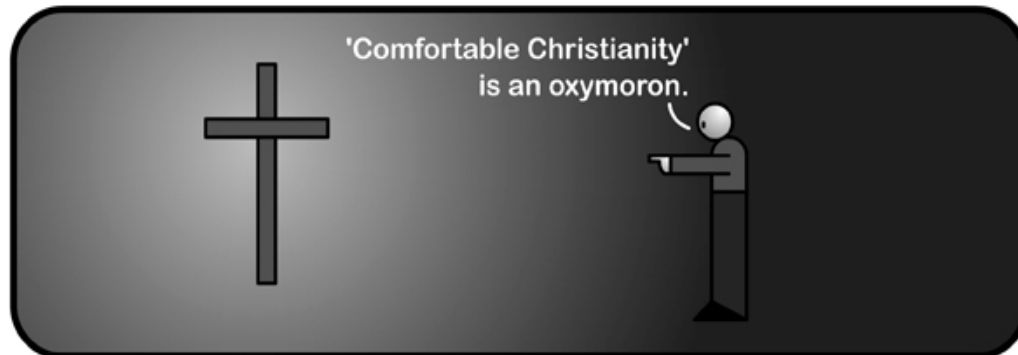


Faith Communities Project
A Disciple of Jesus – Being one who is alive in Jesus!
Session #5 – Identity and Definition



Ok - here's a good one for you...how would define the word, "Disciple"? Most of us when we think about the word "Disciple", and we innately click into prescriptive mode - in other words, we prescribe what a disciple is by what a disciple does. In other words, a Disciple is defined by "Discipleship" ...the actions of a Disciple. In this instance, actions would be focused primarily on things like worship attendance in a local church, bible reading, prayer, a person's devotional life, financial giving, etc. Now, don't get me wrong - all these activities are good and can even be used as "measures" in assessing discipleship. Let me put it this way, it has been our "habit" in popular Christian circles to "assess" whether a person is a disciple primarily by measuring certain boundary markers of how our denomination or religious heritage has defined or articulated the actions of a good "you fill in the blank with a denominational label" disciple (e.g. "good Lutheran disciple" or "good Catholic"...fact is, sometimes we even leave out the word "disciple altogether"). I'm sure you understand that! Just because we're curious...

Question for Discussion – According to how you understand it now or have heard about it in your past experience in the Church, what does a good Lutheran Disciple look like?

But being a disciple according to scripture is something different – being a disciple isn't a program...it has nothing to do with a prescribed process...rather, it has more to do with a person's IDENTITY than their actions. You see, our IDENTITY shapes our actions...it is something that is LIVED OUT through our actions. To do the opposite, only leads to what some would call, "hypocrisy" ...or play acting or role-playing some reality of identity that is not or might not be really real within us.

In this Unit, we will explore what it means to be a disciple not only because it is imperative to understand what the Spirit of God has and is creating within us but also we cannot be faithful to the call of Jesus to "go and make disciples" until we understand what one is. The fact is, via the power and presence of Christ in your life, there is a Disciple living within you – let's discover how to release that Disciple within you to be who God dreams you can be!

As we begin, let's look @ some of the Biblical Background of what it means to be a Disciple. What do each of these sections of the New Testament tell us about being a disciple?

1 Samuel 16:7 –
Proverbs 27:19 –
Ephesians 1:15-23 -
Mark 3:31-35 -

Matthew 28:16-20 -
Matthew 10 -
Luke 9:23-27 -
Luke 14:25-34 -
1 John 3:19-24 -

What does the word “disciple” mean? What images come to your mind? Who in your mind/life is a disciple you would want to emulate?

2 Corinthians 6:1-9 – More on being a Disciple – How does this text illuminate the issue (does it make it clearer or muddier to you)?

1 As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. 2 For God says, "At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you." Indeed, the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation. 3 We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us, and no one will find fault with our ministry. 4 In everything we do, we show that we are true ministers of God. We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. 5 We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food. 6 We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love. 7 We faithfully preach the truth. God's power is working in us. We use the weapons of righteousness in the right hand for attack and the left hand for defense. 8 We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. 9 We are ignored, even though we are well known. We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed. 10 Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything.

