

## **Disciples in a Discipline**

A sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church  
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Texts: Ecclesiasticus 6:32-37; Colossians 2:1-5

If I use the word “church” and “discipline” in the same sentence, what comes to mind? Many of you jump to the meaning of discipline as punishment. As in, you broke the rules of the church and now we punish you by shunning you. Many people have a lot of negative connotations with this meaning of the word discipline. But that is not what I am talking about today. I am talking about discipline and church, but I’m using a different meaning of the word “discipline.” Today I am talking about the church as the arena for learning.

A young person is starting university and you ask them, “What discipline are you in, arts or sciences?” They might say, “I’m in medicine” or “I’m in engineering”. The word discipline here means a body of knowledge that is passed on. The Latin word for the verb “to learn” is *discere*. It’s from this word that we get the English word ‘disciple’ which means learner. The Latin word *disciplina* means instruction.

We are familiar with the word “disciples” because that is what the gospels calls the twelve people chosen by Jesus. They were learners, who wanted to be instructed by their Teacher. Teacher with a capital T, they eventually realized. They wanted to learn the wisdom that Jesus taught. Last week we read from Ephesians where we were reminded that our task is to “learn Christ.” The discipline of learning Christ is not a solitary endeavour, but something that is undertaken in a community of learners.

Community is the essence of a discipline. Let me give you a simple illustration. Picture this: Someone makes a decision to follow Jesus, the minister baptizes them, and says, “May God bless you and make you a blessing,” Then immediately they both go together to the door of the church, the minister shakes their hand and says, “Go out into the world! You’re baptized now, you are Christian...best wishes with that! We’ll meet up in heaven! Have a great life!”

Picture this, a person says, “I want to be a doctor.” The people from the university come down and say, “Good career choice!” She pays her fees and they give her 150 books and say, “It’s all here, everything you need to learn. Go off and learn these, learn it all and you will be a doctor my friend! Good luck!!!”

Both of these situations are ridiculous to us. The discipline of learning Christ is something that needs to be done in community, just as obviously as the discipline of becoming a doctor is learned within a community of doctors. The medical student is brought into a community of other learners, a community where teachers are doctors, and learning is carefully shepherded by doctors who walk alongside in the everyday work of healing.

In a similar way, a Christian needs the company of Christians. The discipline of learning holiness is not possible to do alone. Holiness is not a matter of going and reading one hundred books and assimilating it all in your mind and then achieving holiness. It has to do with learning in community, together.

In our society we find communities of discipline wherever there is knowledge that involves responsibility. The person who is going to be diagnosing my illness, we want them to have been trained by a community. The person who builds the bridge over the North Saskatchewan River, we want them to have been trained by a community. We want the electricity in our buildings to be put in and inspected by a professional trained in a community.

And in all these disciplines, there is not just a one-time acquiring of knowledge, there is continuing accountability and responsibility throughout their professional lives. If the patient dies, if the bridge falls down, if the building burns up—the doctor, the engineer, the electrician are held accountable. The mistakes are examined, and the community asks, “How can we learn from this?” In a discipline, learning is continuous, it’s not a static thing. We encounter new situations all the time, so the discipline evolves and changes over time.

I chose the reading from Ecclesiasticus today because it talked about discipline in the sense of learning wisdom. Ecclesiasticus encourages the reader to choose the discipline of wisdom. It does involve learning and studying the statues of the Lord. But it’s more than that. Going into a little room and beavering away on ancient scrolls and texts is not enough. These verses tell us that we need to seek out a community to learn wisdom. Attach yourself to wise people. Listen to elders, seek out godly discourse. I love the image: “If you see an intelligent person, rise early to visit him; let your foot wear out his doorstep.” Wisdom is not something you can do alone.

In my experience, there is something to be learned from everyone at church. Take last Sunday. Can I learn from the cheerfulness of the people serving the potluck in the kitchen last week after the service? Absolutely. In other settings I have seen people serving at potlucks who do nothing but complain: “Why do I always have to do this, why do we have these potlucks, this isn’t fair that this work falls on my shoulders.” But the people I talked to on Sunday were happy to serve. Can I learn from the exuberance of little children, who are always ready to engage you? “Let’s read a book right now,” they say. They sit down, totally absorbed in the story. They live in the moment. There is wisdom there. Can I learn from people who live with chronic pain or fatigue? Absolutely, I see them hearing God’s voice in the midst of their trials, I see them still finding ways to serve. Our community is a rich environment for learning wisdom if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

When we do this, we join with Jesus, who also learned wisdom from the community around him. Jesus was born not knowing anything, just like the rest of us. He trekked to the synagogue, to the Temple with his family. He received the wisdom from the wise people around him, whether they were Jewish or Gentile. He gleaned and gathered the best that his culture and his faith could offer. The Bible tells us he grew in wisdom and stature as he went from being a child to being a man.

