

**MESSAGE: “A Disciple’s Path”**

**Text: Matthew 28:19-20; Ephesians 4:14-15**

**Shift #3: Membership to Discipleship**

**Purpose:** the purpose of this message is to distinguish between ‘membership’ and ‘discipleship,’ and to invite those present into a faith-growing journey and relationship.

For the past couple of Sundays, we have tangled with a book called “*Shift: Helping Congregations Back into the Game of Effective Ministry*,” by Phil Maynard. The ideas of the book are drawn from the depths of scripture and challenge us to go the distance in faithful response to Christ’s mission. Our Church Council worked with this book before my arrival as pastor, and, at the request of our District Superintendent, I have been asked to continue the conversation on the five shifts identified.

The first was a shift from fellowship toward hospitality. The second was a shift from ‘worship as an event’ to ‘living a worshipful life.’ Today, we consider a shift from membership to discipleship. What does it mean to be a member of something? It means that we have a part in the whole. I am, for example, a member of a fitness center. There are certain rights and privileges I can expect from the monthly fee I pay. I have the right to use the equipment whenever the fitness center is open, to make use of the water fountains, showers and lockers, and to request assistance from experienced trainers who can help me achieve fitness success.

Those who are members of a church also have a part in the whole. They can expect that worship opportunities and Christian education classes will be offered, that people in crisis will be helped and that pastoral care will be available when children are baptized, engaged couples want to marry or when deceased loved ones need to be buried. Actually, whether they are members of a local church or just attending, they can anticipate these things being available. Membership affords a sense of ‘belonging,’ and almost all benefit from feeling like they are part of something bigger than self.

As members of an organization, we can decide what level of participation we want to have. I can go to the fitness center seven times a week or once-a-year; the choice is mine to make. I have two brothers who are members of the Grange. Both go to meetings fairly regularly, but one chose to become a local officer, then a state officer, then a national officer. He and his wife traveled all over the country in behalf of the Grange, and a few years ago were recognized as National Grange Couple of the Year. Members choose their level of involvement.

Discipleship, though, is another creature altogether. One source defines a disciple as ‘a person who subscribes to the teachings of a master and assists in spreading them.’ A Christian disciple, then, is one who subscribes to the teachings of Jesus and assists in spreading them. It is the lion’s share of our mission as a church. If you consult the global website of the United Methodist Church, you will see that we exist “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” The purpose emerges from the words of Jesus, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

The implications of this are counter-cultural and revolutionary. Unlike most organizations, the Church exists not so much for its members, but its non-members. We are charged with the responsibility of reaching the whole world with the love of Jesus. Membership decides what place God will have in my life; discipleship discovers what purpose my life has in the heart of God. To put it another way, “Ask not what Christ can do for you, ask what you can do for Christ.”

Disciples follow the Master. Since Jesus often taught through parable, let’s follow his example by borrowing a parable drawn from a class on evangelism by Brent Hunter. On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little lifesaving station. It was just a hut, really, with just one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought of themselves, went out in all sorts of weather, day and night, searching for the lost. Their relentless effort saved many lives. Some of the saved, and others, impressed with the mission, wanted to join the lifesaving station by offering their time and financial resources. New boats were purchased, new crews were trained, and the lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members lamented that the building was crude and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable place should be provided for those plucked from the sea. They built a new station, replaced emergency cots with beds and appointed it with suitable furniture. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for the fellowship of members. Fewer members wanted to participate in actual life saving missions, so they hired life boat crews to do the work.

Shortly thereafter, a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boat loads of cold, wet and half-drowned people. Most were dirty and sick, some had a different color of skin, and some spoke a foreign language. The beautiful club was messed up pretty badly, so the property committee had a shower house built outside the club where victims could clean up before coming inside.

**At the next meeting, there was a split in the membership between those who wanted to stop the lifesaving activities and those who insisted on returning to their original purpose. The reformers were voted down and told they could build another lifesaving station further down the coast. That is what they did.**

**As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes as that of the old. It evolved into a club, and another lifesaving station was founded. If you visit the seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent, but most of the people drown!**

**The parallel between the lifesaving station and the reality of many churches is not difficult to perceive. Churches that are all about ‘numbers on a roll’ substitute membership for discipleship. To be candid, discipleship is far more invasive. Billy Graham describes it like this, “Salvation is free, but discipleship costs everything you have.”**

**“Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you,” James and John once asked Jesus, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus replied, “You do not know what you are asking...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”**

**When he called his disciples, Jesus didn’t say, “Peter, I think you would learn a lot by taking a class on ‘how to win friends and influence people.” No, he said, “Follow me!” Disciples follow Jesus by becoming more like Jesus. It isn’t devotion to a church, but devotion to a Savior. It isn’t a ‘take it or leave it’ but a, ‘Where else would I go? You have the words of eternal life!’ Discipleship grows from relationship—relationship with Jesus for sure, but also from relationship with a spiritual friend or mentor.**

**It didn’t take me long, after arriving here, to see, for example, that Russ Peppe could teach me a good many things about pastoral effectiveness and help me grow as a disciple of Jesus. Fortunately for me, he has agreed to work with me toward that end. How about you? Is there a person in your life who can help you grow as a disciple of Jesus? I know that some of you have found such a gift, but I pray that every single one of you will benefit from such a relationship.**

**One last thing. We began our message today by distinguishing between membership and discipleship. As I was reading the history of ‘Methodism in Auburn’ this week, I came across an 1883 snapshot of discipleship that nourishes us still. The previous year, in 1882, Rev. Thomas Tyrie believed it was simply a matter of time before Methodism would end in**

**this area and advised members to join other churches. The following year, Rev. Ira Sprague was appointed as pastor, and he believed what was really needed was a new church building. He devoted half his salary towards a new church, purchasing, on his own account, the lots where the church and parsonage would be built on High Street. We worship God in this church today, with no small debt, to the discipleship of Ira Sprague.**