
Discipleship: Things I Have Learned Since I Left

**A sermon by the Rev. Wallace Marsh
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany – Year B**

The most difficult thing about being a priest is you have to practice what you preach.

About five years ago I delivered a final Sunday sermon about failed attempts to navigate a white water rapid on the Hiwassee River. It involved some wild stories (and a little nudity), but the point of the sermon was that Christian life / discipleship is about following God's call and going down the center of life's rapids.

So, I left this church, with great colleagues, with people I love (and still miss), and moved to Thomasville, GA to become a high school English / History Teacher and coach Football, Tennis, and Golf.

Like the disciples in today's gospel reading, there was a strong call to do this work. So, I would like to catch you up on life and share three things I have learned about discipleship. Are you ready?

When we moved out of the deanery in June 2018, I knew there was time to prep before school started in August. What I didn't realize is that football had already started. Learning the playbook felt like I was back in Hebrew and Greek.

I was the varsity outside linebackers coach, and because I was the new defensive coach, I got the job of JV Defensive Coordinator.

At one of those Junior Varsity games, I was reminded of the first important lesson in being a disciple (wait for it).

We were playing a Tallahassee School and the game was close. I thought it was a third and long, so I dialed up a pretty aggressive blitz. I sent the signal into the middle linebacker and he gave me a confused look. I quickly glanced at the play sheet and made sure my signal was correct. He held up his arms confused but gave me a thumbs up.

At that point, I looked up from the play sheet and noticed the offense was in a punt formation. It was 4th down. Unfortunately, I had brought the safeties down in man coverage and had dialed up a monster blitz, so there was no one to receive the punt.

The players thought I was crazy, and the parents in the stand were looking at me like I was crazy. Thank the good Lord when the ball was snapped, the blitz was too much and the punt was blocked.

The defense came running over to the sideline and said, did you mean to call that play. Of course, I tried to preserve my dignity and said, "boys you got to learn to think outside the box." The middle linebacker spoke up, you had no clue it was 4th down did you? No, and I feel like an idiot. It's okay, coach. It worked out.

My first point: Following Jesus should make you feel like a fool. Look at today's gospel text. Can you imagine family dinner that evening? Peter, how was work today? I am not going back...I am following Jesus! You did what? You are following who? Peter, you are crazy!

Paul tells the church in Corinth to be "fools for Christ" (1 Cor. 4:10). Part of discipleship is taking a leap of faith and doing something crazy and foolish. How are you being a fool for Christ?

My second point: Discipleship involves being open to the Holy Spirit.

I had a lot of freedom in structuring my 12th grade English Class. Since we live in the South, I wanted the students to be exposed to some of the great Southern writers. So, we read Tennessee Williams, Zora Neal Hurston, Flannery O'Connor, and Ernest Gaines.

I remember one day we were about 2/3rds of the way through Gaines' novel, "A Lesson Before Dying" and some of the students came in from a psychology class, and said Coach Marsh, have you ever studied the enneagram?

I reminded them I was a priest and knew about the enneagram, but I was embarrassed because I hadn't spent any time with it. I told them I had some good friends like Canon Knowlton, Canon Zappa, and Jeannie Mahood, who talked about the enneagram and offered courses on it, but I was always too busy to go. And then the bell rang, and I told them to pull out their novels, and you could feel the energy leaving the room.

As I was teaching, I kept hearing words from 1 Thessalonians running through my mind, "Do not quench the Holy Spirit." Over and over again the words kept running through my mind. The message was clear—Throw away the lesson plan and bring in the enneagram.

I told the psychology students to stand up. I put the other students in groups with them and sent them to the corners of the room to take the enneagram assessment as though they were the protagonist of the novel. The energy came back.

I said wait until everyone is done and then write the enneagram number on the board, and I will show you this spirituality assessment has flaws. They were amazed they all wrote down the same number. I hadn't studied the enneagram, so I didn't know what to make of the number, so I told them to go back to their groups and write down how you see the strengths and weaknesses of that number in the protagonist's life.

I had read the novel a few times and was amazed at what they were writing. At that moment, the teacher became the student. Because of that, I went home and looked at the Enneagram for the first time in almost 20 years in ministry. And the miracle that happened in the classroom, happened in my own spiritual life. That tool has helped me become a better disciple.

And to this day, I don't think any of it would have happened, had I not laid down the fishing net (I mean the lesson plan) and been open to the Holy Spirit.

Again, my second point: No matter what season or stage of life you are in, discipleship means being open to the Holy Spirit.

Finally, my third point: Being a disciple of Jesus means learning to change. The passage from Jonah is about people changing and God changing. Change is an important part of being a disciple.

On Thursday, the church celebrated the Confession of St. Peter. You remember the story. Peter confesses Jesus as Lord, then Jesus goes on to describe the cross and Peter will have none of it. Jesus says, "Get Behind me Satan," because Peter is struggling to change his perception of the Messiah.

One of the Southern writers I had the students read was Walker Percy, the winner of the National Book Award for "The Moviegoer." Walker Percy, a physician by training, but changed careers to become an author. Percy attempted to synthesize literature, philosophy, and theology.

If the name Percy sounds familiar to you this morning, it is because you just sang a hymn written by Walker Percy's uncle, William Alexander Percy.

You see, when Walker Percy was a child, his father committed suicide. His mother decided the best thing for the three boys was to leave the house and spend some time in Greenville, Mississippi with their Uncle Will. And so they lived there for a season until tragedy struck again. Walker's mother was driving home with Walker's youngest brother, and the car ran off the road and into the river. Walker's brother escaped but his mother died.

Uncle Will, a Sewanee grad, a wealthy world traveling bachelor, and someone who probably never imagined having biological children, had a decision to make. Standing before him are three young nephews who have lost both of their parents. He knew it was a call, so adopted all of the boys, and changed his life for them.

The youngest brother (Phin), who was in the car with his mother, remembers waking up with nightmares for

years. He said Uncle Will would walk down the hall and read him stories until he fell back to sleep. Discipleship involves changing our lives so we can walk in love as Christ loved us.

Even though today's hymn text was written before William Alexander Percy adopted the boys, I can't help but think he was moved by his own words.

As the father of two young boys, I can see William Alexander Percy in his study. Can't you hear the footsteps running through the house? I can hear the furniture being knocked over. Purchases he bought on his trips being broken during fights. I can imagine stomach bugs and flu being passed through the house.

In that moment, I know he remembered what he wrote in that final stanza: "The peace of God it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod..."

And then, I imagine him looking at those boys in the way we look at our children / grandchildren / students and recalling the holy moments. I can see him smiling at the blessings he could have never imagined, and thinking of the words he wrote a few years earlier, "yet let us pray for just one thing, the marvelous peace of God."

Discipleship involves being foolish, being open to the Holy Spirit, and changing your life in ways that draw you closer to the love of God.