

Come and See
Matthew 28:11-20
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Melinda Giese

When Tom and I started dating 13 years ago, I was not a Christian. And as our relationship progressed, I wondered whether it was a good idea for me to marry someone who was a Christian when I wasn't. I wasn't concerned about going to church or raising children in a church. I could handle all of that. It was the unknown in Christian life that concerned me, the fact that Christians were supposed to follow where Jesus led them, and who knew where that might be. My specific fear was that Tom would decide at some point in the future that he was called to be a missionary in Africa, and I would be stuck going with him. I should also add that this fear was not actually based in reality. Never once did Tom give any indication that being an African missionary was something he was interested in doing. But I figured that there was no way that Tom could know where God might call him in the future, so it was important that I consider all the possibilities. And for me, the negatives of being married to an Africa missionary were quite numerous. Just for starters: 1) I don't like bugs 2) I don't like the heat 3) I would be constantly worried about getting malaria and checking my bed net for holes 4) At the time, I didn't think Christianity was all that convincing myself, which seemed like a bit of an issue for a missionary wife.

Of course, I did marry Tom in spite of the extremely remote chance that one day I might have to go to Africa as a missionary wife. And Tom made a leap of faith too in marrying not only a non-Christian but also someone with an active imagination who would occasionally invent things to worry about. But I think my strange concern that Tom could one day be called to missionary work was partly based on a somewhat loose interpretation of the text for today. In the book of Matthew, Jesus's last instructions to the disciples are to "go 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." At some point when I was younger, I think this verse was explained to me as meaning that one of your primary jobs as a Christian was to convert others to Christianity, particularly people in other countries. Now I am not criticizing missionary work or missionaries in any way. But I don't think that's what this verse is about.

A more accurate translation of this verse is "As you go, make disciples" or "while you are going, make disciples." Go is not the command from Jesus, making disciples is the command. And furthermore, the Greek word that is translated "nations" as in "make disciples of all nations" can also be translated as "ethnic groups" or "people of every kind." So going isn't the point and going to other countries isn't the point. The main point of this verse is simply to make disciples of people of every kind. You could do the work of making disciples right where you are and still be following Jesus's instructions. If we accept that this is one of the things that Jesus wants us to do, then the first question we have to ask is, what exactly is a disciple? And then we can't help but ask ourselves, am I a disciple?

"What is a disciple?" is not a simple question and people don't always agree on the answer. But I can safely say that being a Christian at this point in history is not exactly the same thing as being a disciple. When people say they are a Christian today, usually what they mean

is that they believe certain things about Jesus. When we say someone is a disciple, we mean that they don't just believe in Jesus, they have also made a commitment to follow him. These things are not the same. You can believe in Jesus and live a life that looks a lot like the life of someone who isn't a Christian. But when you commit to following wherever and however Jesus leads you, your life is guaranteed to look and feel different.

I asked a few friends what being a disciple means to them. One said, "Being a disciple to me means we make a decision to accept Jesus as our Lord - instead of other 'Lords' like money, status, power, desire, etc. The way Jesus lived (in context) becomes our example for living as opposed to what we learn from the culture around us." Being a disciple means we have to do a certain amount of swimming against the tide of popular culture. There's no way around it. Following Jesus as a disciple is now and has always been counter cultural. As an example, who does our culture consider to be blessed? The rich, the famous, the attractive, and the powerful. Movie stars, CEOs, rock stars, and celebrities. These are the people our culture tells us we should admire. And do we remember who Jesus considers to be blessed? The poor, the meek, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Most of the time, these are not the people you see on the cover of a magazine.

For me, being a disciple also means that Jesus is the Lord of everything in your life. Everything. And so you have to consider what that means for you in terms of how you spend your time and your money, how you treat people and who you need to forgive, how you serve others and how you serve God. You have to think long and hard about your gifts and talents and what God might be asking you to do with them. Suddenly, your faith is about more than whether or not you come to church on Sunday. Your faith becomes a whole lot bigger than that.

