

Moving from Membership to Discipleship
Matt 28.16-20
January 8, 2012

Grace, mercy, and peace from the one who has called us to be his disciples, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Have you ever been to an ocean beach and watched the surfers? There are two kinds of surfers, and usually you'll find both of them there. The first kind of surfer is the would-be surfer. These surfers never go near the water. Although they're dressed for the water and have their boards at hand, they just sit on the beach, talking among themselves and watching the waves break on the shore. They're not at the beach to surf, but to get a tan, to show off their fancy suits and boards, and to talk about the big waves they have caught in the past.

The other kind of surfers aren't on the beach. They're out in the water – way out in the water. They're sitting on their boards eagerly watching and waiting. When they see a big wave coming, they flop down on their boards and start paddling faster and faster, until the energy of the wave catches them. Then they jump to their feet for the ride of their lives.

These two kinds of surfers are much like the two kinds of people you normally find in churches. The first kind, like the surfers on the beach, are church members. The other kind, like the surfers riding the waves, are disciples.

We need to look at the difference between a church member and a disciple. After all, unless we know the difference between the two, we can't know how to move from one to the other.

Church members are spectators. If someone is just a member of a church, they have, whether they realize it or not, the notion that coming to church on Sunday is their job. That's what they do. On some level, they feel that attending worship services is what being a Christian is all about. They come to church, they sing some songs, they put their offering in the plate, and they go home and wait for next Sunday, when they make their way back to church.

Do you know the difference between churches that are shrinking and will someday close and churches that are growing? Churches that are on a fast or slow march toward closing are churches full of members. Churches that are growing are churches full of disciples.

I'm not saying that it's the people's job to grow the church. Church growth is God's job. However, God's chosen method of growing the church is for his disciples to take the Gospel to the world. That's God's formula for church growth. Think back about today's Gospel reading, "*Go and make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching.*" That's not a church member's work. That's a disciple's work.

Let me tell you a few facts about our Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. In 2003, the Missouri Synod lost over 25,000 members. During 2004, the synod lost another 25,189 members. Of that 25,189, 14,609 were confirmed adult members. The average weekly church attendance during 2004 fell by 10,000. Child baptisms were down 1,108, adult baptisms were down by 44, and teenage confirmation was down by 217. These statistics are a bit outdated, but the trend they describe hasn't changed. The 2010 Yearbook of the National Council of Churches shows the LCMS down 1.92% from the previous year. The 2011 Yearbook shows the LCMS down another 1.08%

Let me ask you a question. Do you think the Missouri needs more members or more disciples? Here's another question. Do you think Prince of Peace is any different from the synod as a whole? The problem with the synod is the problem with Prince of Peace – too many members and not enough disciples. Don't get me wrong. Prince of Peace does have some disciples, and that's great. But we don't need some disciples we need a church full of disciples. If we have 300 members we need 300 disciples.

Now that we know what a member is and we can see the results of having a church full of members, let's ask the obvious question. "If members are spectators, what is a disciple?" A disciple is someone who has gotten down out of the bleachers and joined the game. Disciples wear game shoes. Disciples are game winners. Spectators never have and never will win the game.

I'll give another definition of a disciple. A disciple is a mind through which Christ thinks. A disciple is a heart through which Christ loves. A disciple is a voice through which Christ speaks. A disciple is a hand through which Christ helps.

Make no mistake, a disciple is a servant. A disciple is not the teacher, he's the learner. A disciple is not the leader, he's the follower. A disciple is not the center of attention, he's the one serving in the background. Jesus is our teacher, our leader, the center of our attention. A disciple is a servant called by God to carry the cross of Christ by living for Jesus in this world.

Living for Jesus is not just a Sunday job. That's member thinking. Living for Jesus goes on 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, 365 days per year. There are no days off from discipleship. There is no time when a disciple has "done his share." Living for Jesus never ends and it supercedes every other function in life – because living for Jesus is life.

We never know what living for Jesus is going to be. Living for Jesus may be "business as usual" today – sacrifice and suffering tomorrow. A disciple remains faithful through good times and bad. A disciple takes the lowliest job just as joyfully as the high-profile job. A disciple is just as happy doing what only God sees as he is doing what everyone sees. The logo for the Baptist Missionary Union makes this point very well. It pictures a bull standing between a plow and an altar. The caption reads, "Ready for Either."

Are the people of Prince of Peace ready for either or neither? This is the question we must ask ourselves. Our church has some real obstacles in its path if we are going to carry out God's mission here in Farmington Hills.

The church could use more money, but that's not the biggest obstacle we have to overcome. The church is in a changing neighborhood, but that's not the biggest obstacle we have to overcome. The church building could use some repairs and maintenance, like a new heating and cooling system, but that not the biggest obstacle we have to overcome.

The biggest obstacle we have to tackle, the biggest obstacle holding us back from doing God's mission, is changing the mindset of the people of Prince of Peace from membership to discipleship. I'm not talking about changing the mindset of a few people. I'm talking about changing everyone's mindset.

Today's Gospel reading is the Great Commission. Listen one more time. *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* These are the marching orders for disciples.

However, how can we make disciples for Christ if we ourselves are only members and not disciples? Jesus asked, *"Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?"* (Mt 7:16 NIV). If you wish to have grapes, you must start with a grape vine. If you wish to have figs, you must start with a fig tree. If you wish to make disciples, you must start with disciples.

You might be saying to yourself, "That makes sense, pastor, but how do we move from membership to discipleship?" Let me start by saying it's going to be work. Sitting around wishing and hoping will not change a member into a disciple. Change requires action.

During the next six weeks, we are going to look at the six life disciplines that change a church member into a disciple. If you make these six disciplines a part of your everyday life, your life will change dramatically. Here is a sample of the next six weeks.

When you come to Bible study, you are putting yourself in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us that faith comes from hearing God's Word. Regular Bible study, especially corporate Bible study, serves to strengthen the faith God has given you. The more you know about God's holy Word the easier your walk with God will be.

When you pray, you open the lines of communication between you and your Lord. Prayer is not just about you speaking to God. It's also about God speaking to you. Don't expect God to whisper in your ear. But do expect that the more time you spend in prayer the closer you will be moved to living inside the Will of God.

When you worship, you are drawn closer to our Lord. This is your chance to pray, praise, and give thanks. Worship also recharges your discipleship battery so you can

not only face another week in the world, but at the same time be a living example of God's love.

When you serve your neighbor, both inside and outside the church, you are following in the footsteps of your Savior. Jesus spent his entire life working for the good of others. He told his disciples, "*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mt 20:28 NIV). The more you humbly serve the more you will learn the joy and privilege of serving.

When you witness, you are showing a love for your neighbor that is greater than your love of yourself. Witness is both words and actions. Living a life of full-time witness will strengthen your faith more than you could ever imagine. Jesus told us that, "*greater love has no man than that he lay down his life for his friends*" (Jn 15:13 NIV). When your life is a living witness of your faith in God and your love for God, you have very meaningfully laid your life down for others.

When you support God's work with the treasures he has given you, you show a disciple's trust for the promise of God. Our Lord told us that he will provide what we need. Making meaningful offerings to him shows our faith in that promise.

If today begins Prince of Peace's move from membership to discipleship, then today will be the beginning of a new chapter in the history of our church. If today begins your personal move from membership to discipleship, then today will be the beginning of a new chapter in your walk with God. I pray that God will work through Prince of Peace to accomplish his mission as we move from membership to discipleship.