

“Creating a Community of Disciples”

I just finished a book this week by one of my favorite authors, Donald Miller. It's called “A Million Miles in a Thousand Years.” In the book, Donald is approached by some filmmakers who want to make a movie of one of his previous books, “Blue Like Jazz,” which is a collection of somewhat humorous stories from his life about faith. What he discovers in the process is that they don't want to make a movie specifically about his life; instead, they want to make a movie of a fictional character based on his stories. Because his life, most of our lives are not suited for a movie, for many reasons. This challenged him from the stagnant place he had been at to go and make his life a better story. And so in the book, he talks about the different struggles in facing his own life, and all of the people that he encounters that help him on his journey. Through their stories, advice, and challenges, he is able to take a hard look at himself and work towards directing his life into a better story.

Each of us is living out a story in our lives. Some of us have funny stories, some have sad stories, some have romantic stories. The people that we are and the things that we do create the character and action in our stories.

Our faith, our Christian life, is a part of our stories. I would venture to say that it is the main part, or at least, it should be the main part, of our stories.

Life, however, is not like a movie. It isn't always exciting, and sometimes, it seems like the story is stalled somewhere in the middle. Like the author, we might find our lives stuck in routine, work, tv, sleep, without any change in sight. Because our lives are significantly longer than a 2 hour movie, this might happen more often than we'd like.

And sometimes, our faith stories stall out as well.

He compares it to paddling a kayak across a lake, reaching the middle, and realizing that you are still so far from the other side and also just as far from the original shore. You could go back to comfort, where you once were, or you could go forward to transformation, where you would like to be. In any case, it often feels like you are paddling and going nowhere.

And like the author, we need people in our lives, their stories, their advice, their challenges, to help move our stories forward.

Today we're going to talk about the last part of our vision statement, which is: equipping children, youth, and adults for Christian Discipleship.

I'm going to suggest that a crucial part of equipping for Christian Discipleship is that we allow our story to interact with other's stories; that we allow others to speak into our lives, and that we speak into other's lives. I'm talking about relational accountability.

We have a great equipping program at Oak Grove. We have Sunday School available for all ages which is a time set aside that we can study

and discuss Scripture and relevant Christian and life issues together. And the extremely high percentage of attendance to Sunday School is pretty incredible considering that Sunday School nationwide is failing and being phased out of churches. For the youth, outside of Sunday mornings we have Bible Bonanza for the younger kids and JYF and MYF which gives us time together to worship and understand our own faith a little better. For some adults who have chosen to participate, there are Small Groups as well as a Wednesday Night Prayer Time where we search and discuss Scripture together and participate in communion.

I believe that one of our strengths is that we're very intentional about providing space for everyone to grow; not that we're perfect at it, but we are making an effort. But do we know in all of our efforts, if people at Oak Grove are really being equipped for discipleship? Do we assume that just because we've created these programs that they are functioning like they should? As a church, are we becoming disciples of Christ? Is there even a way to measure discipleship, and if there were, what would we be looking for?

These are important things to consider, when thinking about our personal stories and our collective story as a church. It can be uncomfortable, though, to evaluate our own faith and discern the faith of others, in a non-judgmental sense.

A few years ago, one of the largest mega-churches in the nation, Willow Creek from the Chicago area, released a study that they had been doing on themselves called "Reveal." They had spent many years trying to attract people to Christ by providing "cool" services to draw people in.

And it worked; the church grew very large. In 2004, the average attendance was 24,000. Well, what they found out in this study was that even though the church seemed to be thriving, people within it were really struggling, and many were considering leaving. They felt that the way that Willow Creek did church lacked depth.

And so they took a hard look at themselves, realized their weaknesses, and adjusted for the sake of the kingdom. They needed to know that what they were doing worked.

As an organization, they submitted themselves to accountability in order to move their collective story forward.

One of the things that I feel like my friends and I really missed from the church when we were in high school was peer accountability. We participated in church programs and events which helped to heighten our faith, on an emotional level. But nobody really sat down with us to help us understand our faith better, to see where we were really at. At that time, I'm not so sure that we could've really answered those questions. Introspection is not necessarily a strong point for high schoolers, no offense. But, it wasn't facilitated either. I think that people's approach to youth group at the time at least, was that if they created programs and opportunities and we did them, then those programs would do their jobs and we would be disciples. It was almost like a formula or a recipe. Take 5 kids, add pizza, Christian rock, and a message about the dangers of sex, bake for four years, and out comes disciples.

Luckily, this approach worked for me. However, for many of my friends, it did not, and they have since left the church.

What was the problem? There was no personal accountability. People didn't challenge our stories with their own stories.

Here's the truth though, our culture does not encourage accountability or vulnerability. We are told not to be open to one another because we do not want to compromise ourselves. We don't want to get hurt. This philosophy has infiltrated the church. And because of that, we don't share our stories with one another. We disregard Paul's message in Galatians 6:2 that says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Big IDEA: But this sharing of stories, this personal accountability, is essential to discipleship.

