

## **Homily – The Practices of a Disciple**

**Rob Keim**

**June 25, 2023 - St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church**

This week, and for the next two weeks, the important theological theme of discipleship emerges in our readings from the Gospel according to Matthew. Disciple just means learner, and it is important to note that discipleship is a journey that includes learning, which is distinct from being an apostle, or a messenger, who is sent to declare a message. The focus for a disciple is to try to understand what Jesus is seeking to teach us, and what we are to learn from it. Then a disciple takes what they have learned, internalizes it, and uses it to form the actions of their daily living. And I dare say that a disciple of Jesus lives differently than others. Jesus had a lot to say about gratitude, forgiveness, and how we care for one another. When we live as a disciple of Jesus we let go of our need for control, approval, and security. Or, at least we are on the path to giving up these things, a path that has us moving into healthy loving relationship with God. And, we might like to think that our journey as a disciple will be smooth sailing and conflict free.

However, throughout history, there have been negative consequences for those who work to be the hands and feet and voice of Jesus. There is hardship for those who live the way of Jesus in a way that is authentic to the gospels. And I'm not just talking about the persecution of Christians in other parts of the world. Here in twenty-first century America we lift up and reward those who follow what I will call "Christianity-lite." Christianity-lite is comfortable. It is socially acceptable. We get approval and support from family and friends for Christianity-lite because no one wants to see us live in a way that is truly authentic to the gospels. Jesus knew this. Two thousand years ago Jesus shared the words that we have in today's difficult Gospel readings. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword... and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me." As I said earlier a disciple of Jesus lives differently than others. A journey into discipleship means we must confront and defeat the ugly stuff we have in our own lives and in general society. It also means that we will need to bear the cross of Jesus. There will be times when allegiance to Jesus causes a crisis of loyalty and forces a decision. The gospels shake up values, rearrange priorities, and re-orient goals. So, is it any wonder that we can build up trauma on our journey as a disciple?

So, what are we to do with the trauma? How do we keep going when these negative consequences and hardships weigh us down? Today's passage reminds us that none of this negative stuff can impact the soul. As God even cares for a sparrow, God even cares more about us. There is comfort in that. We should always remember that the Holy Spirit will be present with us, and will never abandon us.

Now, I want to spend the rest of this sermon equipping you to overcome trauma and bear hardship. Instead of ignoring the cost of being a disciple, I want to help you bear the cost so that you can embrace the authentic journey with Jesus. Over the centuries, wise ones have developed a variety of spiritual practices that help us through the ups and downs of life. And, spiritual practices are one of the few active things we can do to enable our journey to resurrection and the True Self. Here is a list of practices or exercises that is broader, than our traditional list of practices.

The spiritual practices of stillness include centering, silence, quieting the mind, and mediation.

The generative spiritual practices include gratitude, loving kindness or compassion meditation, contemplative reading, beholding, visualization, and welcoming.

The creative spiritual practices include music and singing, improvisation, journaling, and contemplative arts.

The active spiritual practices include pilgrimages to areas where social justice issues are highlighted, activism and volunteering, vigils and marches, and bearing witness.

The relational spiritual practices include deep listening, council circles, storytelling, dialogue and resourcing.

The movement spiritual practices include walking meditation, labyrinth walking, yoga, dance, aikido, T'ai chi, Quigong, and tracking.

And finally the ritual and cyclical spiritual practices include establishing a sacred or personal space, retreats, and ceremonies and rituals. We Episcopalians are especially good at this last one, ceremonies and rituals.

Spiritual practices and exercises are important because anytime we want to improve something, we must practice it. And now to further equip you let me do a deeper dive into three of these spiritual practices or exercises.