1. The Issue of Identity

Identity “*the fact of being who or what a person or thing is. The collective aspect of a set of characteristics by which a thing is recognizable or known. The distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity.*”

Question for Discussion/Sharing: What are some of the things that shape a person’s identity? How would you describe YOUR identity?

The question of identity can be best stated, “Who are you?” How would YOU answer that question? For many, they will talk about where they work, what they are like physically (height, weight, gender, etc.), where they live, what their daily “roles” in life are (mother, father, wife, husband, etc.)...each of those answers are good descriptions of a person – but do they really capture the truth of a person’s identity? The truth is there is far more to you and me than what people can see on the outside of our lives....thank God for that! For if you place to core of your identity in only what people can see of your life, you are walking on shifting sand. If your identity is wrapped up in your profession, or how you look, or even your relationships, those realities can change and you are out of luck! That’s why we need to have our identity shaped and defined by a reality that is deeper...for a follower of Jesus, our identity has been shaped by the very life, word and presence of Jesus!

Your identity as a person shapes you. It defines your character, heart, disposition, actions, and inclinations as a person. In other words, anyone should be able to discern a person’s identity by simply observing or entering into relationship with them. One way or another – a person’s identity can be clearly seen – what your life is really all about is on public display. Someone is either living out his or her true identity or play-acting...there no middle ground. That’s why we can say without a shadow of a doubt that everyone can visibly see who you really are.

Jesus said the same thing – “*a tree is known by its fruit*” (Matthew 12:33). The bible uses the word “heart” as a synonym for identity. The heart is the core of a person...it is the center of who a person really is. Matthew

15:19 Jesus talks about that which comes out of the heart...it isn't a person's actions that shape a person's identity rather it is a person's actions that disclose who a person really is!

Read some of the following sections of the bible and discuss as a group – according to these verses, what is your identity? In other words, “who are you?” Matthew 15:1-20, 2 Corinthians 5:15-17, Galatians 2:20, Romans 6:11, Matthew 5:13, John 1:2, 1 Corinthians 3:6, Ephesians 2:10, Ephesians 1:3, Colossians 3:3, Hebrews 3:14, 1 Corinthians 6:19, Matthew 5:14.

When your identity is transformed or changes in some way, it alters who you are profoundly. In other words, you are not “almost” or “barely” or “privately” married. If you are married, that marriage has changed your identity. Marriage is not only a public profession of relational faithfulness but it is a spiritual event of the uniting of two persons into “one flesh”...it is a spiritual “mystery” that alters who you are. The same can be said for being a parent...you don't have a baby in the hospital simply for the “experience” of having a child...that child when it is born alters who you are! The truth is, having a relationship with living God changes your identity – and that new identity changes you.

A side note for reflection - unfortunately, not many followers of Jesus have changed – they have added a little bit of Jesus to their lives to secure their eternity, maybe even joined what they consider to be a religious club...but the transformation of self, their relationships, and their understanding of who God has made them to be in terms of influence-making in their lives is definitely on the bottom of their agenda. They continue to be just as self-made and self-defined in terms of their identity as before they aligned themselves with the Church...why is that? What is the real issue here?

Again, according to the bible, what is your identity? How should that new identity change you? What should happen as a result?

There is a connection between our Actions and our Identity – our Identity is about WHO a person is...and our Actions is about WHAT a person does...your identity shapes/informs your actions – your actions should be consistent with who you are.

To act inconsistently with your identity is telling...when you act/ behave in that manner, what is that demonstrating? What does the bible say about that?

In addition, your actions can enhance/train your identity with new habits that will help transform you. That's why the Apostle Paul said that there are spiritual disciplines (such as prayer, bible reading, fellowship, worship, etc.) that are important in the training of a follower of Jesus in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16-17, “right living that proceeds out of right relationship).

