

"Deepening Our Foundation: Discipleship" - October 11, 2016 by Sari Ateek

INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday, we talked about the importance of deepening our foundation as a church community so that we can continue to grow in our faith and our calling. If you missed the sermon from last Sunday, be sure to go online to our website and listen to it, because in it I make the case - including some specific eye-opening details - for why it is essential for us to deepen the foundation of our financial giving, as a spiritual practice. This morning, we continue that conversation.

STORY

When my son was about a year and a half old, he developed this really weird name for oven mitts. He would hold up an oven mitt and he would say "Ayayoo!" We had no idea where he got this word, or name, or whatever you want to call it, but every time he held an oven mitt he would say "Ayayoo" and he would try to get our attention as though we were somehow supposed to know what he was talking about. So we would say it with him... but we had no idea what he was talking about; and eventually he would lose interest, and toss the oven mitt and move on to the next thing. It was a real head scratcher. Especially since he did this for over a year.

Anyway, about a year ago we were going through some of the kids' stuff And i found a few little Hand Puppet Board Book that maybe you've seen them before. One of them is a little book about this little piggy. Another was about Noah's Arc. And then there was Old McDonald Had A Farm. When I saw this one (which I had't read to him since he was a really young child) I had an epiphany!!! Sing it with me: Old McDonald had a farm..... E..I...E...I...O!

It makes perfect sense now! All along, he was saying E..I...E...I...O!

The point is that some things make absolutely no sense if they are not presented in their proper context. In the same way, talking about financial giving as an act of worship makes no sense unless we first talk about discipleship.

DISCIPLESHIP

At the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says this to his followers: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (we've come to call this the great commission)

Go and make disciples. The word for disciple used in the New Testament is the Greek word *mathetes* which means: one who is a devoted student and follower of a particular teacher or leader with the sense of total (mental, emotional, spiritual) commitment to emulate and carry on the heartbeat (instructions, convictions, commandments, and illuminations) of that leader or teacher

So for three years - from the time he began his public ministry (from his baptism all the way to the Ascension) - Jesus made disciples. He imparted to his followers, and in particular to his 12 disciples, the all encompassing and transformational message of the Kingdom of God.

He mentored and guided them;

he moulded and shaped them

into agents of this kingdom, and then he released them and said: "Go and make disciples."

Jesus' mission was to transform the world with the love of God (actual transformation:

renewal,

redemption,

peace,

justice,

restoration of goodness) and the way he would do this is by means of making disciples.

Again, what are disciples? Those who have caught the vision: devoted students and follower who are marked by total (mental, emotional, spiritual) commitment to emulate and carry on the heartbeat of Jesus Christ.

[And just an interesting fact: The disciples did such a good job at making disciples, that not long after this movement had begun, the Roman world began to refer to these disciples as Christians. Originally this was a derogatory term that meant "little Christ"... But these early disciples embraced this label, because in fact that is how they viewed themselves. We are Christ (little Christs) to this world, and we are changing this world in the name of Christ]

OUTWARD = UPWARD

OK, so discipleship is a life of devotion and total commitment to emulating and carrying on the heartbeat of Jesus Christ for the world - His instructions & teachings, his commandments, the things that matter most.

So what are these things? What does matter the most to God as revealed to us by Jesus? What I want to do today is draw our attention to the epicenter of Jesus' message. And what I'm excited about is that once you see this, everything else you know about Jesus and what he taught (and who he was) is going to fall into place through this lens.

Matthew chapter 22. Up to this point in the Gospel, Jesus has performed all kinds of miracles, he's taught on numerous subjects, in fact, by this point in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is nearing the end of his three year ministry. In this chapter, we're told that the Pharisees - one of the Jewish sects that was very much opposed to Jesus - noticed that on one particular occasion that day, he had actually taught something that was in alignment with what they believed (and, in fact, had silenced their rival Jewish sect - the Sadducees).

So, suspending their criticism for a moment, the Pharisees (out of curiosity) sent one of their top experts in the law to ask Jesus a question that would help them understand where Jesus is coming from? (Sometimes he teaches things that we are drastically opposed to, and sometimes he teaches things that we agree with... So where is he coming from?). So, the question was intended to get at or to help them understand the heart, or the central theology of Jesus... And here it is: which commandment in the law (referring to the law of Moses) is the greatest commandment (singular)?

This would kind of be like asking one of the presidential candidates: if you could boil it all down to just one thing – what would that be? what matters most to you?

And Jesus responds this way:

37 He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment.

And before anyone could respond, (because they only asked about one) Jesus immediately tacks on another one:

39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

and Jesus concludes:

40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

2 commandments in 1:

The upward - love the Lord, and

The outward - love your neighbor

Now, we may nod our heads and say, yes that's really beautiful, but here's the thing... And this is what we need to understand: Jesus is actually addressing a specific and primary religious misunderstanding or misdirection - one that was common in Jesus's day, and one that is common today - here it is: the primary religious misdirection is that one can have an upward relationship with God separate from one's outward relationship with others:

I worship, I pray, I read scripture, I go to church, I have a spiritual life...

this is one thing here. and something separate (important but separate) is how I treat people: Love of neighbor, doing justice, caring for the needs of the poor and the oppressed, etc.

And what Jesus does (and this is radical! You see this all over his teachings and his interactions, in fact, this is the very thing he drives home over and over with his disciples) he says that not only are these two – the upward and the outward inseparable, but (listen to this) the outward fulfills the upward. When you love your neighbor, that is when you are loving God. And you cannot love, or please, or worship God if you do not love your neighbor.

(Pause and offer pastoral note: fixated on one single individual - run the risk of not hearing rest of sermon. God also doesn't ask us to exist in unhealthy paradigms.)

