

Sessions in this series:

1. Discipleship from Dearth: Sharing Our Abundance
2. Discipleship from Despair: Comforting Others
3. Discipleship in Danger: Standing Up For Our Faith
4. Discipleship with Daring: Embracing the Outsider
5. Discipleship by Devotion: Spreading the Good News
6. Discipleship by Decree: Our Christian Vocation

Disciples' Discourse: Good & Faithful Servants is a set of leaflets designed to invite conversation within an adult or young adult setting regarding principles of lifelong Christian discipleship. These studies coincide with the First Lesson according the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, for the Second through Seventh Sundays of Easter. *Disciples' Discourse: Good & Faithful Servants* is inspired by *Talking Points on The Amazing Gift of Your Baptism*, issued by the Department for Ecumenical Affairs of the ELCA (www.elca.org/ecumenical). Biblical quotations are taken from the Contemporary English Version (CEV) copyright © 1999, The American Bible Society.

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Disciples' Discourse: Good & Faithful Servants

Discipleship with Direction:

The Facilitator's Guide

If you are tired from carrying heavy burdens, come to me and I will give you rest. Take the yoke I give you. Put it on your shoulders and learn from me. I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest. This yoke is easy to bear, and this burden is light.

Matthew 11.28-30 (CEV)

Thank you for volunteering to facilitate *Disciples' Discourse: Good & Faithful Servants*. This study is ideal for small groups, bible studies, and adult forums. The format is intended to provoke discussion about the topic among the participants, based upon the First Lesson according the Revised Common Lectionary readings for Year B during the Sundays following Easter.

No special preparation is required apart from reading the material and making enough copies for each participant. A different facilitator may be chosen each session.

The sessions are designed to last approximately thirty to forty-five minutes depending upon the number of participants. The material is appropriate for groups of adults and high school age students.

The following suggestions might prove helpful in facilitating each session:

- Allow time for participants to settle in their seats prior the session. If many of the participants are unfamiliar with one another, an exercise of introduction would be appropriate.
- Begin the session with a brief prayer, asking God's blessing for those gathered and the revelation of the Word that will be studied.
- Encourage everyone to bring a Bible. A portion of the Sunday reading is printed on each handout, but it would be helpful to read the entire lesson prior to beginning the Reflection.
- Ask for a volunteer to read the Reflection portion out loud, inviting others to read along to themselves. Alternately, you could give two or three minutes of silence for participants to read the Reflection to themselves.
- After the Reflection, ask the group for their general impressions of the Reading and the Reflection.
- Ask for volunteers to read each question under Pondering the Possibilities. This section is intended to stimulate thought provoking conversation about the lesson and its application to the ministry of the church and daily life.

- During the conversations, encourage participants to respect the opinions and perspectives of others. Encourage listening by reframing thoughts and opinions, asking open-ended follow-up questions, and discourage participants from dominating the conversation. The atmosphere must be one of mutual respect, consideration, and love.
- Conclude the session with a closing prayer. You might make mention of particular issues discussed during the session. You might encourage others in the group to offer their own petitions. Conclude with a benediction or sing a doxology.

If this study is led in a church context, consider using it as a part of the adult forum or teen-age Sunday School. If this study is led in a home or small group, consider leading it in the context of a simple meal, inviting participants to bring a small dish. Regardless of the context, try to make the participants as welcome and comfortable as possible.

Exploring the role of discipleship in the life of the Christian and the church community is a wonderful opportunity for faith formation and witness. Encourage participants to invite friends, neighbors, coworkers, and others to join the discussion groups.

God bless you and your ministry as you facilitate this study.

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Disciples' Discourse: Good & Faithful Servants

Discipleship from Dearth: Sharing Our Abundance

The group of followers all felt the same way about everything. None of them claimed that their possessions were their own, and they shared everything they had with each other. In a powerful way the apostles told everyone that the Lord Jesus was now alive. God greatly blessed his followers, and no one went in need of anything.

Acts 4.32-33 (CEV)

Reflection

Some churches have the practice of receiving the offering of alms and tithes on Sunday mornings accompanied by the recitation of a familiar verse: 'All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee' (1 Chronicles 29.14b; KJV). This acclamation acknowledges something we all know, that every blessing in our lives is a gift from our loving God, and that we are mere stewards of such blessings.

