

“Go and Do Likewise”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 34:15-18

New Testament Lesson: Luke 9:37-43a

Karl Wallenda was a world renowned high-wire walker who fell to his death in 1978 while doing his most dangerous walk. Shortly after the accident, his wife said, “All Karl thought about for months before was falling. It was the first time he’d ever thought about that, and it seemed to me that he put all his energies into not falling rather than walking the tightrope.”

There’s a lesson for us in that story. Author and leadership expert Warren Bennis says, “If we think more about failing at what we are doing than about doing it, we will not succeed.”¹

In today’s New Testament lesson, Luke tells about the failure of Jesus’ closest disciples trying to cast out a demon. What was it that caused their failure, and what can we learn for ourselves and our church from their experience?

Earlier in Luke, it says that Jesus had been up on the mountaintop with Peter, James and John, during his transfiguration. And now upon his return, a man from the crowd shouts, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son...” – his only son – who is suffering terribly with seizures. Jesus rebukes the demon spirit and heals the boy. Why couldn’t the disciples do that? Before Jesus returned, the man begged them to heal his son, but they couldn’t do it. Why not? The question becomes even more perplexing when we realize the disciples had just been sent out by Jesus – at the beginning of Chapter 9 – with power and authority over all demons, to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal, which they did. No problem. So, what’s different now? Of course, the answer has to do with Jesus. There’s a difference between being sent out with a mission to accomplish and being left behind to fend for yourself.

When Jesus sent the disciples on his behalf, they went out into a world of need and they knew they had the answer, the power and authority of Jesus. Then sometime later, they were left at the bottom of the mountain, watching that same power and authority – as embodied by Jesus – leave them behind.

When they knew they had been sent, they had no problem. When they felt left behind, they lost touch with their God-given power to work miracles on Jesus’ behalf.

¹ Bennis, Warren, *On Becoming a Leader*, 143.

Well, the same is true for us. We are capable of so much more when we remember that we have not been left behind by Jesus to fend for ourselves. No, we have been sent by the Lord into a world of need. As modern-day disciples, we, too, have been given a mission.

The word disciple, in its most common use, means follower or student. But Jesus raised up more than mere students. When Jesus used the word disciple, he gave it a more dynamic meaning like where he says in Matthew (13:23), "... This is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Discipleship means more than learning and understanding. It means doing and achieving, it means raising up fellow disciples to go and do likewise.

I have begun working with the leaders of our New Beginnings process and our Vitality and Growth Committee to develop and implement a Discipleship Pathway over the next few months. In doing that, we plan to organize and communicate all the ways people can deepen their faith and further their spiritual growth at First Presbyterian Church, and then challenge ourselves in doing that, in going deeper in our faith and spirituality.

The goal is to engage more people in the life of First Church, and thus, raise up fellow disciples to go and do likewise. To reach that goal, we have to remember that we have been sent by Jesus to accomplish a mission, a mission summarized in Matthew where Jesus tells the disciples – tells us – to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And remember," he says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

One of the biggest dangers of being a disciple in this day-and-age is forgetting that Jesus is here with us, that we have not been left alone at the bottom of some mountain, left waiting for Jesus to return, waiting for the real miracle worker to show up. We are the miracle workers!

It's like the famous doctor known for miraculous cures for arthritis. One day, an older woman walked through his waiting room full of people. Completely bent over in half, she slowly shuffled into his exam room, leaning on her cane all the way. Amazingly, she emerged just a few minutes later walking completely upright with her head held high. A woman in the waiting room looked at her and shouted, "It's a miracle! You walked in bent in half and now you're walking upright. What did that doctor do?" "Miracle, shmiracle." She said, "He gave me a longer cane."

When Jesus said, "... How much longer must I be with you and bear with you" he was pointing to our ability as his disciples to work miracles on his behalf. Jesus knew that his earthly ministry was limited and that the church – the family of faith – had so much more to do.

In order for us to reach that next level in fulfilling our calling as the church, we have to be miracle workers on behalf of Jesus. Rather than focusing on our limited time and energy, we need to be laser focused on raising up fellow disciples to go and do likewise.

Today is St. Patrick day. St. Patrick was a priest and missionary dedicated to bringing Christianity to the Celtic tribes of Ireland. To do this, Patrick used a relational strategy. he and his team would meet with people, engage them in conversation, and look for those who were receptive. They encouraged people to ask questions and express their hopes and fears. In this way, he brought God into their day-to-day lives, shining divine light into ordinary circumstances. In this way, he planted more than 700 churches and monasteries. Interestingly, the Discipleship Pathway we have in mind follows a similar pattern. We, too, want to engage people in the life of First Church by shining a divine light into ordinary circumstances.

For instance, we are planning to offer a course called Binder for Life, which helps you collect and organize all your most important information into a three-ring binder. That way, if you're in the hospital, your friends or out-of-town family will know how to keep things going. You can look for that course sometime this May.

We're also looking at supporting the Young Life ministry here in Independence, which comes alongside high school students who don't have a church home and encourages them to ask their tough, spiritual questions and share their hopes and fears, just like St. Patrick did in building up the church in Ireland.

The key to a successful Discipleship Pathway is always having that next step available, so people attending one of our introductory programs know that maybe they'd like to come to worship next or bring their children to LOGOS.

After worshiping with us, perhaps they'd like to try a Sunday school class or a small group. And then maybe it's a mission project that calls to them, and so on.

We just want to be sure when people do come alongside us, they feel welcomed and have the information they need be as involved as they'd like, growing spiritually along the way. In this way, we are following the pathway that Jesus took in giving rise to the church, when he shined the light of God into the lives of others, helped them to see their role in sharing the gospel and all its blessings, and called on them to raise up fellow disciples to go and do likewise.

It is my prayer that each of us here today – and those whom God is even now sending our way – will find themselves somewhere along the Pathway of Discipleship, and be inspired and guided to go a little further, step by step. For instance, if your worship pattern is less than weekly, use this season of Lent to attend more frequently.

If you've not yet checked out one of our Sunday school classes – or have backed away from what you once attended – come to Sunday school next week. Same with our small groups and ministry teams – things like Sew & Sows, choir, Divine Design, Circle 7, Menninger's Bible study, and the ChristCare parlour games small group. Each of these is meeting next week, as listed in the bulletin calendar on Page 2, an opportunity to go a little deeper.

Whatever might be that next step for you – whether it's personal prayer, community service or a church activity – let us all be attentive in the days and weeks to come, listening for God's word, looking for God's guidance, as we approach this Lenten season as an opportunity to go deeper in our deeper faith, in the promise of a richer spiritual experience. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We enter into the stillness of prayer and gaze at the days stretching before us, leading us to the glory and hope and promise of new life on Easter Sunday.

We ask the glory and hope and promise of new life for all those who are feeling run down, run aground, run over by illness and disease, and for all our friends and loved ones who are struggling, especially for ...

O God, as the days stretch out toward Easter, let us give of our time to those in need of an encouraging card or visit, or to a child in need of engaging play. And then, O God, stretch us to give more as we listen to one whose burdens are heavy.

Let us give of our talents during this time of Lent, volunteering to serve where our talent meets a need in our church or in our community. And then, O God, stretch us to share our talent with a young person who wants to learn.

Let us give of our gifts as we walk through Lent, acknowledging our abilities honestly and sharing them with those who need what we have to offer. And then, O God, stretch us to be silent and still, and discover new gifts and new ways of sharing. Stretch us until we fully feel the joy of giving.

Such are the tasks of Lent, stretched out on the crosses we bear, that we might know the joy of new life in the miracle and promise of Easter.

So let us live, so let us give, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**