

Students for Life 10-4-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Matthew 4:18-22

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Luke 9:23-27

Then he said to them all, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.’

Last week we began our exploration of a statement about who we are at First Christian Church that was developed out of many conversations within the General Board. We began by reflecting upon the opening words of that statement. “We are a people of God on a

path of freedom, learning and love." This week we go to the next layer of discovery. The next section of the statement talks about our relationship to Jesus. You'll find it on the back side of the announcements insert in your bulletin. "We are students of Jesus, who did not start a religion but launched a movement of extravagant love, inclusive community, and revolutionary non-violence. Jesus showed us what unconditional love looks like. We want to follow Jesus' example and love all human beings, no exceptions... There are no doctrines to which one must subscribe to be part of First Christian Church. Jesus shows little concern for what a person "believes." Rather, Jesus says, "Come, follow me."...Just as Jesus ate with people from various walks of life, as we gather at the table of communion, we welcome all who would be nourished by Christ's presence."

We know what it's like to be students, don't we? We spend a great deal of our lives in some kind of educational setting or another. And here in Ames, home of Iowa State University, we are surrounded by students and teachers and the concept of learning. As I understand

it, there is even a College for Seniors here in Ames. We in Ames certainly should understand the concept that learning is an on-going process that is life-long. As First Christian Elder, Barb Gurganus, put it recently, "if you're not growing and learning, you're dying." Hopefully the theme and sermon title for today - Students for Life - just makes sense, not only in terms of learning about the world and science and sociology and psychology and geography and music and art and all the other areas of study you'd find in a university, but also in our faith and understanding of God and what it means to follow Jesus. Hopefully we *don't* have the sense that what we learned in Sunday School as children is enough to address the challenges and struggles of our adult life and an ever more complex world. That would be like having the reading skills of a second grader to get you through college as one recent article I read suggested.

And just as memorizing body parts doesn't make you a doctor, memorizing or saying certain words or claims about God and Jesus doesn't make a person a follower of Jesus. In recent weeks I've talked

about how easy it is for we humans to substitute the representation of something for the real thing. For example, we might say we believe in Jesus, therefore we are saved. Those words are not literally true.

They point to something much bigger and deeper and transformational than the words can possibly contain. Jesus himself basically says there will be many who say, "Lord, Lord" but who just don't get it. Life with God, the kind that transforms and heals and frees and saves does not come from saying the right words. If Jesus taught nothing else, he certainly taught that over and over again. And yet, the farther in time we got from when Jesus walked the earth, the more important it became to the powers of the church to get the words right; to say the right things. And those words were used as a way to allow some in and keep others out, and in some periods of history, not saying the right words could get you killed.

The early founders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), of which we are a member congregation, took a look at what they believed to be layers of church rules and structures that seemed to

keep some in power and be a burden to others - like the least, the lost and the last that Jesus always seemed to care about - and decided they wanted to go back in time, to dig through the layers and discover Jesus again. What did he say? What did he stand for? What does he expect of his followers? They went back to the New Testament and studied the scriptures and realized some pretty important things. Jesus didn't actually teach doctrine. He didn't teach creeds. He didn't set a list of requirements. He simply called people to follow and become his disciples. - students for life - who journeyed with Jesus and lived a radical new lifestyle that Jesus called the kingdom of God. A life formed and nurtured and fed by unconditional love, forgiveness, compassion and justice. That's all. No words necessary. Just walking and responding and living God's love and grace in every situation and with everyone you encounter along the path, no exceptions.

I need to say a few words about creeds and statements of belief. We Disciples are non-creedal. We do not say creeds and we do not expect people to be able to say they believe all the words in the creeds

or any statements of belief in order to be members of this congregation. If you turn in your hymnal to page 358, you will see the title, Nicene Affirmation of Faith. In most any other church, that would read, Nicene Creed, but we don't hold people to creeds. So, if we were to recite a creed, we would do it as an affirmation which is a way to say we say these things understanding that they are part of the Christian tradition, but that we are not bound by such statements.

A few years ago, I was teaching a class called, "Saving Jesus." It was an ecumenical study series helping uncover Jesus from the layers that have been superimposed on him through the years. As a part of that class I did some research and brought with me a couple of Statements of Belief from a couple of sources. One was very specific and one was quite general. One had a list of seven points that one must say they believe in order to be part of the organization. You had to believe the Bible to be the inerrant word of God; you had to believe in the trinity, the virgin birth, blood atonement, and a few other things like that. The other basically said that their belief boiled down to

Jesus' words that we are to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all you mind, and with all your strength, and you neighbor as yourself." The next time I saw Jim Gaunt following that session, he had to tell me about his observation. The one statement of belief was based entirely on the love. The other didn't even use the word love once. What an amazing revelation that was! And as I read the Nicene Creed, and the Apostle's Creed I realized that the word love cannot be found in either of them as well. And there's something else that is sorely lacking from all of those statements, except the one based on Jesus' words; none of them require anything of the believer. We merely give our ascent to the ideas and words, and we are done. Whereas Jesus himself said if anyone wants to save their life they must lose it, pick up their cross and follow me.

My point here is not to disrespect those documents of the church, but it is truly to put them in their place. They may be useful at times, but they should never be mistaken as any kind of ticket to

heaven or abundant life. Jesus climbed up the mountain and gave the sermon of his life - his manifesto. We call it The Sermon on the Mount - the ultimate or uber sermon.... from the teacher himself! In that sermon, found in Matthew chapters 5 through 7, Jesus has a lot to say! But he doesn't say anything about what we should believe. Rather, he says volumes about what we should do and how we should live.

Life comes as we, like Peter and Andrew and James and John, drop our nets and follow Jesus, willing to let the way of Jesus form us and shape us and transform us, changing our priorities, our actions, our attitudes, the way we spend our money, the way we talk to one another, the way we treat strangers and foreigners, the priorities and sacrifices we make, our willingness to keep on the journey no matter what mistakes we make and no matter what detours and road blocks we encounter. Life comes as we allow every fiber of our being to be infected with the love of God so that love would flow forth from our lives and into the world, as partners in making real Jesus' prayer that God's kingdom would come one earth as it is in Heaven.

So, the bottom line here is, at First Christian Church, we do not require you to be able to recite any creed or to sign onto any statement of belief. We truly invite participation by people wherever they are on the journey, with doubts and questions, existential angst, searching, experimenting, falling down, getting up, changing course, changing, growing, resting... what counts is that you're on the journey, following Jesus. In the opening paragraph describing who we are at First Christian, we say, "We are not defined by our agreements or disagreements. We are defined by our acts of love and justice and healing." Doctrines divide people. Discipleship brings us together. It's not about being conservative or liberal. In fact, it's hard to say just what it is. In one board meeting as we were trying figure out just what word would be the right one to describe what we are trying to say, Larry Mesenbrink, who often has just the right thing to say, said, "Maybe we just need to be *original* Christians."

How do we find abundant life? How do we know God? How do we find the way that takes us outside the small, relatively unimportant

concerns and tap us into greater meaning and purpose and impact that matters and heals and nourishes? Jesus says, "Follow me." Amen.