Martin Luther affirms this understanding with his explanation of the first article of the Apostles' Creed in The Small Catechism: 'God has given me and still

preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and home, spouse and children, fields and livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life.’

This affirmation might seem at odds with our perception of the reality around us. There are countless people for whom it is a daily struggle to feed and shelter themselves and their families. There are innumerable people whose bodies are ravaged by disease, tragedy, and the effects of old age. There are many who suffer from economic and social injustice and oppression which strips them of their property, their livelihood, and their health. If God provides these things in abundance, why then do so many people (including people of faith!) suffer from despair and want?

The early church recognized the disparity between the so-called ‘haves’ and ‘have nots.’ The first disciples realized that indeed God provides everything we need in abundance, but that human sin stands in the way of that provision. To this day, enough food is produced worldwide to feed every man, woman, and child, but that food is not made available to those who cannot produce or afford it. God indeed provides abundantly, yet we in our sinfulness do not share what we have been given with those who need our love and our provision.

The first disciples shared their property in common, not out of some early political and economic philosophy but in recognition that all that they had was given them by God, and therefore they had the responsibility to share what they had with those who had little or nothing. As a result, ‘God greatly blessed his followers, and no one went in need of anything’ (Acts 4:33; CEV).

Pondering the Possibilities

1. In what ways do you notice the disparity between God’s provision of every need and the lack of subsistence in so many communities? How do you see this locally, nationally, and globally?
2. What do you feel is the responsibility of the Christian to alleviate this disparity? Is the model used by the early church a viable one today? How so? If not, what is?
3. The distribution of wealth is a controversial subject involving economic and social philosophies and policies. How do these stand in the way of sharing God’s abundance with those in need?
4. Do you share the belief that all things come from God, and what we return is already Gods? How does this affect the Christian life as a steward of God’s gifts? How does this affect you when you fill out your pledge card each year?
5. Sharing God’s abundance is more than sharing wealth and property; it also sharing our selves, our time, our love, and our interest. In what ways do you share God’s abundant gifts other than writing a check?

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Disciples' Discourse: Good & Faithful Servants

Discipleship from Despair: Comforting Others

You see this man, and you know him. He put his faith in the name of Jesus and was made strong. Faith in Jesus made this man completely well while everyone was watching.

Acts 3.16 (CEV)

Reflection

The Acts of the Apostles records a story of Peter and John, disciples of the risen Jesus, making their way to the temple to pray. At the door to the temple grounds, they encounter a man who was born lame; that is, he couldn't walk and therefore couldn't provide for himself through labor or industry. The man made his livelihood by begging for alms from the pious people who prayed each afternoon at the temple.

As Peter and John approached the door, the lame man asked for money. 'But they looked straight at him and said, "Look up at us!"' (Acts 3:4; CEV). For so long, the

Pondering the Possibilities

man had suffered in despair of his condition, bound to his handicap, victim of the social stigma attached to people who were imperfect, unproductive, and incapable of helping themselves. The man was in bondage to his condition—his crippled legs, his social status, his embarrassment and shame. Even as he begged for money which would buy his daily bread and pay someone to carry him, he could not look others in the eye. He lost his dignity to shame.

When Peter and John approach the lame man at the temple gate, they insist that he look up at them. They refused to allow him to acknowledge that he was any less valuable in the eyes of God than the richest prince or the healthiest athlete. More than money, Peter and John give to the man something far more valuable: hope. They proclaim to him the good news of God in Jesus Christ, that he is a child of God who is worthy of love and respect. And the man's ankles and feet become strong again, and for the first time in his life he enters the temple and prays.

Peter and John recognized that being a disciple of Jesus Christ was not about thumping bibles or shouting from rooftops or going door to door and asking if everyone has accepted Jesus. Instead, they recognized that being a disciple is about being a comfort and herald of the good news of Jesus in all that they did. It was in the routine of daily life that each disciple is given an endless number of opportunities to love and care for our neighbor, to bring good news of love and acceptance to those who are left out or unlovable, to comfort those who are lost in despair and bring to them hope.

The crowds at the temple are amazed at what Peter and John do in healing the once lame man. Peter uses this opportunity to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to the assembling crowd. But Peter also chides them, for this man was someone they all passed by each day with disregard, a man worthy of even God's attention.

