

Daring to be Disciples  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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“Daring to be Disciples” Pilgrim Church UCC January 25, 2015—Third Sunday after Epiphany  
(Mark 1:14-20)

I’ve always been a fan of Dr. Seuss and appreciate *Oh, The Places You’ll Go!* which I could probably quote in every sermon. For those who aren’t familiar with the story, it’s Dr. Seuss’ wise and wonderful graduation tale where he speaks about going off on adventures in this Great Balancing Act we call life. At one point, all the roads are converging and the young protagonist is at a crossroads. We read, “You will come to a place where the streets are not marked. Some widows are lighted. But mostly they’re darked. A place where you could sprain both your elbow and chin! Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?” How much can you lose? How much can you win?”[1]

“Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?” This could just as easily be a line from the Gospels, especially when we look at Jesus calling the first disciples in Mark’s Gospel. These questions could’ve been swirling for Simon, Andrew, James, and John as Jesus asked them to follow him. “How much can you lose? How much can you win?”

Today we’ll cover discipleship. It’s a word that we throw around a lot in the Christian Church, and yet how do we understand the concept? A basic definition is a follower or student of a leader. We often refer to the Disciples as the first twelve followers of Jesus. But we’ve expanded the term in the Church to refer to all Christians as disciples of Jesus. To explore discipleship further, we can focus on it being both a task and an identity.

The Gospel of Mark is action-packed so it’s easy to see discipleship as a task. After all, Jesus passes along the Sea of Galilee and calls out to Simon and Andrew as they’re casting their nets, telling the brothers “follow me.” Immediately they leave their nets and comply. Jesus goes up the shoreline a bit and sees James and John mending their nets and calls out to them. They leave their dad back in the boat with the hired help and take off after Jesus. Notice how active this story is—casting nets, calling out, follow me, immediately, going a little farther, mending nets, calling them, leaving their father, following him. Christian discipleship isn’t passive. It’s something that we do, it’s a call to which we respond.

This speaks to life being about our actions, like Elizabeth Gilbert learned during the writing of her bestselling book *Eat, Pray, Love*. In the midst of her personal journey across Italy, India, and Indonesia, she heard a funny story in Italy about “a poor man who goes to church every day and prays before the statue of a great saint, begging, ‘Dear saint—please, please, please . . . give me the grace to win the lottery.’ This lament goes on for months. Finally the exasperated statue comes to life, looks down at the begging man and says in weary disgust, ‘My son—please, please, please . . . buy a ticket.’”[2]

Now please, please, please don’t hear this as me advocating gambling! It’s a good illustration of being active vs. passive in life. The truth is, you can’t win the lottery if you don’t buy a ticket. You can’t steal second base if you don’t take your foot off first. You can’t expect everyone in America to cheer for you to win the Super Bowl if you go around deflating footballs! I’m sorry, couldn’t resist. The point is, our actions matter and speak loudly. You cannot be a disciple of Jesus Christ if you hear, “Follow me” and just sit there happily mending your nets or casting them back into the sea. At some point, you get up to follow the One who is leading you to new life. You go out to witness to God’s love in the world.

Discipleship is a task—it's something that we do. Now, the great Christian scholar and historical Jesus expert Marcus Borg died this week at the age of seventy-two. He wrote and spoke for many people who've been wounded by the Church and urged them to meet Jesus again, as if for the first time. He became known for embracing mystery, especially in his later writings. Borg once reflected, "So, is there an afterlife, and if so, what will it be like? I don't have a clue. But I am confident that the one who has buoyed us up in life will also buoy us up through death. We die into God. What more that means, I do not know. But that is all I need to know."<sup>[3]</sup> Borg's willingness to say "I don't have a clue" about some weighty religious matters helped many people on their paths of discipleship. He wrote about the importance of believing Jesus, that we shouldn't always focus on affirming certain theological claims made about Jesus. But rather on "giving one's heart, loyalty, fidelity, and commitment to Jesus. This is the way into new life."<sup>[4]</sup>

Discipleship isn't just about tasks, it's also about identity. When we are disciples and have given our hearts, loyalty, fidelity and commitment to Jesus, our lives fundamentally change and who we are as people fundamentally changes. Today we heard Jesus say, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."<sup>[5]</sup> Though a more accurate Biblical translation could be, "Follow me, and I will make you to become fishers for people."<sup>[6]</sup> Perhaps a little awkward sounding, but it certainly changes the emphasis in our story. Fishing is something that you can put in your calendar—it's an action that you perform. Becoming fishers for people? That's a whole new occupation, a whole new identity, a whole new life!

