

Stages of Discipleship

Luke 10:38-42

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

We Mennonites are big on discipleship. It's one of the main vocabulary words we use in our conversations with each other. As best as we can, we want to follow Jesus.

Discipleship is one of our signature ideas, one of our special strengths.

However, there's one aspect of discipleship that we don't talk about very much, and that's how discipleship changes across our life spans. What kind of discipleship do most of us begin with, and how does that discipleship change as we grow older? What does discipleship look like when we're a young person; what does it look like when we're in mid-life; and what does it look like when we're in our final years?

This morning I'd like to offer you a way thinking about how our discipleship shifts around over the course of our lives. I want to describe 3 stages of discipleship. In each of these 3 stages, our core tasks are different. In each stage, we need to focus on different agenda. And in each stage, the call of Christ is different.¹

Throughout life we struggle, but what we struggle with changes. In the middle of those changing struggles, the invitations that come to us from scripture meet us in different ways. We tend to hear the Bible one way in our youth, another way in midlife, and still another way when we are old and facing death. Some of Jesus' words are meant for us when we're young, such as the simple, direct invitation to "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (Mk 1:17). Those words had great power for me when I was 13 years old, but because I've been trying to follow Jesus for the last 47 years, they aren't as

¹ In what follows I'm using the paradigm outlined by Ronald Rolheiser in *Sacred Fire: A Vision for a Deeper Human and Christian Maturity* (Image, 2014).

gripping now as they used to be. By contrast, consider Jesus' words in John 21:18: "When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." Those words are clearly addressed to older people, and they grab me now in a way they didn't 40 years ago.

So let's explore the 3 stages.

Stage 1

The first stage is called essential discipleship. It usually begins around puberty and lasts until our 20s or 30s, sometimes our 40s, or perhaps even later. Our main struggle during this stage is to get our lives together. God and nature have designed puberty to drive us out of our family's home and eventually create a new home. During puberty, we experience the fiery energies of restlessness, wanderlust, and sexuality. We want our own freedom, and we hunger for new experiences. These fiery energies can disorient us, confuse us, and make us feel insecure, but they also push us toward adulthood.

This stage is about searching. We search for a new identity that is uniquely our own. We search for intimacy, vocation, career, financial stability, the right place to live, things to give us meaning, and possibly, marriage. If you listen to pop music or watch American-made movies, you'll see these themes all over the place. This is a time for having big dreams about who we will be, who will love us, and how our lives will turn out.

One of the best examples of this stage in the Bible is the prodigal son in Luke 15. This young man has big dreams for himself. He will get his inheritance from dad, then leave the family home and take off to another country. There he will live on his own, make a name for himself, and form his own identity. This is more or less what all of us need to do at this stage of our lives. We're supposed to leave home and form our own identity. The problem with the prodigal is that he doesn't use his money as capital to invest in education or job training, or to start a new business. Instead he squanders his money and ends up penniless.

Most of the male disciples of Jesus are probably good examples of the spiritual work we need to do during this stage. I say most because Judas Iscariot apparently didn't navigate this stage very well. As far as we know, the other disciples did a better job. They were young men struggling to find their way in the world. Jesus both taught and modeled for them the importance of private prayer and personal integrity. He showed them how to live with charity for others and justice for the marginal. He emphasized forgiveness and mellowness of heart. Of course, these are important qualities for every stage of our lives, but Jesus demonstrated how crucial it is for us to lay down a solid spiritual foundation with them in our youth and young adulthood.

Stage 1 can last 10-20 years or more, but if we do our work well, we eventually land in a new home. We find a job, a career, and a set of responsibilities. We pay our own rent or mortgage. Maybe we marry and have children. We form a new identity and gain standing in the community. To a large degree, our struggle to get our lives together has succeeded. We have now come to the threshold of stage 2.

Stage 2

The second stage is called mature discipleship, and it lasts most of the rest of our lives. The main struggle in the second stage is to give our lives away. We are concerned with questions such as: How do I live deeply, generously, and meaningfully so I can bless other people? How do I live beyond my own heartaches and obsessions to make other people's lives flourish? How does my life contribute to the welfare of others?

