

## THE CHALLENGE

**John 1:29-42**

### **The Second Sunday after Epiphany**

After about four years of watching his church grow from a few dozen to about 300, Glenn McDonald noticed that everyone's attention had become riveted on the ABC's of congregational life. In his book he wrote, "...the ABC's of congregational life—attendance, building, and cash. How many people are on site, and is that number increasing? Is there room for everyone to park, and when can we upgrade our nursery facilities? What was last month's bottom line, and will we have the money to pay next month's bills? Without even noticing it we were paying more attention to structure than vitality. Our lip service to 'releasing God's transforming power' had become swamped by our let's-keep-the-place-under-our-control behaviors." He then went on to write, "It's safe to say that a large majority of Protestant congregations have made attendance, buildings, and cash—as opposed to Christ's Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 to be and to make disciples—their organizational bottom line."

To be honest is to admit that McDonald's words have a jolting effect. It caused me to think about the way the church can become so riveted on the ABC's—attendance, buildings, and cash—that making disciples gets completely lost as an organizational bottom line. It is very obvious that we report faithfully in the weekly newsletter our attendance and cash numbers, but none of us have noted there is no mention of the number of professions of faith. A few weeks ago in a sermon we thought about how God wants to take us from where we are to where He wants us to be. Surely, He desires to take us from this ABC church mentality to the disciple making mentality. Surely, He wants to take us away from our obsession with attendance, buildings, and cash to an obsession with disciple-making.

Our gospel text for the day lifts up one who was single minded about pointing people to Jesus. Actually, it seems rather strange that John the Baptist would be pointing people to Jesus because the people he was pointing to Jesus were his own disciples. What he stood to lose were his own disciples. We sometimes forget that the first disciples of Jesus were first disciples of John the Baptist. John clearly understood that his influence must decrease as Jesus' influence began to grow and so he not only announced that Jesus was coming, but he also pointed his finger and said,

*Look, here is the Lamb of  
God! (John 1:36)*

He said it with such authority that Andrew and John left the Baptizer and followed Jesus. John did not try to hold them back. He expected them to leave for good and become followers of Jesus. The way the word "follow" is used in the text does not allow for a casual or tentative inquiry. Instead the term more appropriately expresses a once-and-for-all decision to cast their lot with Jesus.

This very simple story of two men coming to faith in Jesus Christ speaks of the place where God desires for His church to be. It was never intended for us to become focused on our ABC status. Instead He has always desired for us to be a community focused on pointing people to Jesus in such a way that they will move toward Him and become one of His disciples. This is not something we have failed to acknowledge in our head. We know it to be true. It is one of those things we know we ought to be doing, but just have not gotten around to doing yet. The difficulty we have experienced is allowing what we know in our head to impact the way we live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The sad truth is the church no longer takes seriously its call to make disciples because we as its members no longer take it seriously.

How do we get from where we are to where God wants us to be? If not taking seriously our call to make disciples is where we are and taking seriously the call to make disciples is where God wants us to be, how do we get there? The first step on this journey of moving toward where God wants us to be is to decide for ourselves that being obedient to God is the most important issue of our journey of faith. If obedience to God is not really an issue for us, it is not likely we will ever get around to being a disciple maker. If obedience is not an issue we will find a way to explain away the Words of Jesus when He said to His followers what we find in Matthew 28:19,

*Go therefore and make disciples...*

The first step toward being where God is calling us to be is to take this Word of His seriously. It was not a Word spoken as a possibility for disciples to consider, but an imperative spoken for disciples to obey.

Once we decide that obedience is our choice regardless of how uncomfortable such makes us, we have taken a giant first step in our movement toward where God wants us to be. It is at this point that we are often tempted to back away thinking that God does not want us to do something which creates so much discomfort and stress in our life. The truth is that being obedient to God will always lead us outside of our comfort zone and our discomfort maybe one of the signs that where we are heading is indeed the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The next step may seem like a much smaller step in that it carries us to our knees. Some of us are going to need our hearts changed if we want to take seriously the call to make disciples. It is not who we are and what we are about. We see unchurched folks and think, "If they want to come to church, they know where it is." When we look honestly at our heart we know there is more indifference than passion. If we want to take seriously going where God wants us to be as a disciple maker, we know we have some praying to do.

We sometimes forget that Jesus told the disciples to do this very thing before Pentecost came upon the church. In the last few verses of Luke we hear Jesus restating the Great Commission of Matthew 28 using different language. In that place Jesus said to his disciples,

*...repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be  
proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning  
from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.  
(Luke 24:47-48)*

And after telling them He wanted them to go as witnesses, He said, “But, not yet, there is something I want you to do first.” In the 49<sup>th</sup> verse He told them what to do instead of getting up and going.

*And see, I am sending upon you what my Father  
promised, so stay here in the city until you  
have been clothed with power from on high.*

We do not have to do this pointing people to Jesus thing alone. In fact it was never intended that we should. It has always been a partnership between us and the Holy Spirit. As we pray honestly about our reluctance and the growing awareness of where God wants us to be, we will begin to discover not only the opportunities with other people, but also what it means to partner with the Holy Spirit in pointing people toward Jesus. Instead of giving up and saying this ministry of making disciples is not for me, ask for the help of the Holy Spirit and then stand back to see what He will do.

Seeing what the Holy Spirit will do is always a more exciting option than watching over the ABC’s of church life—the attendance, the building, and the cash. I want to prove this to you. Or, I should say, I want to give the Holy Spirit a chance to prove it to us all. I want you to read Matthew 28:19 with me. It says,

*Go and make disciples...*

Now I have a question. Do you believe that word of Jesus includes you? Is Jesus telling you to make disciples? Yes or No. If you answer “no” then you are free to think about other things. Take a mental holiday for the duration of the sermon. If you answered “Yes, I believe Jesus wants me to make disciples,” then I want to ask you to continue listening to the challenge. Even as Jesus said for the disciples to go but first wait, I want to ask you to spend from today until Wednesday asking God to bring into your life someone with whom you can invite to worship with us next Sunday. Each day between now and Wednesday pray asking, “Lord, will you bring someone into my life with whom I can share an invitation to worship so that they might come and encounter You?” And then, after Wednesday, step back from the prayer and see what the Holy Spirit will do. See who it is He brings into your life. Wait for the opportunity He has prepared for You and then step forward into it with faith. See who He wants to receive your invitation to experience the presence of Jesus at our worship here next Sunday. Next week when we come here, we will see and celebrate the exciting things the Holy Spirit is doing because we have sought to live in obedience to His Word about making disciples.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on January 20 & 27, 2008.