2. What a Disciple IS?

What (or better yet, WHO) is a Disciple? What is a Disciple in a descriptive perspective? Well, try this one on for size - a Disciple is one who is alive in Jesus Christ. In other words, a Disciple is a person who has the life of Jesus implanted by the Holy Spirit and manifested by the Holy Spirit in their life that they are now alive in Jesus. Again, a Disciple is defined not by what we do but by the life of Jesus in us. Before there is any "doing" as a Disciple, there is an essential "being" that comes from the life of Jesus alive in the heart.

What a disciple IS in their identity has been IMPLANTED by the Spirit of God – embedded/inserted.

I'm still working on this...so allow me some latitude. A Disciple is alive in Jesus...as a friend of mine recently stated in an email, “A Disciple is one resurrected from death to life in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, and daily lives out that life.” In other words, the Holy Spirit is drawing out what is true, right, holy and pure within their heart because that's where Jesus resides. A disciple is always Jesus –shaped and Jesus empowered. A Disciple lives

Jesus, knows Jesus, grows in Jesus, and embodies the living Jesus. A disciple is Jesus led, Jesus fed, Jesus centered, and Jesus focused.

You can look from cover to cover in the bible and you won't find a verse that says, "you are alive in Christ if..." The bible doesn't say you have life in Christ if you attend church, read the bible, pray, give money, serve on a committee, or be a member of an institution. What the bible says is YOU ARE ALIVE IN JESUS CHRIST. As Paul said in Philippians 1:21, "for me to LIVE is Christ..." You see, being a disciple isn't about striving to be someone you are not...it is rather becoming more of what you already are! It is an issue of LIVING your IDENTITY.

What about a Disciple and good works? For many followers of Jesus, they think that they have to "work" at good works...they have to force themselves to do good things or do their best to imitate Jesus or some saint. In the end, many Christ-followers feel defeated and inadequate. Well, good works are not things that we are trying to do because we are attempting to be like Jesus...good works are what the Holy Spirit is doing through us. They are happening and will continue to happen because of the life of Jesus in and through us. As you live in Jesus, good works will happen almost effortlessly, quicker than you could have ever imagined because they happen not by sheer will power, guilt, or even training/mentoring but because they are being released through the work of the Holy Spirit. A Disciple, to allude to something I read in a new book by Len Sweet and Frank Viola, The Jesus Manifesto, doesn't ask "what would Jesus do" as if they could match up their actions with the actions of the biblical Jesus...but rather a Disciple asks and seeks to know/discern what it is that Jesus is doing and wants to do in and through their life? There is a difference! You see, the Holy Spirit wants to release what is already there in the life of Jesus in the disciple's life...in this manner, a Disciple is more than a noun - it is a verb, implying action and life.

So - what is a Disciple? A person who is ALIVE in JESUS.

Isaiah 50:4 - "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of disciples, that I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens me morning by morning, He awakens my ear to listen as a disciple."

A disciple sustains a listener with a word...a disciple is a responder to the promptings of God.

Jesus said a disciple "follows Me". Jesus calls them "MY disciples", in other words, there is a relational connectivity, embrace, and affiliation with Jesus when you are His Disciple. Disciples "of the Kingdom" - come to Jesus, deny self, pick up cross, follow Jesus, give up all, are willing to be reviled, are willing to stand out (known for being disciple)...they are workers in Kingdom (harvest plentiful, workers few), and are responsive and obedient to the commands of Jesus (you feed them, you cure them, etc.). A Disciple always comes back to Jesus - understanding what it means to be a disciple without a relationship to Jesus is not only non-biblical but also oxymoronic.

To be "Alive in Jesus" means that a disciple allows the divinity of Jesus to live in and through their lives. Being a disciple is about BEING...it biblically does not mean that we are to be an adherent to a complex doctrinal system or ethical principles - but rather be a passionate person with a love for a way of living in the world that is rooted in living by Jesus - since Jesus is way, truth and life. A Disciple can never be separated from the Kingdom of God - because Jesus can never be separated from the Kingdom. A Disciple lives Kingdom...a disciple is a living manifestation of God's rule.

Question - How are you a living manifestation of Jesus? How are you the living manifestation of the rule of God (big question, huh)?