In Matthew chapter 25, we have a powerful teaching in which Jesus concludes "whatever you have done for the least of these you have done for me."

In the sermon on the mount Jesus says, "if you go to worship, and you're about to make an offering to God, and you remember that you have an unresolved conflict with your neighbor, leave your gift there on the altar go first be reconciled to your neighbor and then come and make your offering before God."

In the letter of first John in the New Testament, the author, one of Jesus is disciples, says the same thing but is a little less gentle about it: he says:

20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. 1 John 4:20-21 I NRSV

The outward fulfills the upward (Say that with me). Love of neighbor and love of God are inseparable.

I recently had a very organic experience of this truth. It was the end of a very long day where it was just me and the kids, and for some reason that whole day the two of them fought non-stop. I don't know what it was, maybe there was a full moon the night before, I have no idea, but they woke up that day with fangs - they were awful to one another (thankfully that's not the norm for us). So that night I'm standing there brushing my teeth trying to get them to brush theirs so that we can all just go to bed and end this horrible day... and guess what they start doing? they start arguing over who gets to use the sink first. And right around this time one of them looks at me and says "I love you daddy."

Now, to be perfectly honest with you, my first thought was: that really doesn't mean a whole lot to me right now. And you know, it was more than just having to listen to them yell at each other all day, it was the sadness - for me - of seeing seemingly ongoing and unresolved contention between my children... And I thought to myself, "more important to me in the long run than hearing the words I love you from my children, or even having a good relationship with them myself - is them having a good relationship with one another... This is my dream for them as a father, that they would always know that they are there for each other. And I always tell them that's what matters most... and so, when they fight it breaks my heart...and that also somehow communicates to me that they don't care about what matters most to me, which makes the words I love you not very meaningful. Are you with me?"

The outward fulfills the upward. Discipleship begins here. To love my human brothers and sisters is the number one way for me to love God, and to participate in making God's dream come true.

INWARD

OK, so here's the question: how do you love your neighbor?

If the outward fulfills the upward - if that's what matters- then how do you love your neighbor?

Jesus devotes a lot of time to answering this question...to teaching his disciples (and helping them comprehend) what the outward looks like. And it's in the context of the outward (which fulfills the upward) that Jesus addresses the inward. I realize that might be a little confusing, so let me expound on this. (We're still talking about discipleship).

How I treat other people is not (according to Jesus) a matter of more rules and laws and regulations that are set out here for me. The law of Moses was full of rules. In this situation you do this... if this happens, here's how you respond. In fact, to be a good Jew, one had to observe all of the rules and regulations in the law of Moses. And if you had any questions about what those are, you go to the experts, and they will help you figure out what your response should be to a particular incident or experience with your neighbor.

But Jesus, seems to have had very little interest in more external rules. Instead, from what we see in the Gospels, he was much more interested in helping develop within his disciples an internal gauge - an inward predisposition that would guide the outward behavior in relationship.

And this inward predisposition (that he wants to develop and nurture within his disciples) begins to surface as a common thread that undergirds almost everything Jesus talked about and taught in relation to the outward (how we treat others).

All right, so we're going to play a little game, I'm going to recap some of Jesus's main teachings in the next 30 seconds, and your job is to see if you can figure out what this common thread is:

- * Love one another
- * Serve (Be a servant) - give of yourself in service to others
- * Forgive
- * Care for the poor and the marginalized. Give of your means for others
- * Let the children come!
- * If your brother or sister has something against you, go and be reconciled to them.

(Are you listening? What's the thread that undergirds all of these? Let me give you a few more):

- * Be merciful as your father in heaven is merciful. Give mercy!
- * If someone takes your cloak, give him your tunic as well.
- * If someone strikes you on the right cheek, give him your left.
- * "give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." Luke 6:38

What is the thread that undergirds all of these teachings? GIVE!

We are called to give.

Jesus - through a slow and steady process of shifting their internal paradigm - instills in his disciples this inward self-perception: "I am a giver"

How do you love your neighbor?
How do you fulfill the outward?
You give.

But Why giving?

I want to invite you to consider with me for a moment the main source of the crises and the conflicts and the brokenness in our world... The very things hope will change, the very things we dream of transforming:

Is it not the epidemic of a self-centeredness that manifests itself in taking:

Taking life

taking land,
taking dignity,
taking freedom,
taking revenge,
taking and stripping resources from the environment,
taking (hoarding) money,
taking hope,
taking away a viable future from our children...

Clenched fists,
serve me,
give me more...
taking.

And Jesus says to his disciples, "not so with you!!!"

"open your hands!"

You are a child of the Kingdom of God!

We are called not to take but to give and to be radically generous givers!

(How many times should I forgive, Jesus? Seven times?

No, Jesus says, 7×70 times.

Whom should I love, just my family and friends?

No, Jesus says, love also your enemies.

Be radically generous givers.

This is the antidote...

This where the healing comes from...

This is how you will transform the world

Give your love,

give your forgiveness,

give mercy,

give money

give hope,

give yourselves in service to one another

give, be generous in your giving.

Discipleship is being a radically generous giver

When we give we are actively loving our neighbor and joining god in making

God's dream for the world come true.

And when we love our neighbor, we become lovers of God

Generous givers are spiritual Giants.

CONCLUSION

Next week, in our third and final sermon in this three sermon series, I'm going to talk about one of the most important, and perhaps most transformative, types of generous giving - money.

and just to give you a preview of the importance of this subject: of the 38 recorded parables of Jesus, 16 deal with money or possessions. In the Gospels, one out of ten verses (288 in all) deal directly with the subject of money. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 on faith, but more than 2,000 verses on money and possessions.

There's a reason for this, and that's what we're going look at next week.