Equip Disciples Matthew 25:14-30
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I opened up the news yesterday and came across a headline about a recently released documentary on Neil Peart, the drummer for the Canadian rock band Rush. I don't personally follow the band, but with a career spanning 58 years, they certainly have a loyal following. Maybe even some of you here.

What caught my attention was the title of the documentary: **"No One's Disciple."**

When I searched to find out why it was given that title, I discovered that it comes directly from a 1993 interview in which Peart pushed back against people trying to pin down his political and philosophical influences. He famously declared, "I am no one's disciple."

The documentary's description went on to explain that the title celebrates independent thinking, intellectual curiosity, and a refusal to be categorized or blindly follow any system of belief.

Now, I have very little context beyond what the internet offered me, but what stayed with me was the rather narrow and negative understanding of the word *disciple*. It equated being a disciple with cramped thinking, apathy, rigid dogma, simplistic answers, and blind adherence.

And maybe that is true of cult leaders and fascist regime's who set themselves up as the master over others. But it certainly isn't what the church means when we identify as disciples of Jesus.

It got me thinking about this word, particularly as we continue exploring our congregational mission statement and what it means when we say that we want to **equip disciples**.

And I think our Gospel reading today offers us an interesting way into that conversation.

Jesus has been asked about *when* the kingdom of God will come. Don't lose track of that context - Jesus responds with three parables. This is the second. In Jesus' parable, a landowner prepares to go on a journey. Before leaving, he entrusts his property to three servants. To one he gives five talents, to another two, and to another one.

Now, a talent was an enormous sum of money. It was worth approximately fifteen years' wages. If we use an annual income of roughly $50,000 as an illustration, we're talking about $750,000 for one talent, $1.5 million for two, and $3.75 million for five.

These are not small gifts. Each servant has been entrusted with something of extraordinary value.

The first two servants put what they have been given to work. They take risks, invest, and return double what they received. But the third servant takes a different approach. He digs a hole and buries his talent in the ground.

When the master returns, the first two servants are commended and invited into the master's celebration. But the third servant offers an explanation for his actions. He says:

"I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter..."

In other words, he has a particular view of who his master is - harsh, demanding, and someone to be feared. And that disgust and fear shapes everything he does.

The master has been generous, but the servant cannot see that generosity. His image of the master paralyses him. Instead of seeing possibility, he sees only risk. Instead of using what has been entrusted to him, he hides it away.

His mistake is not simply that he made a poor investment decision. His mistake is that he failed to trust the one who entrusted him with the gift in the first place. Unprepared and uninterested in entering the life of the master, the pronouncement of the landowner that he will be left outside is actually a logical conclusion.

At the heart of this parable is the foundation of trust. (What is the answer Jesus is answering? *When*….) The master entrusts his servants with something valuable, trusting them to make good use of it. And the first two servants respond with confidence in the generosity of their master.

The third servant, however, operates out of fear rather than gratitude and trust. His mistake is not simply that he made a poor investment decision. His mistake is that he failed to trust the one who entrusted him with the gift in the first place.There is a tragedy in responding timidly to abundant generosity.

When will the fullness of God's kingdom come? Jesus draws the eyes of his disciples away from prediction to trust and the beliefs and actions that flow from that trust. Will preoccupation with the end times result in a failure to care, to love, to rejoice? Will it make them play it safe, investing nothing, being so cautious and prudent to never actually put gifts to use? Will they dig a hole and bury their talent in the ground?

The third servant hasn't done anything particularly terrible with what he was given. He hasn't frittered it away. He hasn't stolen it. He has simply done nothing. He has allowed fear and maybe even preoccupation to keep him from responding.

And that brings us back to our mission statement. **As followers of Jesus, together we worship deeply, equip disciples, lead humbly, and serve with hope and grace.**

Why do we say that we want to equip disciples? Because we believe that the God we follow is good and generous. A God worthy of our trust, our commitment, and our habits of heart, mind, and action.

So what does it mean to be a disciple? The word itself carries the idea of being a learner or a student. Jesus is our teacher and mentor. He is good, wise, generous, merciful, and loving. He shows us what life in God's kingdom looks like, and invites us to follow him.

Being a disciple isn't about having everything figured out. Jesus' first disciples certainly didn't! They asked questions, misunderstood his teachings, made mistakes, and sometimes got things terribly wrong. But they kept following him. They kept learning, and they kept being shaped by their relationship with him.

Being a disciple, then, isn't a destination we arrive at. It is a journey we continue throughout our lives. We are always learning what it means to follow Jesus, allowing his teachings to shape our hearts, our decisions, our relationships, and the way we live in the world.

And we never outgrow our need to learn. Whether we are six or ninety-six, whether we have been part of the church for six months or sixty years, we are all still disciples. We are all still learning what it means to follow Jesus.

But our mission statement doesn't simply say that we want to be disciples. It says that we want to **equip** disciples.

And I think that word is important.

To equip someone is to prepare and strengthen them for something. It suggests that the church is not simply a place where people come to receive something. The church is a training ground, not a theatre.

Tai Chi - sometimes slow: breathe, walk

- Sometimes risky: try with a partner
- Though I have a long way to go, as I practice I am shaped by it

So how does the church equip disciples?

- Sometimes slow: what is going on, why do we do it this way. Learning essentials.
    - In the new year: Basics of Faith
- Sometimes risky: practice forgiveness, ask questions, befriend the weak.

Our bulletins have quotes from Living Faith. 8.1 about Discipleship. (Read)

There is one particularly precious gift that the church has been entrusted with. It is the good news of Jesus Christ. The gospel: the good news that God's kingdom has come near in the person of Jesus, and that through him we discover God's extraordinary love, mercy, forgiveness, and hope. This is what makes the church a talented people.

What isn’t like our parable is the absence of the master.

Matthew’s gospel doesn’t end in chapter 25. The text goes on to Matthew chapter twenty-six and seven and eight. There King Jesus is judged worthless and is thrown into the outer darkness of Golgotha, where weeping and gnashing of teeth accompanies all who are sentenced to the penalty of death. Jesus goes where all failures finally go. He joins them in the defeat of all that they have tried, and failed, to do. Jesus enters their loss. The one we follow is the one who entered the darkness of human failure, who took upon himself our sin and brokenness, and who overcame death with the promise of new life.

The good news of God's power to begin again after all is lost saves us from despair just when we are sure that it has all come to an awful end. Last word: “I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” We are not alone - required to make something of ourselves.

St. Patrick’s breastplate: Christ with me, Christ before me,

Christ behind me, Christ within me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ at my right, Christ at my left,

That is the good news we have been entrusted with. And so, when we say that we want to equip disciples, we are saying that we want to be a community that helps people discover this good news, grow in their trust of Jesus, and learn to live out his kingdom in the world.

We don't need to have all the answers. We don't need to be perfect. We don't all need to have the same gifts or abilities. But we do need to be willing to learn, to grow, to take the gifts God has entrusted to us seriously, and to put them to use.

Because being a disciple is not about blindly following someone or surrendering our capacity to think and question. It is about following the one who is worthy of our trust, allowing ourselves to be shaped by his love, and discovering together what it means to live in his kingdom.

May we be a church that doesn't bury the good news, but one that tells it, sings it, lives it, and shares it.