



The Towel and Basin

A Ministry Newsletter

The Jackson District, The United Methodist Church

Joy Weathersbee, District Superintendent

John Middleton, Spiritual Formation and Congregational Life

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Dear Friends,

I was working with a congregation recently that wanted to learn more about the making of disciples. I began with a question which I thought would lead to extended, fruitful discussion: "What is a disciple of Jesus Christ?"

As often happens, I was a step behind God's Spirit. At worship that morning the pastor had asked the same question during Children's Time: "What is a disciple?" A young boy gave a definitive answer -- "Someone who has decided to follow Jesus and never turn back."

The summons to "Follow me" is the most basic invitation of Jesus in the New Testament. As the story of the four fishermen in Mark 1:16-20 indicates, a response to that call has economic implications, implications for established patterns of social status and power, and consequences for family life. To be a disciple is to follow Jesus. The decision is costly, risky, and radical. It challenges every dimension of our lives.

President Andrew Jackson, a Tennessean, ordered the removal of all Indian tribes to western reservations. The peace-loving Cherokees were forced off their Smokey Mountain homelands.

A resolution was presented to the Tennessee Annual Conference opposing President Jackson's order. It failed to pass. Seven white men who had been serving as missionaries among the Cherokees approached the bishop and surrendered their credentials. When the Trail of Tears began at the point of cavalry guns, those seven men walked with the Cherokees to Oklahoma.

For those men discipleship was not a vague concept with no consequences. They followed the Cherokees because in their faces they saw the presence of Christ. They had eyes to see, though the government and their church were blind. Tears streamed down the missionaries' faces as they left the church. They paid a high price for the decision to "follow Jesus and never turn back."

How is it with your discipleship? Is it a matter of personal piety or of committed lifestyle? What has the decision to follow Jesus cost you? What consequences are you willing to bear?

Let us encourage one another.

Joy and John

A CONTEMPORARY WITNESS

On a Sunday night in February, 1957, a nineteen-year-old student pastor was five minutes into his sermon. A procession of robed and hooded Ku Klux Klansmen came down the aisle. Each one was carrying a handful of money. As the first Klansman reached the altar, the preacher stepped over the Communion rail to confront them directly.

"We don't want your money," he said. The Klansmen continued to drop offerings onto the table. As the last one placed his dollar, the pastor scooped it all up, held it above his head, and tore the money to shreds.

As they were recessing from the church, he called after them, "I wish that I hadn't torn your money. I wish I had sent it to the NAACP."

Within a few days a call came to his college dormitory. "Are you the Reverend Gene Davenport?"

"Yes sir."

"Are you the pastor of Pelham Methodist Church?"

"Yes sir."

"Were you preaching last Sunday night when some visitors came and made an offering to the church?"

The gospel is the proclamation of the presence of freedom, the reality of love, the movement of peace, and the establishment of justice. These are not to be contemplated, debated, or respected, but accepted, appropriated, lived, and manifested.

Gene Davenport

"A threat is not an offering," he replied. "But who are you? The joke is over." He thought that it was a prank by one of his friends.

But the caller was an agent with the U.S. Secret Service field office in Birmingham. He instructed Rev. Davenport to come to the Federal Courthouse the following day.

In the Secret Service office Davenport told the story as it had happened and signed a transcribed copy. Then he was told that the Federal Grand Jury would meet in three months and that he would be notified when to appear. The penalty for defacing U.S. currency, he was informed, was a substantial fine, two years in prison, or both. (Narrative based on Will Campbell's Foreword to Davenport's book, *Into the Darkness: Discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount*.)

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Gene Davenport was never indicted. This encounter was one of a number in his young adulthood where he learned that faithfulness to the gospel often places one in the midst of conflict. He has not flinched from the conflict, recognizing it as an opportunity to respond to Jesus' invitation to "Follow me."

Fifty years later we find ourselves in a similarly intimidating environment. Once again the government is using its power to silence and punish acts of prophetic witness, even while clothing itself in religious language. Once again the invitation of Jesus sounds forth, placing us in the midst of conflict. Once again the integrity of our faith is tested, and we must choose, as did the 19-year-old pastor of Pelham Methodist Church.

CONGREGATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

Conversations that Matter



United Methodists have the rather strange conviction that talking can be a "means of grace," a way in which we experience the presence and power of the Holy. Not all talking, of course, much of which is idle chatter, gossip, or the spreading of destructive rumors. We speak instead of "Christian Conferencing." Yet at its heart, Conferencing is a conversation, a conversation that matters, a conversation in which our true selves are discovered and revealed

in trust and which opens an awareness of God as a conversation partner.

In her book *Turning to One Another*, Margaret Wheatley declares, "I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. Not mediation, negotiation, problem solving, debate, or public meetings. The simplest way to begin finding each other again is to start talking about what we care about."

Is your congregation a safe place for those conversations? What if 15 minutes were set aside at every Church Council meeting simply to talk in response to a question -- What gives me hope for the future? What nourishes my spirit? How do we provide hospitality to newcomers? What are our congregation's core values? What yearning do I have for my children, for our children? In talking and listening, the world can be changed, because God is a part of our best conversations.

A key rubric when gathering is embodied in Paul's words to the Corinthian congregation: "let all be done for up building" (1 Corinthians 14: 26c). These words not only suggest how we are to engage one another when we gather; they also point to the fundamental purpose of Christian conversation.

Dale A. Ziemer

RESOURCES FOR MINISTRY

On Being and Making Disciples

1. *Through the Eye of a Needle: Faith and Discipleship*, Chris Marshall

<http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/book/print/169>

Writing from the Anabaptist tradition, Marshall insists that discipleship is more than an individual, spiritual affair -- it is a corporate lifestyle and a commitment with consequences for our values and allegiances. He illustrates by using the call of the four fishermen in Mark 1: 16-20. "There is no discipleship other than radical discipleship. It is radical because it requires a thorough-going conversion of one's personal, social and political values and commitments. It requires a risky, dependent faith that looks wholly and solely to Jesus for identity, provision and protection."

2. *Walking in the Way of Jesus*, A sermon preached at Peace Lutheran Church, Charlottesville, VA, February 18, 2006. <http://www.plchurch.org/sermonsnew/sermon060218.pdf>

This sermon is one of a series on The Marks of a Disciple and focuses on 'the feet of a servant.' What does it mean to be a Christ-like servant? That question is answered by describing a change of perspective in four phases.

3. *Wesley's Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the 21st Century*, Randy Maddox. http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/maddox%paper_9-23-02.pdf

This paper was prepared for the United Methodist Council of Bishops' Task Force on Theological Education and Leadership Formation. The clear grounding in Wesleyan thought is most helpful, and Maddox does not hesitate to suggest the advice which John Wesley would offer his contemporary descendants.

4. Two Books --

Traveling Together: A Guide for Disciple-Forming Congregations. Jeffery Jones (The Alban Institute, 2006) Perhaps the single best overview of what it means to be a disciple, what it means to be a community of disciples, and what it means to be a community of disciples which forms disciples. The Appendices include assessment tools for individuals and congregations.

Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor. David Augsburg (Brazos Press, 2006). This book is required reading for the Five Day Academy for Spiritual Formation, October 15-20. It should be required of all who desire a clear, compelling presentation of the practices of discipleship.