1. What do you do when you encounter a 'pan-handler' or transient begging on a street corner? Do you give money, or look the other way? Why?
2. There are many people who for many reasons cannot or are unwilling to receive charity. In a society which celebrates success, hard work, self-promotion, and individualism, to receive charity would be to admit failure or defeat. How can you help others in need without shaming them?
3. Today it is uncommon to witness the miracle of genuine physical healing. Despite the prayers of church groups and loved ones, many people suffer at the hands of disease or trauma. How can you offer hope to those who suffer in body or mind? In what ways have you received such hope from another?
4. In what ways is your church welcoming to those who have special needs? How can you make your congregation more accessible and hospitable to people who are visually or hearing impaired, or who have special physical needs?

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4th Easter
May 7th

Disciples' Discourse: Good & Faithful Servants

Discipleship from Danger: Standing Up For Our Faith

This man is standing here completely well because of the power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth...He is the stone that you builders thought was worthless, and now he is the most important stone of all. Only Jesus has the power to save! His name is the only one in all the world that can save anyone.

Acts 4.10a, 11-12 (CEV)

Reflection

After healing a man at the temple who was born lame, Peter and John were taken before the council of religious and civic leaders in Jerusalem to explain what they had done and how they did it. With a conviction very different from the night Jesus was arrested, Peter stands before the council and confesses his faith in Christ, the man whom this very council had condemned to Pontius Pilate.

From its earliest days, the church has faced many obstacles in the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. Persecution, discrimination, corruption, and schism have plagued the church throughout history.

Today, Americans are accustomed to the myriad of denominations which all claim to be Christian, and most have very little threat to their family, home, or livelihood on account of their affiliation with a church.

It is a very different situation in some other countries which do not recognize the freedom of religion. There are examples of Christians severely persecuted for their faith in parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Yet even in America where religious freedom is celebrated, some who would claim to be Christian themselves have engaged in discrimination or violence against people of other faiths such as Jews and Muslims.

Modern Americans face a different challenge when called to stand up for their faith in Jesus Christ. The strong secularization of our culture and the plurality of different faith traditions pose a different sort of threat to the confession than do direct and violent persecution. Some Christians today resent the behavior of more zealous believers who commit atrocities in the name of Christ. Some people of faith feel that being a Christian is out of vogue, and are afraid others will look down upon them for their faith. Some Christians are unable to share their faith in certain contexts such as work or school due to issues of political correctness and harassment.

Though Peter would deny his Savior three times, he would later commit his life and death to the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. In the early church those who made the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of their faith were remembered as martyrs, literally 'witnesses', for their lives are examples of committing one's self wholly to the ministry of the Gospel.

Pondering the Possibilities

1. What are the subtle ways in which you are persuaded to deny (or at least down-play) the importance of your faith in your life? How can you challenge these temptations?
2. In what ways do you stand up for your faith in Jesus Christ? Are you ever embarrassed or ashamed of speaking with others about what you believe? Why or why not?
3. Christians in present America face little open persecution for their faith in comparison to people of other nations where religious freedom is not tolerated. How can you or your church help support, comfort, and defend those Christians who face persecution today?
4. How is the secularization of our culture felt in your life? How much do you participate in the commercialization of Christian holy days such as Christmas and Easter?
5. How do you stand true to your faith as a Christian and yet respect the opinions and beliefs of others from different faith backgrounds or traditions?

5th Easter
May 14th

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Disciples' Discourse: **Good & Faithful Servants**

Discipleship with Daring: Embracing the Outsider

Philip ran up close and heard the man reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The official answered, "How can I understand unless someone helps me?" He then invited Philip to come up and sit beside him.

Acts 8.30-31 (CEV)

Reflection

The story of the disciple Philip and the conversion of the official from Ethiopia might be a familiar one. Whilst making his way to Gaza, Philip comes upon the treasurer for an African queen riding in his chariot. The official is reading from the prophet Isaiah, but cannot decipher the prophesy of the suffering servant (Isaiah 53). Moved by the Holy Spirit, Philip unlocks the messianic nature of the prophesy, and the official was swept away by the good news of God in Jesus Christ. Seeing a body of water they were passing, the official requests to be baptized into the faith without further delay. Philip obliges.

