

Real Faith for Real Life: Living Discipleship

Lessons: Matthew 28:16-20 & Ephesians 4:11-16

(Opening: Person in polo shirt and khakis pushes TV into front of sanctuary, and pulls chair up to face it. Person in sweats and t-shirt enters through side door, sits down in chair, and turns on video. Video shows workout tape. Person watches for 1 minute, then says, Amen. S/he shuts off the TV, then exits out the door whence s/he entered.)

Does anyone know the date today? January 29, right. How do you know? You can look at the calendar, of course. You can also tell it's the end of January by the many open parking spaces at health clubs.

At the health club I use, during the first week of January, after the excesses of Christmas and Hanukkah and holiday parties, the offices are packed. Every salesperson is surrounded by people wanting to join. By the second week of January, the sales force is less busy, but the health club itself is packed.

There are three sets of people in the club in early January. One set is the devoted regulars — the people who work out fairly regularly, try to watch what they eat, and so forth. Another set of people joined the health club and immediately signed up with a personal trainer; they are walking around in pairs, with the trainer helping the newbie use the machines properly. The third set joined in January as well, but are determined to get fit by themselves; they look worried and distracted in between sets. Sometimes people in this third group come with friends; in that case they spend much of their time chatting with each other while they lounge on the machines.

By the third week of January health club attendance is at its peak. One day last week I couldn't park — I had to use a separate parking lot.

But this week, the fourth week of January, it was no problem. The crowds had thinned significantly. The newbies who are working with trainers are still there, and learning, and working out. A few of the ones who came with friends are still there. These novices — the ones getting help from trainers and friends — are on the road to being devoted regulars.

Why does this happen?

What is the difference between the sets of people – between the devoted regulars, who will continue to work out and care about their health even if that particular club closes, and the newbies who keep at it and become devoted, and those who start up every January 2nd and stop three weeks later, every year?

The ones who start and stop every year have a few things in common: They tend to switch health clubs. They switch methodologies – weights OR pilates OR yoga OR running. The ones who fail often go it alone. Or they go only when they're feeling fat or guilty.

All of the ones who drop out, year after year, think of working out as something you add to your normal life, rather than the approach you take to living. So, from time to time, they realize they're not healthy and go to a health club for a fix. Or to be fixed. Then, when they're feeling better, or lazier, they stop. Until the next time they think they need a fix of "health."

Some people even seem to think that they can read a book on health, or watch a program on health, and that alone will change their lives. As if simply understanding theory makes you live differently.

If you ask an excellent doctor, fitness expert, nutritionist, or personal coach how to be fit and healthy, what will she say? Do a crash diet and exercise program for 2 weeks and then go back to what you were doing? Of course not.

If you want to be healthy, truly healthy, for the rest of your life, you have to change the way you live, and how you think about the way you live, and how you think about yourself. If you want to be healthy, you have to change the way you think about your life, and how you live it. You have to value yourself enough for it to matter. And each morning, you have to choose real health until your new way of thinking and being is so engrained that it is your way of life. And, it really helps to have a personal trainer who knows you and cares about you showing the way. Workout partners help too, because you're in it together and can encourage each other when it gets hard. And it does get hard.

There are some people who change their lives overnight. They have a real scare, or what is sometimes called a "come to Jesus" moment, and change

everything permanently. But for most of us, being healthy is a daily – even hourly or minute-by-minute – choice.

The other aspect of the January weltanschauung that I find fascinating is the “membership” phenomenon. Some people seem to think that being a member of a health club makes you healthy, or gives you some exalted standing or social virtue. “Of course, I’m a member at Club One” or “Bikram Yoga” or whatever. But – and you know this – being a member of a health club simply means you have paid some money for the right to come in the door and use the facilities. You can even get a couple of meetings with a trainer. But being a member of a health club is no guarantee of being healthy. Being a member doesn’t even mean you’re committed to your health. And it certainly doesn’t mean you care about anyone else’s health.

I’ve seen people get really angry when their membership expires. Maybe they paid money in January of 2005. They met with a personal trainer once when they enrolled. They visited the gym a couple of times. Then they got distracted and didn’t make the time. Or maybe they hit a rough patch in their training – like that back injury I had last year – that caused them real pain, and it was hard to return and risk that pain again. Or maybe they went back once in April, and got really inspired – for an hour or two. But since they knew people who didn’t go to the gym but still seemed pretty healthy, they kind of slipped away from the whole activity. They were never really thinking about their health – they were only thinking about getting a health fix at the gym – and so when they stopped going, the rest fell apart too.