Transition: In order to get a better picture of discipleship through accountability, or story sharing, we're going to take a look at two famous discipling relationships in the Bible: Eli and Samuel in the OT and Paul and Timothy in the NT. As we discuss these characters, examine their relationships, and point out different aspects of discipleship found within the passages, I want to challenge you to look at your own lives, your own relationships, communal circles, and church experiences, and ask yourselves these two questions: who am I sharing my story with, and who is sharing their story with me?

Discipling in the OT: Samuel and Eli

The book of 1st Samuel begins with a man and his two wives, one of whom could not have children. Hannah, as she was called, prayed fervently for God to give her a child; even though her husband treated her extremely well, in fact, he gave her double portions because he felt so bad about her predicament. But his other wife tormented her because she did have children. One day, when they had gone to the temple to offer sacrifices, Hannah was praying for God to give her a child; she spoke from an anguish so deep that her mouth was moving during the prayer. She prayed that if God would only give her a child, she would dedicate him to the service of God. The priest, Eli, thought that she was drunk and told her to leave. She told him that she wasn't drunk and explained that she was praying out of grief. He saw that what she said was the truth and blessed her. Hannah became pregnant and, after she gave birth and weaned the boy, brought him to the temple for dedication and gave him to the service of Eli.

Now, I don't know if you're aware of this or not, but my job description says nothing about physically raising other people's children in the priesthood. If somebody drops their infant off at my office because they promised that they would give him or her over to God, I will not be happy, and I will then in turn drop it off in Dick's office.

Apparently, though, that was not an altogether uncommon practice in the OT. And so it is here that Samuel and Eli enter into a discipling relationship. By spending this time with the priest, Samuel was able to learn about the law and how to be a good Jew.

A crucial point in their story occurs in chapter 3 of the book when Samuel is still young. Samuel, while sleeping is awakened by a voice

calling to him. He assumes that it is the priest, and so he goes to the priest. But Eli tells him he did not call for him and to go back to bed. This happens again. Finally, the third time Samuel goes to wake up Eli, this happens:

1 Samuel 3: 8-10

⁸ *A third time the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me."*

Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy.⁹ So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ *The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"*

Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

Eli realizes that it is God calling to Samuel, and helps Samuel to recognize this. And so at this point, Samuel goes from being a simple performer of God's work to becoming a called servant. Now, I think is an essential part in discipling, helping one another to recognize God's calling in our lives, and encouraging one another to act on this.

I want you to notice something about Eli's character. Though he was a priest with whom Samuel was entrusted, he did not always do the right thing and would not have necessarily been known for being a good person. In fact, God came to give a message to Samuel about Eli, that because of the wickedness of his sons his line as part of the priesthood would fail.

Here's the lesson, a perfect story is not a qualifier for being a discipler. Most, if not all, people called in the Bible for ministry felt that they were unworthy. And despite this, they were able to do incredible things for the kingdom because it was not them, it was God through them.

Discipling in the NT: Paul and Timothy

Let's now take a quick moment to move to the NT and take a look at the relationship between Paul and Timothy, which begins in Acts 16: 1-5. Paul, in his travels, comes across this young man who is very highly spoken of by his family and neighbors. Paul must have seen something in him, some sort of potential, because he decided to take Timothy along with him, to have him participate in the mission work. Luke writes that:

Acts 16: 1-5

¹ Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. ² The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. ³ Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Paul lived life with Timothy; he allowed their stories to intersect. And in that way, Timothy learned how to be a disciple, not through lecture or theory, but through practice and with the modeling of Paul.

They continued to travel together until Paul saw that Timothy was ready to go out on his own. And so he sent him. And like any good mentor, Paul continued to check in on and encourage Timothy.

I want to read through some of the charges that Paul gives to Timothy through his letters, and as I do, I want you to notice some of the things that he is trying to pass on.

1 Timothy 1: 1-2

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

² To Timothy my true son in the faith:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

First, he calls Timothy his “true son.” Paul thought an awful lot of Timothy. He then grants that Timothy might be receiving the peace of God in his ministry. Paul genuinely cared for him.

1 Timothy 1: 18-19

¹⁸ Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, ¹⁹ holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith.

Again, Paul refers to him as his son. And he reminds Timothy of his own spiritual journey; Timothy, you have been prophesied about. You are going to do great things for God. He continues in both first and second Timothy, telling Timothy to “pursue righteousness,” “turn away from godless chatter,” and to “continue in what you have learned...because you know those from whom you learned it.” Paul was concerned about Timothy, even from a distance, and was eager to impart as much wisdom as he had learned in his own life to him.

Conclusion:

In both of these stories, we see different aspects of accountability in discipleship. I didn't take the time to point them all out, in part because I wanted you all to have the opportunity to notice them yourselves, to see what struck you, maybe even something you relate to.

Here is a general observation, though. Sometimes relational discipleship and accountability is messy; anything involving people gets messy. The paths described are not always clear, nor do they necessarily apply to everybody's experience. What is essential is that in both cases, there are people getting together and sharing in life's messiness. Share your story. Allow your story to inspire others stories. Allow their stories to inspire yours. If we truly want to become Disciples at Oak Grove, we need to be in relationship, in community.