I have to point out, when I was writing this sermon, it occurred to me that if I were listening to this and wasn't a disciple already, I would think why on earth would I **want** to be a disciple? What if I was perfectly happy with my faith just the way it is? What if I don't want my life to change in any way? What if being a disciple sounds like its too much work or too frightening or just too difficult? And I would say, then you may not be ready. Yet.

It takes time to be ready for this step. Personally, I like being in control, I don't like uncertainty, and I'm not all that comfortable with change. As I mentioned earlier, if I don't have enough worries in my life, I have been known to invent some. I initially thought discipleship was a frightening prospect too. But over time, I slowly became more and more dissatisfied with my life the way it was. I started to become aware that there was a missing piece to my life; there was an emptiness there that I couldn't fill. I didn't know quite what it was, but it had to do with feeling like I wasn't the person I was meant to be and furthermore, that I really didn't have the foggiest idea of what I needed to do to become that person. I felt a general lack of purpose and I also knew that I had gifts that I wasn't using and didn't know how to use. I felt guilty that I might actually be wasting the life that God had given me.

Jesus doesn't appear in the flesh and call us by name anymore. Those first disciples actually met Jesus and he looked right at them and said, "Follow me." And they did. I imagine that hearing Jesus call you by name into a life with him was a powerful experience, and one you could leave everything for. You could just set down your fishing nets and go. But even though we don't hear the sound of Jesus's physical voice anymore, I believe Jesus can still call us

through ordinary events in our lives, through the voices of others, and through that small, persistent voice inside ourselves that asks, “Is this all there is?”

Christians as well as non-Christians ask themselves that question. “Is this all there is?” I was asking myself this question while I was attending church regularly and serving on the children’s ministry team. I had been in a small group and taught Sunday School and I was still asking, “God, is this it for my life? Isn’t there something more?” None of those church activities helped with that stubborn and painful missing piece in my life. I was busier and I’d made some new friends, but I didn’t feel any different. If I was living the abundant life Jesus promised, then why didn’t it feel abundant to me?

There are a variety of ways to become a disciple; there’s no one size fits all formula. But for me, the abundance I was looking for, and that Jesus promises us, started with making a decision in prayer to trust God with my whole life, and to do whatever Jesus wanted me to do. And soon after that decision, I had an experience of feeling called by God to speak in church. And I felt called to do this despite the fact that I’d never taken a decent Bible study class and had no experience in public speaking. I was also very nervous about public speaking and had gone out of my way in the past to avoid this kind of experience altogether. Fortunately, no one asked to see my resume or checked into whether I was in any way qualified to be a lay speaker. Because my qualifications were sketchy at best. But when I trusted God and began moving in this new direction despite my fears, that’s when my life started to look and feel different. I didn’t realize it at the time, but that’s when I feel that I started to experience life as a disciple.

One of the best discipleship lines in the Bible is in the book of John when Philip tells his friend Nathanael about meeting Jesus and believing that Jesus from Nazareth is the Messiah. It’s also one of the few jokes that made it into the New Testament. Nathaniel’s response is, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathaniel is cracking a joke at the expense of Jesus’s home town. But Philip’s response to Nathaniel is no joke. He simply says, “Come and see.” Come and see what Jesus is like. Come and see what its like to follow him.

I think that Philip’s response continues to be the best advice a disciple can give to someone else. The best sermons and books on discipleship do the same thing. They’re all meant to encourage others to come and see what its like to trust God and follow Jesus. The point isn’t to discuss or debate the concept of discipleship. The point is to convince more people to become disciples themselves.

Disciples aren’t special people. Every single person here could be a disciple. And some already are. You don’t need a secret decoder ring. You don’t need to have read the whole bible cover to cover. God doesn’t expect you to have everything figured out. All it takes is your choice to follow Jesus however and wherever he leads you in your life. I don’t know what that would look like for you. And you will never know either unless you take that step in faith. In the end, you just have to come and see for yourself.