



## ***Creative and Engaging Discipleship I***

### **Galatians 5:1-15**

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This summer, we are looking more closely at our mission statement, which claims, “We believe God is love and so we’re making a place for everyone to know that love.” The past couple weeks, we looked at the first of our three core values, which names that underlying our mission of “Making a Place for Everyone,” we are a *Welcoming and Nurturing Community*. We are called into greater inclusiveness and deeper connection with our broken and suffering world. If you missed those sermons, they are available on our website at [wsumc.com](http://wsumc.com) – I recommend you go back and read, listen, or watch the sermons as you have time.

This week and next week we look to our second core value, which names our foundational tenant of *Creative and Engaging Discipleship*. We are called into deeper relationship with God through prayer, worship, spirituality, and lived faith. Today, we are going to focus on the first half of this, looking at what it means to be founded on *creative* discipleship.

One of the great problems of our church culture, both throughout the denomination and throughout our country, is that we have too many dish sponge churches. Do you know what a dish sponge church is like? When you come in, they squeeze out all the dirty water in you and pump you full of clean water. You are rejuvenated, given new life, because after the ill is wrung out of you, they pump you up with the law that gives life to the faithful. To create this sponge filling process, churches in the past half-century have focused on a Christian formation pipeline that necessitates worship and Sunday School, to fill you with the Biblical text, so that you’ll know all you need to know to be a faithful Christian.

Yet, we are seeing more and more critique of this sponge church model in the modern day. One of the biggest critiques of this model is that it’s focused solely on Christian formation instead of Christian discipleship. Phil Maynard, a Methodist Pastor and consultant, says he believes the Christian formation model has been the primary detriment of the church in the past 50 years. He receives a lot of critique, especially from our seminary professors, for this kind of criticism. But his thoughts certainly beg the question, what’s the difference between Christian formation and discipleship?

For Maynard and others, Christian formation is the process of teaching you what the Biblical text says, making sure you have a right theology, ensuring that your beliefs match the beliefs of your teaching institution. It’s marked by Bible drills and memorization techniques. It is designed to make sure you know how you’re supposed to live from an academic perspective. It teaches you the commandments, the instructions, and the historical tradition of the faith. Retired Pastor Bill Easum says that as the result of our focus on Christian formation over the past six to seven decades, “We have some of the best educated church members on the planet.”<sup>i</sup>

Christian formation is a good thing. Knowledge of the faith is critical. A right theology is healthy and necessary. But for the good it offers, Christian formation alone is not enough. Knowledge of is not sufficient.

Discipleship, on the other hand, is not focused on how much you know. Discipleship is focused on how well you practice and on mastering *lived* faith. If Christian formation takes place in a classroom, discipleship takes place in the community.

To direct our focus on this, consider our text from Galatians today.

Paul has spent the majority of his letter to the church in Galatia up to this point teaching the community of believers that they need to stop trying to do to the right thing, and to just be. He's hammered the point that there is nothing we can do as disciples to earn our salvation. He makes clear, we are saved because of the great love of God in Jesus Christ – nothing more and nothing less. Here are a couple of examples: Galatians 2:16 reads, "we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ." Then in Galatians 3:2, Paul begins, "Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? ... All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse ... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.'"

In the first four chapters, Paul isn't condemning knowledge of the law. In fact, he names the law served a vital purpose. In 3:19, Paul says, "The law was our disciplinarian before Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that Christ has come, we are not longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all Children of God through faith." Paul is not writing off Christian formation, he's not saying one shouldn't know the law, or to know how to live rightly. But because of the work of God in Christ, our focus of how to live faithfully must change. He spends four chapters explaining the benefits of learning, knowing, and believing fully that we are not responsible for our salvation, that it is Christ alone. And then in chapter 5, he takes it to the next step. If the first four chapters are about Paul saying, "Don't just do something, stand there!", here in chapter 5 he shifts his call to say, "Now you know, God has saved you, so act like it!"

To make his point, Paul focuses on this issue of circumcision because it was a great example of lawful obedience. Hear what he says, "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ... every man who lets himself be circumcised is obliged to obey the entire law. You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen from grace."

Paul isn't saying that following the law is wrong. He says you can believe the law is what matters most, but in that case, Christ will be of no help for you. If you're going to say the law is whereby you are saved, you better keep the *full* law. If you want to stick to the law as that by which you'll be saved, you will be held accountable to the entirety of the law.

But, Paul goes on to say, that's not the way it is in Christ. "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

The gentiles, to whom Paul is writing, have allowed themselves to be misled. "In reality what they are doing is to misunderstand the law, making it into something ultimate rather than penultimate."<sup>ii</sup> Paul is not a fan of those who are trying to convince the gentiles that circumcision – that is, obedience to the law – is what matters most. He has some choice words for those who are speaking this way. "Such persuasion," he says, "does not come from the one who calls you. Whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty."

The law, the knowledge of what is right and wrong, the historical application of the law in Christian context – these are the focal points of Christian formation. They teach us of the Biblical foundation that has for centuries been the bedrock of our faith. I cannot and will not say that knowledge of our faith and Christian history is wrong. I want you to know the foundations of our faith – I want you to have an accurate understanding of the Biblical text. If these things didn't matter to me, I wouldn't stand up here and preach from the Biblical text each week. But admittedly, Christian formation in this frame of understanding is not what I believe Christ demands of us as his followers. Christ doesn't call us to "Go and make knowledgeable Christians who know every facet of the law in all the world." Christ says, "Go and make disciples of all persons." We'll touch more on this text and the great commission next week.

