



## Creative and *Engaging* Discipleship II

Matthew 20:16-20

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This summer, we are looking more closely at our mission statement, which defines our work together as a community of faith. *We believe God is love, and we're making a place for everyone to know that love.* Over the past few weeks, we've identified some of the underlying values of this mission. This mission is built upon three core tenants. The first names that we are a *Welcoming and Nurturing Community*. We are called to more intentional care for one another by establishing a more nurturing faith community, and we are called to greater inclusiveness and deeper connection with our broken and suffering world.

The second, is that we believe in *Creative and Engaging Discipleship*. We are called into deeper relationship with God through prayer, worship, spirituality, and lived faith. Last week we talked about what discipleship is, and we considered how discipleship can be creative. Creative discipleship doesn't confine its possibilities to the methods and models of discipleship from the past, but allows for the freedom we have in Christ to move in new ways to give us the opportunity to connect with our community, in the modern day, in ways to make God's love known to all.

Today, we focus on the second half of this core value, asking, what does *engaging* discipleship look like?

As I've shared before, throughout my teenage years, and into a year of college, football was a primary passion of mine. It was the focus of my efforts, and what ended up taking me to college. There are few things I don't know and love about the sport of football.

A couple weeks ago, while visiting family in Georgia, Jen and I went up into the North Georgia mountains to visit Helen – a quaint town, designed and built like an Alpine town from Germany. The German motif is their shtick. We had the chance to take the boys tubing down the Chattahoochee River, and visit my favorite candy shop in the world, the Hansel and Gretel shop, where they make fresh fudge, chocolate covered everything, and truffles. We had lunch under the bridge, where all the tubers come floating by, at the Troll Tavern. While we were at lunch, I saw a guy who I went to high school with, who played on the football team with me.

To my knowledge, he didn't recognize me, and I didn't interrupt him to see if he remembered me. He was a smaller guy on the team; he wasn't the fastest, he wasn't the strongest, and to my recollection, he didn't see much playing time during the games on Friday nights. His primary role was on the scout team.

Do you know the scout team is? The scout team is the group of players that the starting team goes against in practice. The scout team has the role of mimicking what the upcoming opponent will do, so that the starters have a chance to go against the schemes of the opposing offense or defense. Scout team members tend not to be the strongest players – it usually consists of backups or third string players. As backups, they are often trying to prove themselves worthy of a starting spot, so the scout team players had a reason to do well, to play hard, and to give the starters a challenge.

But for more than just their own possible promotion, the scout team's ability to challenge the starters in practice was a factor in the team's ability to win on Friday nights. The coaches used to chastise the scout team when players weren't working hard enough, saying – with the colorful words removed – “How are we ever going to get better as a team if you aren't willing to make the person across from you work harder during the week?”

It didn't matter how public their role, it didn't matter how talented a player, it didn't matter if they ever saw the field on Friday night – if every person on the team, starter or scout, wasn't involved, engaged, and giving their best, collectively, the team failed.

Now I know, discipleship isn't much like football. I'm not trying to equate anyone in the church to being on the 'scout team' for Washington Street. We're not trying to beat people in the community into submission so that they'll come and join us, and we're not competing against other churches or other faiths. We're not screaming French obscenities at each other when someone fails to make a conversion of a friend or neighbor. We're not calling hail marys as a last ditch effort to win at faith ... at least not in the Methodist Church.

Yet, the necessity of everyone being engaged for us to be faithful to our mission is just as true. It's not just important for all to be engaged because we have a mission, and we want to succeed at making a place for everyone to know God's love. This tenant of everyone being engaged takes its roots in the call of Christ himself, who named such corporate engagement as a foundational part of discipleship.

Matthew 28:19-20 is often referred to as the 'Great Commission.' Many of you have served, or are serving in, or you have served around the military. Perhaps more than most people, you are familiar with the term *commissioning*. You know that there's a difference between giving someone a command, and commissioning someone. Rev. David Lose articulates it this way, “When someone commands you to do something, it's all on you. You must either obey or disobey, succeed or fail, but no matter how it turns out, it's on you.”<sup>i</sup> Commands are used when parents tell their kids to go clean up their rooms. Commands are when teachers give you homework to do. Commands are when the boss gives you a project, and says she expects it back on her desk by 10 the next morning. You are told what to do and left on your own to accomplish or fail at the task.

Commissioning is different. Again, Rev. Lose says, “When you are commissioned you are not merely commanded but also equipped, empowered, and given the necessary authority to

accomplish your duty.”<sup>ii</sup> Break the word down, and you see how this plays out. Commission comes from the Latin prefix, *com*, and the root word *mittere*. *Mittere*, which we have taken as the word *mission* in English, means “to let go,” or “to send.” The prefix, *com*, means “with,” or “together.” So to commission someone means to send them out with authority, or with power.

When Jesus is commissioning his disciples, he’s not simply commanding them to go and make disciples, as if we have the ability to do on our own. Jesus is commissioning then, entrusting and sending them out on a mission with the promise that he is with us. “Go baptize and make disciples, and know that I with you always, to the end of the age.” We don’t do this alone – thankfully we are not expected to do this work without the empowerment, strength, and presence of Christ with us.

Knowing that we do not do this alone, it becomes evident that there is no one incapable of this work, for the work is not dependent on our ability. We are all gifted with ability because Christ goes with us – that is the promise of Christ, “I am with you.”