January 2006 rolls around, and the holidays have made them lazy and fat, so they stroll into the gym. They complain to each other about the parking lot being crowded. They loudly whisper to each other that they don’t know anyone there, and that the music has changed. When they walk through the door, they’re insulted that the trainer they met with in 2005 doesn’t know them. Then, they go to the desk and demand a towel, and discover that their memberships have expired. And that’s when the yelling begins. “I’ve been a member for YEARS” they shout, though you couldn’t tell it from their lives.

The question is this, Do you want to be members of a health club? or do you want to be healthy?

My friends, Jesus isn't recruiting members for the heavenly country club – pay once a year to have privileges. God isn't interested in your simply adding an activity to your life. Jesus came to give you a new life. God wants to give you a new life, the life you were created to have. Jesus came to heal you of our spiritual dis-ease, and to teach you how to be spiritually healthy, your life permeated with love and joy and trust. Jesus came to make you healthy, set you free, and give you a new way of living: with purpose, and meaning. Every day. Every moment of every day. Every thought of every moment of every day.

Consider these questions for yourself: How many of you want to be spiritually healthy – to be strong, joyful, and resilient? Do you want to have stamina to face the day? Do you want to rest peacefully at day's end? Do you want your choices to reflect your desire for health? Do you want to encourage others, and to be encouraged by them? Do you want to think healthy, live healthy, and be in close connection with others who are working on being healthy too?

Do you want to have a whole and holy life? Do you want God actively present and working for your good? And do you want to feel loved and be loved and to love others?

My friends, if you want to have a healthy, whole, and holy life, with God's active love permeating every aspect of your being and your day, you have to stop thinking about discipleship as something you add to your regular life. Following Jesus isn't something you learn about or do one day a week, maybe, if your schedule works out by listening to a motivational speaker or watching a tv show. New life is not an event. New life is a relationship with God and with other people who are in relationship with God.

To have an active relationship with God, you have to stop changing spiritual health clubs. You have to stop trying to go it alone.

Jesus didn't come to us to make members of God's club. Jesus came to make disciples. Followers. People who would live with him and learn with him and live as he lived. When he walked along the shores of Galilee in

Matthew chapter 4, he said two things to those first disciples. He said, "Come, follow me." And he said "I will make you fish for people."

Let me say that again: Come, follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

First he said, "follow me." The church of Jesus is about living as followers, together, and making yourself into a better follower with God's grace and with the help of others.

When Jesus gathered his disciples, he didn't simply put an ad in the Galilee Gazette and ask people to show up. He went out along the streets and the beaches, and into the marketplace where the people were. He called them by name, and said two words: follow me. And they left what they were doing and followed him. Then he spent three years teaching them, living with them, and loving them. He showed them what loving others looked like, and what real healing was.

Then he said, "I will make you fish for people." After he was raised from the dead — after he had begun his new life — Jesus came to the disciples, the ones he had taught and groomed for 3 years. They were the health club regulars, the devoted followers, the ones who showed up every day and followed him around and did what he told them to do, more or less. Jesus told them to make disciples — to tell others about the value of a life of spiritual health and strength — and to teach them how to live well. The eleven disciples doubted they could do this — they had always just followed Jesus around and done what he told them to do. But he told them he was giving them the strength to do it, and the gifts to do it, and that he would not abandon them in their doing it.

You know that those first eleven disciples didn't all have the same godly gifts. Some had talent for sharing the story. Some could see what was really going on, and could tell the truth with love. Some were good at going new places, and listening to others. And a very few — Peter, mainly — were gifted with leadership, with gathering them all together and seeing what to do next. It's like at a health club: some regulars eat really well, some know how to lift weights safely and effectively, some can teach newbies. And a few know what equipment is useful, and what new ideas

work, and when the club itself needs to relocate. The first eleven disciples needed to work together to share the good news of God's love in Jesus.

But most of all — as they were working together to spread the word and to help the newbies grow — they needed to keep caring for their own health. They needed to meet together, not just for worship, but for prayer, service, study, deep relationship, and giving. Their own health depended upon it. Their spiritual lives depended upon it.

Our spiritual lives depend upon our relationship with God through Christ, and our relationships with each other.