Interestingly, this text from Ecclesiasticus and the one from I Peter both talk about the readers as children. We have a lot to learn. We have not arrived yet. And the writer of I Peter issues a challenge: “Prepare your minds for action”, he declares. “Discipline yourselves,” the writer continues. As Jesus was holy, “be holy yourselves in all your conduct.” Learn from the Teacher. Learn from each other. Are we on the look-out for holiness?

Discipline implies work, it implies effort. There’s a discipline to discipline. Sometimes people have good intentions of coming to church, but they decide not to come anymore. I remember baptizing one young man, and it was the very last time he darkened the door of the church. There are lots of reasons why some people leave church. Maybe it’s because it takes too much time. Sunday is our day off, our free time is very precious to us.

Or maybe sometimes church is just too much work. We would have to meet people and get out of our comfort zone, and be challenged, and we are not sure we are up for that. It’s sort of like someone dreaming about being an engineer, they want to build a bridge. They enrol in the discipline of engineering, but they are surprised at how much work it is. It cuts into their social life in a major way! They really want to build bridges, but they don’t really want to study physics, they don’t really want to take exams. There is a high attrition rate in first year engineering programs because it is just too much work.

Perhaps in a similar way, people dream about doing something beautiful for God, they dream about being part of a vital exciting Christian community, they want someday to make a lavish sacrifice for God. But the reality is that there are many mundane steps to achieving those lofty goals. We are

schooled in sacrifice. We learn about sacrifice in small ways, by giving time (an hour on a Sunday morning), money (in the offering plate), our gifts (being asked to serve in the church and in the community). We learn about sacrifice by watching others, and seeing how they serve. When we are faithful in small sacrifices, we become more capable and more able to contribute in bigger ways.

Jesus is clear that following him is a full-time occupation, a life-consuming task that happens in the community of the church. The full-time nature of discipline is not unique to Christianity. Imagine if doctors could be educated on a part-time basis. Someone tells you, "I decided to become a doctor, I studied part-time, I took one course a year in night school for twelve years, and now I'm graduating, do you want to be my first patient?" Our understanding of the discipline of medicine is that it takes a full-time devotion to studies. Would Christianity be any less rigorous? It's not for the faint of heart.

Today we welcomed a new person into church membership. In the Mennonite tradition, adult believers covenant or promise to stay together, to work on learning Christ together. We do this for the long term, through all of life's ups and downs, from the beginning to the end. There are many people in our community that aren't members, and they love and are loved as our Christian brothers and sisters. But membership is a public declaration of love and commitment. A couple living together can be completely loving and committed, but we believe that making a public marriage commitment to stay together, and to love, honour and cherish each other is still important. In a similar way, church membership is a promise to learn Christ together. To learn love together. To be all-in.

Discipline requires commitment in success and failure. A couple of years ago I read a book called "Pillars of the Earth" by Ken Follett. It's a complicated story set in the twelfth century, but one of the things that captured my imagination about this novel was that it talks about people who were building cathedrals. Visionary builders in different areas of Europe were creating new styles of buildings, and in the story there's a dramatic account of a cathedral falling down on the heads of the worshippers. For cathedral builders, there was trial and there was error as they tried to build more beautiful and more lofty structures. Some buildings were very beautiful, but they were not strong enough to last, they were not safe. The cathedral builders learned from every mistake, whether it was their own or other people's mistakes. Cathedral builders learned their discipline in the community of cathedral builders. They observed each others' work minutely. The collapse of a cathedral was not a reason to stop building cathedrals. It was a reason to try a new way of buttressing high walls and vaulted ceilings.

That story to me is a good analogy for the discipline of learning Christ in community. There are wonderful wise things that happen in church every single time we meet. And then there are the things that aren't working out so well. We see the collapse of relationships, people get hurt; there is a lot of rubble in church life.

Discipline means that you stick with the community, to see what comes out of that mistake. Where do we go from here, how do we rebuild, how do we do that together? Membership in a church is a way of gluing us together, a public commitment to stick with the discipline.