Now, some will say, ‘Sure, but Christ is speaking to the disciples. They were pre-qualified to do this work. Christ hand selected this group because they were already capable.’

Qualified? Capable? Did you read the first few verses in this passage?

Back up in the story. Prior to our text this morning, Jesus has been crucified, died, and was buried in the grave. According to Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus rose from the dead, made an appearance to some of the women, who have run to tell the disciples what had happened. The disciples have evidently been told to go meet Jesus on the mountain, because the next thing we read is verse 16, which reads, “The eleven disciples went to Galilee,” (eleven because, well, Judas) ... the eleven went “to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.” So they’ve gathered and have gone to the mountain. We don’t know much about what they are expecting to find there, but they get to the mountain and Jesus, in resurrected form, is there. “When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.”

*Some doubted.*

This makes sense right? I mean, Jesus, in front of the eyes of the masses, was flogged, beaten, crucified and buried by the Romans. The Romans have a knack for this kind of execution – they know what they’re doing. I’m sure that in the history of the Roman empire up to this point, not a single person of those they have crucified previously have disappeared from the grave, only to be seen walking the earth later. It makes sense then that some of the disciples, arriving atop that mountain, would be skeptical that this was really Jesus in front of them. They thought ... no, they *knew* him to be dead – but here is his before them, alive.

Now, in the past, Jesus has belittled his doubters. When Peter failed to walk on water, Jesus criticized him for his lack of faith. When the disciples woke Jesus up on the boat because the storm was brewing and they were scared, he criticized them for their lack of faith. When the

disciples wondered if Jesus was mad at them for not having enough bread, he criticized their lack of understanding and belief. When the disciples were fearful and unsure if they would have the food and clothing they needed, Jesus criticized them for their lack of faith in God's promise to provide sustenance. Jesus has not exactly been kind to those who have doubted.

And yet, here, in the presence of the resurrected Lord, some doubted and Jesus doesn't rebuke them. Jesus doesn't chastise them. Jesus doesn't even call them out.

Instead of responding negatively to any of them, Jesus sends the whole lot out together. He commissions them all, those who believed and those who doubted, to go forth as one body to baptize and disciple. Doubting does not disqualify them from being in the presence of the resurrected Christ, nor does it disqualify them from being a part of what God is doing in the world. It doesn't disqualify them, and it doesn't disqualify us.

God does not look to find the most qualified and capable people and command them to go do the work of God in the world. God doesn't even wait for those he sends to have perfect faith. The ability to do the work is not dependent upon our abilities or our perfection because we are not sent to do the work on our own. We are sent with – commissioned – to do the work with the promise that we do it *with* Christ.

What does it take then, if we don't have to be qualified, or have perfect faith? What does it take to make a place for everyone if at times we will doubt, and have hardships, and fail?

To be faithful to our mission, it takes the body – each and everyone – being engaged.

Whenever someone new comes into the life of the church and expresses an interest to be a part of the church, to make a profession of faith to join the church, or to transfer their membership from another church, I always express my thoughts on what such a commitment means. All are invited, member or not, to participate in the God's work through the church. To be a member of the church is to publicly proclaim your belief in Christ, your support of the mission of this faith community, and your desire to be a part of what God is doing in our midst. To make such a public claim is to say, at a minimum, that you long to engage in the work of the church and to be part of the body.

There are three commitments I think are required for engaging discipleship (whether you are a member of the church or not). The first commitment is to be present. It's hard for a community to share in faith together if they are never together. I ask everyone to be present on Sundays as often as you can. I know we are all busy people – we travel for work and pleasure, we stay out late on Saturdays and Sunday mornings come early, and there are a few local sports teams who (for some reason) schedule games on Sundays ... but to be engaged is to be present. I want everyone to have a small group with whom they can connect, share, and be held accountable. Part of being engaged means seeking growth as a disciple, and I firmly believe sharing in small groups with one another is the best place for you to grow as a disciple. Be present – be here physically. And be present – bring yourself. Don't try to be someone you're not. I know one

church who has a statement that says “we are a church where it’s ok to not be ok.” Be you, and be ready to encounter a God who forgives, strengthens, comforts, and offers mercy. Be present.

Second, I ask everyone to make a commitment to give. Give as you are able to give. Perhaps what you have to give is time; perhaps what you have to give is knowledge; perhaps what you have to give is experience; or perhaps its wealth. Contrary to popular belief, you’re not limited to giving in any one area – you’re invited to consider how you can give across the spectrum of possibilities. To be engaged as disciples is to give. The church functions only because we respond to God in giving. Your giving of time, talent, and treasure, is what makes the work of the church possible. So give.

Finally, I ask everyone to make a commitment to serve in the community. How does your knowledge of God’s love lead you to share that love with others? Is it packing and distributing food at ALIVE’s last Saturday food event? Is it preparing and serving meals at the Carpenter’s Shelter? Is it packaging health kits for conference? Is it stuffing book bags for students? Is it opening up the computer lab? Is it tutoring or offering relationship to those who are underserved? How are you finding time to respond to the knowledge you have of God’s love, so that others may also know such sacrificial love through you? How are you making a space where people can be made whole, given opportunity, and encouraged to know God’s love themselves? Serve.

Engaging discipleship is about showing up, being present, being generous, and responding to the love of God, which we seek to make known for all. For the glory of God, that we may make a place for all to know God’s love, may we all be engaged disciples. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved July 23, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.