Some things from the first stage may still linger with us. In stage 2 we might still feel a little restless and still think about our personal needs. Yet those aren't primary. More important is living beyond ourselves for others. Parents understand this because they know how important it is to pour themselves out into their children.

Imagine a woman named Samantha, or Sam for short. Sam is 30 years old and has settled into her career as a certified public accountant. She's married and has 2 children (though if you like, you could also imagine her as single). Along with having a mortgage payment, Sam belongs to a Mennonite church where she serves as a Stephen minister. For

the next 40-50 years, Sam's responsibilities are fairly clear. She will need to pay that mortgage, raise her children, do all she can to be a competent CPA, contribute to the life of the church, and perhaps eventually, tend to her aging parents. Her spiritual task, her discipleship, is also clear: how will she give her life away more purely and generously?

We do have some ongoing struggles in this stage. We struggle to accept our limits and make peace with a life that seems smaller than the one we wanted. In the first stage, we struggled to control our energy, but now we struggle to find enough energy. We contend with tiredness, disappointment, frustration, boredom, and resentment. We sense that the big dream we had for our lives probably isn't going to happen. We realize we're stuck with second or third best. Henry David Thoreau once said that "the youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon . . . and at length, the middle-aged man concludes to build a woodshed with them."² Once we thought we could go to the moon, but now we try to be content with a woodshed.

If the prodigal son illustrates the first stage, his older brother illustrates the second stage. The older brother works hard and fulfills his responsibilities to family and community. He gives his life away to others. Yet at the same time, he's resentful, angry, and jealous. The two brothers are in different stages of discipleship, but both of them need to get their discipleship patterns on better footing.

In the story of Martha that we heard today, Jesus reveals one of the great spiritual tasks for this second stage. Martha is a classic stage two person, bustling around doing this and that, working hard, trying to fulfill her responsibilities—and she's a little angry about it. Jesus bluntly tells her the solution isn't to dump her responsibilities on someone else. Instead, she needs to carry out her responsibilities in such a way that she includes moments of contemplation. She needs to learn from her sister Mary, who takes a little bit of time here and there to sit at Jesus' feet, to simply be in the presence of Jesus. That may be the biggest spiritual challenge for us in the second stage: to structure our days so we have moments to soak in God's presence.

² This appears in his journal entry for July 14, 1851.

Stage 3

The third stage is called radical discipleship, and it happens only late in life, in our final years. The main struggle of this stage is to give our deaths away. The core question is this: How can I live so that my death will bless my family, my church, and the world? This can include subsidiary questions like: How do I downsize so my relatives won't need to get rid of all the stuff I've accumulated over the years? When I get ill, how do I discern which medical interventions to accept and which medical interventions to refuse? How do I want my assets to be distributed after I die? As I get nearer to death, how can my choices bless others?

For an example we can look to Jesus' own life. During his public ministry, he gave away his life for others. He modeled stage two. He poured himself into other people, teaching them, healing them, blessing them. If you read any of the 4 gospels carefully, you'll see that throughout his ministry, the verbs for Jesus are all active. But then starting with his arrest, the verbs for Jesus suddenly become passive and remain largely passive through his crucifixion and resurrection. He accepted the helplessness, the humiliations, and the loneliness of dying. In so doing, he blessed us.

We too are meant to give our deaths away so that others are blessed. I saw how this can happen when Goldie Hostetler died some years ago. Goldie was a charter member of Berkey who spent the last years of her life at Greencroft in nursing care. Marilyn Rudy-Froese was doing most of the visiting in those days, so I didn't get over to see Goldie very often. But when I did, it quickly became apparent how she was giving her dying away to bless others. People enjoyed being around her. Her children, her nurses and attendants, and other residents—they liked being there. During my visits, she exuded a calm, gentle spirit which I knew was rooted in God. I came away feeling blessed and privileged to visit her. I've experienced the same thing with many others in this congregation who've died.

So—three stages or types of discipleship that we typically experience during the course of our lives:

- Essential discipleship when we are young, with its struggle to get our lives together.
- Mature discipleship in mid-life and into early retirement, with its struggle to give our lives away.
- And radical discipleship in our final years, with its struggle to give our deaths away.

Which stage are you in? And what is helping you to navigate this stage well?