First, the practice of noticing sensations in the body is called "Tracking." Normally, we tend to use feeling and emotion words to describe what state we are in. For instance when someone asks us, "How are you today?" we might say, "I'm feeling good," or "I'm feeling sad." Rarely do we spend time acknowledging the physical sensations that are associated with "feeling good" or "feeling sad." We can learn to do so, however, and developing this skill is enormously helpful in allowing us to know what state our body is in. Being able to recognize a warm sensation in the chest radiating out, or butterflies in one's stomach, or the tightening or loosening of muscles gives us

information about the body. As we learn about our bodies, we develop “body literacy.” We notice that our bodies are experiencing a whole host of sensations at every moment. Each sensation is giving us information about the state of our body. And when the sensation is bad we can shift our attention back to good sensations. When we use the spiritual practice of Tracking, we calm the body, and equip ourselves to be disciples of Jesus.

The second practice I want to share is a relational practice called Resourcing. This is a practice that is an effective way to heal the trauma that is stored within our bodies. With the Resourcing Spiritual Practice we come up with an external, internal or imagined resource that brings about a state of greater well-being, safety or security. A resource is something that will quickly help us feel good sensations in our bodies. External resources can be a memory, place or person that makes you feel better, or an activity such as jogging, biking or swimming, that gives you a sense of greater well-being while you are engaging in it. Internal resources can be a part of oneself, like a characteristic one has (such as a sense of humor) or a part of one’s body that is strong or healthy. Resources can be unique to each of us, and we can have multiple resources. So when we notice trauma has been triggered in our bodies we shift our thoughts and body sensations to a resource that causes good thoughts and sensations.

When I first started this spiritual practice of Resourcing, I used Ben the Dog as my resource. He was sitting at my feet, being cute, and as I thought of Ben the Dog I got that expansive light feeling. So for a few practices, I tried using Ben as my resource, and then I remembered that Ben is going to die at some point. Spiritual directors call this a split resource when you have both positive and not so positive thoughts. So, the next time I practiced Resourcing I thought of a prior pet, Samantha the Cat. At one time Samantha was lost for four days and I remember the joy when I found her in a bush on the other side of the townhouse complex. So, when my body started remembering trauma I would ground my thoughts on Samantha the Cat.

Then my spiritual director said I should have more than one resource, so I spent some time thinking about this. And finally, I decided to use Jesus as my resource. One might think that I would have come up with Jesus right away, but now when I do the spiritual practice of Resourcing, I imagine being with Jesus. I abide in his love. One nice thing about using Jesus as my resource is that I can place myself with him when he is teaching, walking on water, on the Cross, or after the empty tomb. I can abide in the boundless love of Jesus, and can use that love to help me heal from trauma and calm the body. Try it. Resourcing, especially when it is grounded in Jesus, equips us for the journey into discipleship.

And the third equipping practice is a generative spiritual exercise called Welcoming Prayer. Instead of resisting or fighting the ups and down of being a disciple we can follow the first step of the twelve-step program which is to embrace our powerlessness. And, a simple prayer brings this practice into the everyday circumstances of life when we are confronted by the world. While set-aside time for meditation is good for a lot of reasons it is truly valuable in rewiring our brains. Welcoming Prayer helps us find serenity through surrender in the midst of the messy, ordinary moments of daily living. When triggered or caught by something unpleasant, begin by simply being present to your feeling, experiencing it, not just mentally, but also emotionally and physically. Don't try to rationalize or explain the feeling, but witness it giving attention to this sensation. Welcome the feeling, speaking aloud, if you can, saying, "welcome, anger, fear, hunger, longing, or hurt." Repeat this as many times, as you need to truly sense yourself embracing and receiving the feeling. Finally, let go of the feeling, speaking these words. "I let go of my desire for security and survival. I let go of my desire for esteem and affection. I let go of my desire for power and control. I let go of my desire to change the situation." Welcoming Prayer can be an effective way of working through the cost of being a disciple.

Being a disciple of Jesus means we learn from him and use his teachings in our daily living. Yet those of the world do not want us to live a life that is authentic to the Gospels, because it calls us, and by extension them, to change our ways. Far too often the cost of being a disciple leads us to Christianity-lite. So, we all need spiritual practices that help us through the ups and downs of being a disciple of Jesus. Tracking, Resourcing, and Welcoming Prayer are three such spiritual practices. You were made to be in healthy loving relationship with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation. So, today, use spiritual practices to help you in your journey of being a disciple of Jesus.