My friends, this year we are making a new start. We are becoming a new church, and for some of you, it's going to be a new kind of church. Like the church of Peter and Paul and Mary and Dorcas, it's a church that cares more about discipleship than membership. It's a church that sees relationship as central, and practice as necessary. Anyone who wants to follow Jesus, and to have a new life, is welcome. We will learn how to follow, and we will practice with others. As a church, we're going to focus our attention on making disciples — healthy, vibrant, resilient, loving followers of Jesus. This is new for a lot of us, but it's an ancient way of being church. We're all learning how to be this new church — even the ones we recognize as leaders here are learning, and find themselves sometimes doubting whether they can do it. But living fully in God's presence is worth the risk, worth the learning, worth the pain. Because living fully in God's presence is how we were meant to live. Real faith is the life we were meant to live.

Real faith is the life you were meant to live. And you deserve it, because God in Christ loves even you, and there is nothing you can do to change that.

Now, if you want to come for an hour every once in a while, listen to a motivational speech, wipe your brow, and leave, like our friend at the beginning of the teaching, you can do that.

But if you want a new life — if you want to start really living — we are going to do everything in our power to help you, and to call all of God's power into helping you. If you want a new life, if you want to be a new

creation, if you want a life of health, power, strength, resilience, and love, now is the time to start. Don't wait until next January 1st.

Claim God's love, name Jesus as your personal trainer, grab hold of others doing the same thing, and start today.

In the next six weeks, we are going to learn six marks of discipleship – six practices that help develop spiritual health in the body of Christ. They are: prayer, worship, reading the Bible, service, relationship or connectedness, and giving. To help you remember, here's an acronym: PoWeR SuRGe. Those of us who choose to listen to Jesus' call to follow are going to keep following, and we're going to fish. We're going to lean on each other, and lean on God. We're going to work together to give our own lives, and the life of this church, a power surge, through the transforming powerful love of the Divine One.

You were created to be loved by God, and to love God. You were meant to be spiritually healthy. And you can have that new life, starting today.

Let us pray:

God, we know that you want us to have full, loving, free, and hopeful lives. You want us to know your love, through and through, in every moment. You want us to be really healthy. You want us to have deep and strong relationships with each other, and especially with you. You want to make our lives new. We hear you calling us to new life, to our best lives, to our deepest purpose. Give us the desire to have the life you've promised us, and the courage to do a new thing. We start today, God, to follow you anew. In the name of Jesus, our personal trainer and our Christ, we pray, *Amen.*

If want to give to the ministries and mission of this church community, you can come to the altar and do that now. If you want to commit to following Jesus, whether it's the first time or the hundredth time, feel empowered to go on up to the altar or to the cross, or to one of the prayer niches and pray there. Ask God for help, and tell God you want a new life. If you've never been baptized, or want to be baptized again, see me after Worship.

This is your life. Claim it, and live it wholly.

Blessing

God, we commit this money to your work of making disciples, and sharing love and care in the world. Bless it, that it may be fruitful, and we may be faithful. *Amen.*

Gloria/Sending prayer/Song

Lessons:

*[After the Master had been raised from the dead] the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Go** therefore and **make disciples** of **all** nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching** them to **obey** everything that I have commanded **you**. And remember, **I am with you** always, to the end of the age."*

The gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, from the Bible version called *the Message*.

[After the Master had been raised from the dead], the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally.

Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

*The gifts he gave [to each of us] were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to **equip the saints for the work** of ministry, for **building up the body** of Christ, until all of us come to the **unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God**, to **maturity**, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, **we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ**, from whom the whole body, **joined and knit together** by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*

This word, from the Apostle's letter to the church at Ephesus, chapter 4.

Jesus handed out gifts above and below, filled heaven with his gifts, filled earth with his gifts. He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christians in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.

No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for imposters. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love.

Order of worship

Sound of the bell

Gathering music: Shout to the Lord

Announcements

Praise: NCH 22 Sing Praise to God (3 verses)

UMH 451 Be Thou My Vision (3 verses)

Invocation

Passing of the Peace

Children

Prayer prep: NCH 454 Lord, I Want To Be a Christian (4 verses)

Communal prayer

Prayer response: UMH 528 Nearer, My God to Thee, vs. 1 and 4 (adapted words)

Offering: I Know In Whom I Have Believed

Blessing of the Offering

Gloria: *Gloria in excelsis deo* (2 verses)

Sending prayer

Closing song: NCH 76 Sent Forth by God's Blessing (2 verses)