Being a disciple of Jesus isn't just about the stuff that you do, it's about who you are to your core. This isn't just a story about fishing and following, it's a story about those who fish and who they're fishing for and who's teaching them how to fish. If we follow Jesus, we become fishers for people. Discipleship is about identity.

There are many times in our lives where we find our calendars full, a huge stack of papers that we just haven't gotten around to piled in our homes or on our desks, text messages and e-mails that we have yet to respond to, and friends we haven't seen in a long time. These days it's especially important to realize that discipleship is about who you are. Jesus is calling us into a new way of being that helps us remain grounded in God.

Some have said that the way to be a Christian is simply to gather the folks, break the bread, and tell the stories. It's about being part of the Way of Jesus. Being a disciple prioritizes the community—your identity changes because you become part of something so much bigger than just you and your family. You help gather the folks—it's an action, but it's also about becoming a body of Christians. Love and compassion expand when you have a group of people surrounding you.

Thinking about community and identity reminds me of the joke about a man stranded on a deserted island, and one day a ship appears in the distance. The man manages to flag down the crew and finally gets rescued after living in isolation for years. The crew looks around the island as they're getting ready to leave and asks the man about the buildings he's constructed during his stay. One is his house and the building next door is his church where he goes to worship, naturally. But then the crew asks about the third building a little further away. The man relates, "Oh, well that's where I used to go to church!" Apparently even in isolation we don't always practice our faith and embody discipleship perfectly!

Though it's easy to love everyone if you're not around people enough to get mad at what they say or do. It's easy to brush aside hurts or slights if you're not really emotionally invested in the first place. The wonderful aspect of any community with Jesus at the center is that people who are often excluded elsewhere are welcome here. Pride and rank don't have much of a place in Christian congregations, or at least the first Christian communities didn't begin that

way. Followers teach one another what we've learned and help embody what it means to have Jesus at the center of our lives—gathering the folks, breaking the bread, and telling the stories from generation to generation.[7]

I've been feeling sad as we grieve the loss of Marcus Borg, in part because he's been central to the progressive community of Jesus' disciples for so long. He's been one of the most prolific progressive Christian voices in a world where religious fundamentalism is often a whole lot louder. And he brought people back into the fold who might have walked out on Christianity long ago.

A beautiful reflection on his life was written hours after he died by his friend and Episcopal priest The Very Reverend Barkley Thompson. He spoke of being a young priest and having the opportunity to have dinner with Marcus Borg after he spoke at an Episcopal event. Being rather star struck and getting to dine with a renowned Christian scholar—well, of course he wanted to quiz Borg about his historical research and his theological approaches. This was such a great opportunity for him to hear from an intellectual giant in a more private setting, to just sit at his feet and learn! Yet, according to Thompson, "He'd have none of it. Marcus wanted only to talk about me, about St. John's, about our ministry, and about my experience as a young priest in the Episcopal Church. He was solely interested in me, and I've never forgotten it." [8]

This is what being a Christian disciple is about, it's not just what we do it's who we are. We affirm people where they are and often put others before ourselves. We live in humility, listening to peoples' stories as we help God by becoming fishers for people. Discipleship is sometimes an instantaneous decision—yes, I will follow and leave the past behind to enter a new life with God in community.

And then the deepening begins. You learn and you grow and you teach and you listen and you pray and you serve and you give and you receive and you worship and you love your way into becoming a follower of Jesus, a true fisher for people. Discipleship is about the tasks that we do and our core identity as followers of the Way of Jesus Christ. So "do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in? How much can you lose? How much can you win?" Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Dr. Seuss, Oh, the Places You'll Go!

[2] Elizabeth Gilbert, Eat, Pray, Love, 176.

[3] Marcus Borg, as quoted by David Hayward, "the death of Marcus Borg and his willful ignorance," January 22, 2015, <http://www.nakedpastor.com/2015/01/the-death-of-marcus-borg-and-his-will...>

[4] Marcus Borg, Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored, 163.

[5] Mark 1:17.

[6] Ted A. Smith, Homiletical Perspective of Mark 1:14-20, Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1, 289.

[7] Larry Rasmussen, "Shaping Communities" in Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People, Dorothy C. Bass, Ed., 119, 125.

[8] The Very Reverend Barkley Thompson, God in the Midst of the City Blog, January 21, 2015, <https://rectorspage.wordpress.com/2015/01/21/my-friend-marcus-borg/>