, problem, or opportunity; how would you approach this; what outcome would you hope for; what resources would you use; what methods would you employ in this moment?" Christ is interested in what you do, and Christ knows how to do it. More than this alone, Christ has a vested interest in the outcome of what you do because it all serves his purpose—the good of humanity, the well-being of your community, the progress of redemption that moves along as your work succeeds. By regularly engaging in this kind of conversation with Christ, you will develop his perspective, you will see patterns emerge, you will acquire his insight and begin to easily move within the scope of his will for the work that you do. And you will discover that Christ uses your work to shape you as his follower—the challenges you face, the choices presented to you, the conflicts in relationships that arise—will bring to mind his teaching that guides your response.

Because we spend so much time at work, and because of the interactions we have on a regular basis with co-workers, clients, customers, supervisors, and direct reports, how we work and how we contribute to the climate of our workplace provides us with a built-in opportunity to demonstrate the sensibility of living under the reign of God. Discipleship is not so much about how we have mastered the teaching of Christ, but about how much the teaching of Christ has mastered us. It's not about how many Bible verses we've memorized or how well we grasp the intricacies of doctrine—as helpful as these can be. It's about how well we live in the rhythms of common life. As followers of Jesus, then, we make every effort to create a climate in our workplace that recognizes and honors the dignity of all persons, where there is respect for the industriousness of work—while we are at work, our efforts must be primarily directed to that work, for excellence in our work is a principal means for glorifying God. We are to be committed to the creation of value—whether in goods or services—which

has as its goal the common good both in the goods or services it provides and the reward it reaps for the organization. We strive to appreciate ingenuity in the workplace that improves the work that we do, and we give credit for accomplishment to those for whom it is due. And as those who live under the reign of God, we celebrate the positive outcomes of our work and that of our organizations, for we know whose purpose it serves. We live for an idea larger than ourselves, and as we live by the teaching of Christ in all aspects of our work, we become more than we could have imagined. A workforce energized in this way, will further the progress of redemption for it connects ordinary people to the power and blessing of God to whom belongs all glory. AMEN