Pondering the Possibilities

Just as the risen Christ was made known in the scriptures and the breaking of bread at Emmaus (Luke 24), here in Gaza the risen Christ is made known in the scriptures and the washing with water. The ministry of Word and Sacrament had begun to take its shape in the early church, a ministry which continues to this day.

Onlookers, especially those who were very strict adherents to God's law, might have looked at Philip's behavior with suspicion. The Ethiopian official was an outsider in every respect. He was a foreigner, serving in the court of a pagan queen. He was a eunuch, an emasculated man forced into lifelong servitude. By mere association, Philip as a pious Jew would have defiled himself.

And yet, as the apostle Paul writes, '[W]hen you were baptized, it was as though you had put on Christ in the same way you put on new clothes. Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman. So if you belong to Christ, you are now part of Abraham's family, and you will be given what God has promised' (Galatians 3:27-29; CEV).

In Christ Jesus the old distinctions and walls which separate people from one another are no longer valid. Those who were once considered outsiders are now welcomed in! Those who were once considered unclean for ethnic, cultural, or sexual reasons are now welcomed into God's family without delay!

It was well known that Jesus in his earthly ministry welcomed sinners and tax-collectors, and broke bread with those who were considered on the margins of acceptability and society. Philip follows his teacher's example, welcoming and sharing the good news with someone we might least expect.

1. How diverse is your congregation? How many different sorts of people, walks of life, ethnic backgrounds, and so on are represented in your community of believers? How do you feel about what you perceive?
2. In what ways does your congregation reach out to the marginalized in our society? Who would you consider 'the marginalized'? Are you comfortable or uncomfortable being around people who are not like you? Why so?
3. Philip welcomed into the family of God a perfect outsider: a Gentile, a slave, a eunuch. In what ways do you perceive the church feels threatened by so-called outsiders? Can you identify people today who struggle being a part of the church because they are considered outside the norm of society? How ought the church (and you!) respond to people who feel unwelcome?
4. Do you believe that the sacrament of baptism is the 'great equalizer' among those of the faith? How do we as a church live out our baptism by refusing to recognize those things which divide and separate us?
5. In what ways is your congregation a missionary outpost of the good news? In what ways is it an exclusive club?

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6th Easter
May 21st

Disciples' Discourse: Good & Faithful Servants

Discipleship by Devotion:

Spreading the Good News

Peter said, "These Gentiles have been given the Holy Spirit, just as we have! I am certain that no one would dare stop us from baptizing them." Peter ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and they asked him to stay on for a few days.

Acts 10.47-48 (CEV)

Reflection

It is known as 'the Great Commission': that moment when the risen Jesus meets his remaining disciples on a mountaintop in Galilee, and says to them, 'I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth! Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do everything I have told you' (Matthew 28:18b-20a).

Just as Jesus had come to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, now Jesus commissions his disciples to go out to all the nations (all the Gentiles!) proclaiming the good news. To a pious Jew of the day, such proselytizing

would be unheard of, especially if complete conversion to Judaism was not a requirement. Indeed, the early church would struggle with what it meant to be a Jewish Christian and a Gentile Christian.

The Acts of the Apostles describes Peter's reconsideration toward the Gentile mission when he has a vision of non-kosher foods which God proclaims to be clean (Acts 10). Peter is then empowered by the Spirit to welcome a Roman captain named Cornelius into the fellowship of believers. The lines between insider and outsider are blurred in the light of the good news.

Jesus Christ in his ministry often used parables to describe God's reign come to earth and spreading. Some of them might be quite familiar to you: 'The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a farmer plants a mustard seed in a field. Although it is the smallest of all seeds, it grows larger than any garden plant and becomes a tree. Birds even come and nest on its branches' (Matthew 13:31-32). Or this: 'The kingdom of heaven is like what happens when a woman mixes a little yeast into three big batches of flour. Finally, all the dough rises' (Matthew 13:33).

The Great Commission is given to us as well, by virtue of our baptism we have been made children of God in Christ Jesus, and therefore disciples of the good news. Our commission is to go to all people of every sort, everywhere, and spread the good news of God in Christ. This good news is not something to be hoarded or hidden, but shared abundantly with no strings attached! After all, one does not put a lamp under a clay pot, but on the lampstand for all to see in the light (Matthew 5:15).

