

The Fourth Mark of Discipleship: Disciples are Committed to Learning and Growing

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2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5

14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, 15 and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. 4 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: 2 proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. 5 As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

As we continue our journey with Jesus, we have said that these are six marks of discipleship. As you may remember, the first three marks are first disciples offer welcome and hospitality, disciples served do worship the living God. This morning, I want to talk with you about the fourth mark of Christian discipleship which is that disciples are committed to learning and growing. Our text this morning comes from First Timothy, where we could conclude that learning and growing means steeping ourselves in the faith of our childhood. It could mean wandering away from myths to pursue truth. It means discerning what is idle chatter to focus on scripture to help us get clearer about who we are and what believe. Timothy teaches us to wander away from myths to pursue the truth.

But what does it mean to pursue the truth? For some it really does mean drawing on the faith our childhoods and not disrupting it in anyway. What we learned as children in scripture is still true today. Well sort of. In seminary some years ago, I occasionally met people who felt a strong call to ministry. Unfortunately, within a few weeks of their first year in seminary they sadly became disillusioned because what they learned seemed to take them away from the truths in scripture they were taught as children. The more precise moment of disillusionment came when an Old Testament professor delivered a lecture where he or she said there were not one but two creation stories to be found in the

book of Genesis. Two different and contradictory accounts of how it all began.

Really? For those here who might not be aware, there are not one, but two creation stories, in the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible. Those two creation stories were written by two different authors at two different times in history. The oldest creation story is not actually found in the first chapter of Genesis but instead in the second chapter. It is in this story where we learn how “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. 8 And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9 Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” God was also concerned that the man or Adam should not be alone. So God took Adam’s rib to give him a partner or a woman as the case may be. Later in chapter 3, God could be found walking in the garden where Adam and Eve dwelled before been banished from the garden.

The oldest creation story was written about 800 BCE by the Yahwist writers. The Yahwist writers were people of the land who lived in a more stable and unified Israel than 300 years later where Israel was not so stable and unified. The Yahwist style of writing, using very agrarian images, was gentler and a little more folks-y. Hence in this oldest account, we get this picture of God shaping humanity out of dirt with his or her hands and actually walking in the garden like a fruit tree farmer might his inspect his trees.

The second creation story is found in the first chapter of Genesis. It offers a picture of a God who is more distant. God is more transcendent and less touchy-feely. The God in this second creation story created the heavens and earth in earth in five days and created human beings in the sixth day before resting on the seventh day and calling it good. In this account human being are created more towards the end than at the beginning of the creation process. It’s the last thing God does than the first.

The second creation story was written about 300 years later than the first creation story. And the second creation story was written by priestly writers. The priestly writers were the liturgical leaders and custodians in the temple who were trying to bring order to a very unstable political situation where a unified Israel was falling apart and the temple was very close to being destroyed. For the priestly writers, God did not pick up dirt in his hands or walk in gardens. Instead God was transcendent. God created from afar.

The second creation account was written much in the shape of a responsive temple liturgy with a predictable rhythm that brought order out of chaos. You have heard the story right?

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And then the audience in temple worship

would respond to the priest and say, “there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” And then the priest would say in the liturgy let God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ 7 So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. 8 God called the dome Sky. And the audience in the temple would say, “there was evening and there was morning, the second day.” And so it went. Take note of the orderly picture of God and God’s distance from the Earth.

The Old Testament professor offered these two creation accounts to help us understand the fullness of God. God is immanent and God is transcendent. God is immanent by which we mean she is as close to us breathing and walks with us in the Garden. Moreover as human beings we need companionship, friendship and connection to understand who God is. God does not intend humans to be alone. Hence God created for the lonely man a partner. And yet God is also transcendent and cannot be limited by the physical world. God is bigger than any our imaginations or what we can see in our own limited physical world. God is more expansive the heavens.

The creation stories, the professor explained, were written to offer two equally true pictures about the nature of God and what God wants for creation and human kind. The professor also explained that these creation stories are not factual scientific accounts about how the world was actually created. Instead, the professor said these accounts are theological statement about the nature of God. The stories are attempts by human beings to describe in theological and yes political terms the nature of God and how God acts in the world.

Some of those students became upset by what they heard. Why is that? Because some were taught as children and youth by their parents and pastors that there was one creation story and not two. And the real story was found in Genesis 1 which was a scientific account of how the world was actually created. Moreover, God himself actually wrote these accounts. You had to believe these things to be a real Christian or so some of these students thought. So for the Old Testament professor to suggest that these were not scientific accounts written by God but instead more theological statements about the nature of God, lead these students to call that professor’s Christian faith into question.

The next crisis came in New Testament class when the professor said that finding salvation through Jesus Christ could be under understood in a multiple ways. Salvation is not really about making a personal profession in Jesus Christ so you will get to heaven the professor explained. Jesus is not a death insurance policy. Instead, it is possible the professor would explain, to put Jesus at the center of your life without believing he is your personal savior who will keep you out of hell. And by the way, the professor would say, if God’s love is eternal and for all people there probably is not a hell anyway. The only hell from which humanity must be saved is the hell they experience here on earth. The salvation project of disciples is to counter the death dealing and discriminating forces in this world, which would diminish humanity.

So now there was a second crisis where the sacred teaching of their collective childhoods about how Jesus saves and for what purpose was called into question. Do you mean to

say, the student would ask, that you could still get to heaven by not actually saying the words that Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior? That did not sound quite Christian to them. New Testament professor could also be deemed as someone who was not a Christian for saying these things.

These spiritual crises were often hard for these students to handle. Occasionally, it came to pass, that some students left the seminary to go to a place that, in their view, was more “Bible-believing” which would not fundamentally undermine their childhood understanding of these sacred writings. But there were other students who did not let this crisis overwhelm them. Instead, they came to trust that there was nothing wrong with intellectual curiosity where they could challenge the faith of their childhoods. As they probed the depths and contradictions found in scripture, they discovered an amazingly rich tapestry of thought, feeling and argument. They came to see how Christians over the century in their quest to be true to scripture saw the bible as opening vast new vistas of knowledge and child-like wonder that helped them understand the fullness of God. They came to appreciate what Karl Barth said many years ago that he took scripture seriously enough not to take it literally. Scripture should open minds and not close them.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means being committed to a life of inquiry and curiosity. Timothy invites us to continually seek the truth. And in searching for truth we are not threatened by complexity but learn to listen to it in order to arrive at a new understanding. Disciples are intellectually curious and not overly threatened by new ideas and perspectives. We take seriously the faith of our childhoods but not in a rigid sort of way. We even come to see that some parts our childhood faith are not to be abandoned at all, but seen with new eyes. And knowledge and exploration should help us lead a life where we seek to enrich humanity and all creation, instead of destroying it. In this church may we help you not be afraid of probing the complex mysteries of God and the world that our faith might be enriched rather than destroyed. Amen.