

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Discipleship Series
Acts 4:32-37

Created Connected

Christian discipleship has been our focus this fall. We've been examining some very practical and straightforward ways that we can live out our following of Jesus. And if you've been around for more than a Sunday or two, you know what we've been looking at 6 marks of discipleship—6 practices that will help us grow in faith. ① PRAY daily; ② WORSHIP weekly; ③ READ the Bible; ④ SERVE at and beyond First Presbyterian Church; ⑤ Be in RELATIONSHIP to encourage spiritual growth in others; and ⑥ GIVE of my time, talents and resources. We've already been through the 6 marks once and we're now halfway through them a second time. The first time we took them in the order in which I just laid them out. This second time around though we're not taking them in the same order. Which can leave one guessing each week as to which one will be covered next.

The story of the early church in the book of Acts certainly speaks to a number of these marks of discipleship. At first glance it would seem that this account of the believers sharing their possessions would speak to the discipleship mark calling for us to give of time, talent and resources—and in particular here, material resources. Because as we read here the group was of one mind and one heart and soul and that they had done away with the concept of private ownership. Everything that one had when coming into the community of Christ was understood to be owned and held in common. The needs of each person in the community were then met from the pooled resources so that there would be no need among the community of believers. This was a most radical practice in the early church. It was a communism of sorts that makes us Americans uneasy at best and downright repulsed at worst. And if you read into the next verses that follow what we read, the story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira is told in which the two of them conspire to hold back some of the proceeds of the sale of their land before giving the rest to the Christian community. And when their lie of having given all the proceeds to the community is exposed each of them in turn is struck dead! Wow! Is there a stewardship sermon there or what?

Well, yes, we are in the midst of our annual financial stewardship campaign when your pledges are being received to aid the church in planning for the upcoming new year. But perhaps you'll be happy to know that the 6th mark of discipleship to give of my time, talent and resources is not the focus of today's service. Those of you keeping track knew this already since we've already had two Sunday's on this mark.

This story could also be the basis for looking at our worship life and the 2nd mark of discipleship to worship weekly. For we read that "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them." (Acts 4:33) Clearly the preaching and worship life of the early Christian community was vibrant and spirit-filled, providing inspiration as well as the opportunity to thank God for their life and faith. But that was the theme last week—remember? It's not about me. It's all about God and how we acknowledge God as the source of everything good.

So if the theme today isn't giving and it isn't the worship weekly one, which one is it? The last three remaining are pray daily, serve at and beyond the church, and be in

relationship to encourage spiritual growth in others. And indeed it is this one about relationship that is our focus today. The way it was summarized the first time around a few weeks ago was that there are no solo Christians. You can't be a Christian apart from relationships with other Christians.

This description of the closeness of the early Christian community certainly corroborates this. The communal ownership of property also points to this interrelatedness of these Christians. The caring for one another, ensuring adequate provision for each member speaks to this. And the growing together in faith as they worshiped and glorified God together as well.

God created human creatures to be in relationship with each other. God's intention is that we not be left alone and isolated. In fact to be human is to be in interconnected relationships.

You know there has been a lot of attention in the last two sessions of the Montana legislature on the efforts to bring about the abolition of capital punishment in the state. In each of the last two sessions the effort to remove the death penalty from the state almost succeeded. When we think about the death penalty, it is often described as the ultimate punishment— the taking of the life of one who is convicted of a crime so heinous that any sentence shy of death is inadequate. But with increasing evidence of the unevenness of how this punishment has been meted out, along with the finality of it that cannot be undone when a mistake is discovered, it is being reconsidered in state after state across the country.

Have you ever considered what the next most extreme punishment is after the death penalty, apart from torture? According to the Mannheim Centre for Criminology at the London School of Economics and Political Science solitary confinement is second only to capital punishment. According to a study on this issue, "solitary confinement has a well documented negative impact on mental health and well-being and may amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, particularly when used for a prolonged time." It goes on to say, "Solitary confinement is one of the oldest and most enduring prison practices. Bar the death penalty, it is also the most extreme penalty which can legally be imposed on prisoners. Solitary confinement was first widely and systematically used on both sides of the Atlantic in the 'separate' and 'silent' penitentiaries of the 19th century, with the aim of reforming convicts. It was believed that once left alone with their conscience and the Bible, prisoners would engage in inner reflection, see the error of their ways and be reformed into law abiding citizens. It soon transpired, however, that rather than being reformed, many prisoners became mentally ill, and there was little evidence that the newly built, expensive prisons were more successful than their predecessors in reducing offending." (Sharon Shalev, *A sourcebook on solitary confinement*, 2008, pp iii, 2) The human psyche is such that when a person is denied interaction and relatedness to another or others, the mental stability and well-being of the person is compromised if not undermined.

To some of us who are introverts this can at first seem a surprise. But then when we realize the extent of solitary confinement to the point that there is almost no interaction at all, then the pain and anguish of such isolation begins to be more understandable.

The counter-example of solitary confinement firmly undergirds this human need that we have for connectedness and relatedness. From our Christian perspective we affirm that throughout history, God has called to the people of creation to live in relationship and in community. The snapshot of that first generation of Christian believers provides inspiration and a goal toward which we strive.

When it comes to our discipleship there is an added dimension with regard to our relationships with others. And that is the matter of responsibility and accountability. When we make a commitment to grow in faith, that growth happens best when we have partners or compatriots to inspire, cajole and encourage. It's not unlike the matter of physical fitness and training. Our chances of sticking to a new year's resolution to start working out regularly in order to improve fitness and weight control are greatly increased when we have an accountability partner. Because not only do we risk letting ourselves down, we risk letting down our partner as well.

As we continue to encourage this commitment or re-commitment to discipleship, we are looking to what we're calling Commitment Sunday to be two weeks from today, on November 22. That will be the last Sunday in this 12-week series where the marks of discipleship have been unpacked. That Sunday's discipleship mark will be Pray daily, the first mark that we introduced way back on September 6. In the services on November 22 we will be giving you the opportunity to make a commitment to making these 6 marks of discipleship a part of your Christian life. While we know that many of you have already been striving to implement these marks of discipleship, the service on November 22 will be your opportunity to formally make that commitment. It is hoped that by making this commitment in a more formal and official way, we will be able to support one another in this journey of discipleship. This will be the beginning of how we can become accountable to those in our faith community.

So while we have not gone so far as to call for all property being communal property, we are putting out the call for our faith commitment to match the unity of spirit and commitment of those who began the Christian community those 2000 years ago. We believe that the Holy Spirit has been, is, and will continue to blow in and among and through us as we deepen our faith and grow toward spiritual maturity.

To Jesus Christ, who loves us
and freed us from our sins by his blood
and made us to be a kingdom,
priests of his God and Father,
to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.
Amen. (*Rev. 1:5, 6*)