I have known many people who have drifted in and out of church communities...or we stop going to church for many years, maybe dabble in this community, dabble in that community. I actually am sympathetic towards people who go from church to church, because there is wisdom to be learned from every tradition. There is something exciting about the diversity of wisdom.

However, my observation is that the majority of people don't go from church to church to gather wisdom. We go from church to church because we are disillusioned. When mistakes are made, when we find it tough slogging, we decide, "This church is no good." We lose heart, we go somewhere else trying to find a better church.

The discipline of commitment, the discipline of community, the discipline of Christian community involves sticking it out even when community is imperfect. If the goal is love, the imperfections and disagreements are the medium through which our love is tested and made stronger.

Is the discipline of learning Christ just the exact same as learning any other discipline? Is it a human endeavor just like every other human endeavour? Is this all just human beings muddling along trying to learn by themselves? Where is God in this picture?

The writer of Ecclesiasticus says that God is vitally involved.

*Reflect on the statutes of the Lord,  
and meditate at all times on his commandments.  
It is he who will give insight to your mind,  
and your desire for wisdom will be granted.*

God is the granter of insights, God is the one who helps the penny drop, who enables us to see the big picture. It is a human endeavor. People have to make the trek every day to the wise person's door. It's a profoundly human endeavor, but God is incarnated precisely within that humanness.

Jesus talked about this mystery. He said, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). It doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit comes and makes the church perfect. Instead, I think we see that God comes and dwells with us even in the midst of our brokenness, even in the messiest situation we find ourselves in.

In my own experience of the church, I've seen something I can't explain with just human effort. Sometimes church life is so fabulous. I've seen people working together, and marvelous things coming out of community. Peace and harmony and love...it happens. Except when it doesn't. The church is like the girl from the nursery rhyme. You know it, "There was a little girl who had a little curl, right in the middle of her forehead. And when she was good she was very very good, but when she was bad she was horrid." There is something particularly horrid and ugly about things falling apart in the church. People say things and do things they should never say and do in Christian community. Maybe you can remember a time in the life of a church you've been a part of. The rubble of good intentions and high ideals are piled high all around you. It is very very tempting to walk out of there. There has to be some moral high ground that is a bit tidier than this!

But that's where I've seen something mysterious happening. I remember being in a church meeting when all hell was breaking loose. A church conflict was coming to a head. People were betrayed, lies had been spread, half-truths were everywhere and mistrust permeated the room. As far as the discipline of love goes, it was pretty much of a low point. But that's where I saw the Holy Spirit working in us and through us. You see one person showing a spirit of true humility. You see another person not responding angrily to a verbal attack, but instead offering words of kindness. Something subtle starts to shift. Someone says, "We need to pray about this." Over days and weeks, people take this brokenness to God, and come back a month later with a different spirit. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, and I will give you rest. I am confident that even when our best efforts fail in our discipline of being church, and they do fail in dramatic ways, the Holy Spirit is still at work, teaching us, molding us.

It boils down to the statement that the writer of Ecclesiasticus makes, "If you are willing, my child, you can be disciplined." "If you are willing..." it's an invitation. Are you willing to devote your heart and soul and mind to learning Christ? If you are willing, if that is your goal, then enroll in church school. Do that by being baptized, do that by making a commitment and becoming a member of this church if you haven't done that already. If you are a member, how committed are you to the discipline of learning Christ here and now, in this place and time? Are your eyes peeled, looking to learn wisdom from the people on your right and on your left? From the very young, and the very old, and everyone in between? Are you schooling those around you in love, in sacrifice, by the way you are living your life? Do you truly consider yourself a disciple in a discipline? My brothers and sisters, Jesus is calling. Calling you to prepare your minds for action. School is in session.

NOTE: One of today's readings is from the book of Ecclesiasticus. The oldest name for this book was Sirach, after the author, but it came to be known as Ecclesiasticus, which means "of the church", because it was read so often in the early church. This book, probably written a couple of centuries before Jesus, was part of the Jewish wisdom tradition. It was included in some collections of Jewish scriptures, notably the Septuagint, and it's likely that Jesus would have heard it read. Ecclesiasticus was included in the earliest manuscripts of our Christian bible, and was part of the Bible until the Protestant reformation took it out. But even Martin Luther believed that it was a helpful book that should be read. Some of you are participating in the Sunday school class led by Katrina on the book of James; Ecclesiasticus was seen as an influence on the writer of James.