But looking at our text today, if in verses 1-12, Paul is saying, stop worrying about the law, in verse 13-15 he's telling us what to do instead. He says, "You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. The full law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Paul saying we are free is not just a promise of the gospel, it's a missional cause. We have been freed **so that** we might make radical love possible in every opportunity we have to share it. "[The call to perfect freedom] carries obligation to neighbor as well as to God, to invest ourselves in the community of faith."<sup>iii</sup> This is the task of discipleship – learning to use the freedom we have because of Christ to love one another.

Bishop Sharma Lewis has set a vision for our Virginia Annual Conference. She says that as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are "Life-long learners influencing others to serve." We cannot cease to know the great love of God; we cannot cease to engage in Christian formation. We have to continually learn about God's goodness, and our freedom because of Christ's sacrifice. But knowledge of God is only worthwhile as it compels, calls, motivates, and moves us to show up in our places of work, in our neighborhoods, in our homes, in our communities to love one another.

This is discipleship – being freed by Christ for the purpose of going forth to share the love of God with one another.

So then, how do we, at Washington Street, live out this core value of *Creative Discipleship*?

Creativity means the use of the imagination or original ideas. The joy of being freed by Christ to love means we have an empty slate to consider how can we be faithful disciples. We have the luxury and the joy of using our imagination and originality to figure out, how do we go about loving one another? How do we want to exercise and put into action the faith we have in Christ, that God is love, and that everyone is meant to know that love?

Looking in recent years, here's a couple of examples:

In 2010, the church opened the first breakfast ministry in this community. For nearly 8 years, the church has opened every Monday morning from 6-8 am to serve breakfast to the underserved in our community. Since then, two other churches have started serving breakfast during the week, and our hope is to open a fourth morning with the next year. There was a need in the community, and instead of restricting possibilities of how to respond, we allowed our creativity to find a way to utilize the gifts and space we have to serve within the community.

To help that ministry, just a few weeks ago, Dana and Christina in our Sewing Fellowship thought, why don't we make and sell coffee holders at Misha's – cause you know, I love me some Misha's! – and in just a few week's time (literally, in less than 3 weeks) we've already received over \$100 in donations. There's a sign that tells people what Open Table is all about, and it gives the opportunity to participate or to donate. That's ingenuity at it's finest! If you have a gift of sewing, use it as a disciple to share God's love in the community by bringing awareness of how God is creating space for everyone to encounter such love!

Paul says to do things the old fashioned way, just because that's how it's always been done, leads one away from Christ. He says what matters in faith is working through love. So I can only wonder, what does that look like today? ... Better yet, what does that look like tomorrow?

We've got a group in the church who's discerning with some others in the community about supporting some unaccompanied minors who live in our community and attend our local schools. The teens are supporting themselves, renting rooms, working jobs, and trying to get an education. So our group is trying to figure out, how can we use the gifts and resources God has blessed us with to positively impact the lives of these students? How do we share God's love with them in a meaningful and lasting way? How can we be a blessing in their lives?

We just had our second Parent's Night Out event of the year last night. A new way to offer space for the children of our community to gather with one another, and to give their parents a breather. This is not normal – a lot of churches don't do this kind of stuff, especially with children. It's too taxing on the building, kids are messy, it's a lot to clean up, the wear you out.

But when you're called to be creative, and to be disciples who are sharing love with others, you realize parents need this. So we create a space for them.

Speaking of this building – we have a great building, fully – almost fully – renovated. I've got requests coming in every week to use this building. We've got a group of housing authority staff from around the region holding a conference here in September. We've been asked to again be a host of the Missional Alliance conference next Spring. Kyle, Melissa and I are talking about hosting a community organ concert series this Advent. We're opening up for First Night again, and we'll be out front handing out water bottles and providing space for kids to create artwork during the Art Festival in just a couple months. All of these activities are going to require you, the disciples of Washington Street UMC, to be present to welcome people, to connect with people, to share in community with the people who live in our neighborhoods.

Discipleship today is not going to be what it has been in past years. We aren't *just* going to offer Bible studies and hope people show up. We are going to find ways to create a space for all to know they are welcome, because we believe God is love, and we're making a place for everyone to know that love. That's going to take creativity, ingenuity, and originality. It's going to take **you** being a creative disciple, sharing of your ideas, gifts, passions, resources, and time, so that we can live into the call of who God has created us to be. We are to be a presence of the love of God in this space, in this time, in new ways. So I invite to come to worship and to the church, not as a dish sponge, hoping to simply fill yourself up with great knowledge of God and the Biblical text, but as a disciple of the resurrected Lord, who comes yearning to respond to Christ's faith that offers you the ultimate love, that you may share that love with the world.

For the glory of God, may we be creative disciples. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Bill Easum. *Dinosaurs to Rabbits*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Nancy Elizabeth Bedford. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible. Galatians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

<sup>iii</sup> Carl E. Holts-Martin. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.