We do not go about this commission alone. For our risen Savior assures us, 'I will be with you always, even until the end of the world' (Matthew 28:20b; CEV).

Pondering the Possibilities

1. In what ways does your congregation live out the Great Commission? How can you reach out and make disciples in your local community?
2. It can be said that the good news of God in Christ is contagious; the joy and freedom one finds is catching. In what ways is the joy you experience as a person of faith expressed in your daily life? How can you better be an 'infectious' Christian?
3. The early church struggled with tension between Gentile and Jewish Christians. In what ways does your congregation reach out to other Christians of different denominations? How can you and your congregation participate in interfaith and inter-denominational activities?
4. Can we by our own efforts 'convert' others to Christ? Can we convince others of the truth of the good news? If so, how? If not, why not and how is this done? How do we make room for the Holy Spirit?
5. Is your congregation 'outward-looking' or 'inward-looking' in character, or both? How do we find a balance between the two in light of the Great Commission?

7th Easter
May 28th

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Disciples' Discourse: Good & Faithful Servants

Discipleship by Decree : Our Christian Vocation

So we need someone else to help us tell others that Jesus has been raised from death. He must also be one of the men who was with us from the very beginning. He must have been with us from the time the Lord Jesus was baptized by John until the day he was taken to heaven.

Acts 1.21-22 (CEV)

Reflection

The opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles describes how the early disciples replaced Judas Iscariot among the twelve leaders of the mission. As you well know, Judas lost his place when he betrayed Jesus into the hands of the authorities and later met his demise. Whilst there were some qualifications for his replacement (for example, the replacement must have been a follower from the start), it ended in a drawing of lots to decide the candidate—and Matthias was the one.

The word 'vocation' comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means 'to call.' In short, one's vocation is one's calling. Today, we tend to understand this word in terms

of one's job, career, or livelihood. In the early middle ages, vocations were particular callings in the church which followed strict hierarchies of order, power, and importance.

Martin Luther and the early reformers transformed the medieval understanding of vocation when they applied it to God's calling of a Christian. In our daily lives, regardless of our job or livelihood, we are called by God to be witnesses to the good news of Jesus Christ. The Christian vocation is just that: to be a Christian.

Further, Luther taught that all Christians functioned as priests. In early Israel, priests made atonement for the sins of the people by offering sacrifices. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross was sufficient for the sins of the whole world, and now all believers function as priests whenever they make atonement—when they forgive one another's sins and proclaim the good news of God in Christ. Recall that Jesus taught that 'If you forgive anyone's sins, they will be forgiven' (John 20:23a; CEV).

Every Christian by virtue of baptism is called by God to witness the good news of Jesus Christ in all that we say and do. Our lives are examples to others of what it means to be forgiven by God, reborn of the Spirit, and a recipient of God's grace and love. Whilst there are bishops, pastors, deaconesses, diaconal ministers, associates in ministry, and other lay rostered-leaders in the church (that there may be leadership and order), the ministry belongs to the baptized: the entire people of God.

There is no indication of Matthias' feelings about being chosen to fill Judas' place among the twelve. Perhaps he was eager; perhaps he was nervous. One thing is very likely, that Matthias was not indifferent; for he, like all the baptized was called to serve our Savior in thought, word, and deed.

Pondering the Possibilities

1. What do you feel is the difference between a 'pastor' and a 'priest'? In what ways is this distinction helpful in defining the ministry of the church?
2. Have you ever held a grudge against someone? How did you come to forgiveness? In what ways does your congregation participate in the ministry of reconciliation?
3. In what ways do you live out your life as a witness to the good news of God in Jesus Christ in your daily routine, apart from attending church worship services? How can you be a better witness of the Gospel?
4. Martin Luther taught that whatever our livelihood when we work we ought to work as a Christian, thereby glorifying and witnessing God in all we do. Is this true for you? How is your work (at home, at the job, at school) a means of glorifying God? In what ways is it a witness to the good news?
5. Pastors often use the word 'discernment' to describe the tricky struggle to figure out what God is calling us to do. How do you discern God's will in your life and work? Whom do you seek for guidance or advice? Where do you look to find answers to your questions about God's calling?