



September 7, 2014
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

What Difference Does It Make?

Matthew 4:12-25

Good morning! For those of you who are new to us this summer, my name is Mark Toone and I work here. I have been on sabbatical for the last two months because, from my first Sunday here—which was 27 years ago today—the elders decided that every few years they would send their pastors off for an extended time of rest, reflection and study. Starting in 1993, when our Rachel was one, we have done exactly that.

But this summer was different. For the first time, we went without kids. Rachel and Cooper were both at Camp Spalding all summer, and on their week off they climbed Mt. Baker and Mt. Rainier together. So Cyndi and I shared our first “alone” sabbatical in Bend, Oregon, Brooklyn, NY, St. Andrews, Scotland, Oxford, England and Paris, France. We mostly stayed with friends. We worshipped at a new church meeting in a Jewish synagogue in Brooklyn and a new church meeting in a lawn bowling club in St. Andrews. We celebrated Evensong at Christ Church in Oxford and worshipped at Rachel and Ellis’ home church in Oxford, St. Aldate’s. We also worshipped in the 200 year old American Church in Paris, situated on the River Seine.

I met with a pastor in Scotland who wants to bring two churches into our denomination and with a brilliant PhD student who is trying to figure out how to use his degree to serve the Lord. I read all or most of twelve books and journaled my way through a time of significant personal growth. Cyndi and I studied together, memorized scripture together, read together, drank cappuccinos and ate haggis and baguettes and chocolate croissants together... and burned off most of those calories walking more than 100 miles and bicycling across the Brooklyn Bridge and around Central Park. We stayed in a funky hotel with a very tiny bathroom and punted on the River Thames and visited museums, and old churches, and talked for hours about the next things that God has in store for us.

It all came to a dramatic conclusion a week ago when Rachel arrived at Gordon Conwell Seminary near Boston and we moved Cooper into his dorm room at Whitworth University... all on the same day. As we drove off into the sunset, the enormity of the moment struck us. Twenty-five years of marriage, our kids launched, starting life as empty-nesters and returning to our Sweetheart Church of 27 years to begin another chapter of ministry here. So, it has been a very momentous summer for us... for those reasons and others I will share with you.

But first I must say, “Thank you.” There aren’t many churches as kind to their pastors as you are. We never take your kindness for granted. For what it’s worth, when friends ask me how I’ve stayed in one place 27 years, part of my answer is that every seven years, you give me three months to stop, rest, think, pray and re-set. So, thank you. And a particular thank you to our elders and our great young leadership team under the guidance of Pastor Larry and Pastor Megan. They did a remarkable job; I’m sure you would agree. It was a summer of great preaching, Hot Topics, guest speakers, public baptisms and, not least, the welcoming of Dr. Bill MacDonald to our pastoral team. So things didn’t exactly slow down while I was gone, did they? They never do. So, to all of you—pastors, staff, elders and my dear Sweetheart Church—thank you! It’s good to be home. The Lord has been stirring things in my soul... and it’s about to spill out. So buckle up!

Read 4: 12-25

You just heard Matthew’s account of the start of Jesus’ ministry. From that moment—for three eternity-changing years—Jesus walked with these men. For three years they watched as the Kingdom of God broke into earth through his teaching and signs and wonders, and ultimately through his death and resurrection. The world would never be the same because of those three years... and these 12 men had ringside seats. But not only did they witness it, they were part of it! Jesus invited them to be a part of his revolution. His opening words were, “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” It was like the shot of a starter’s gun. It rang throughout that region of the world, and it pierced the hearts of his listeners... and nothing would ever be the same again.

“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Those were his first words. In Matthew 28, we read his last words... his last speech. We even have a title for that last speech. Do you remember? The Great Commission... His parting shot... His marching orders for his disciples. And at the heart of the Great Commission were these words: “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Of all the things Jesus might have commanded us to do, this is what he said: Make disciples. I want all of you to go and make more disciples of me.

Your elders and pastors have spent a lot of time over the last years thinking and praying about this. And we are convinced that God wants us to be even more intentional as a disciple-making church. And more specifically, we need to be a church that makes disciples... who make disciples. Disciples making disciples making disciples... 3D. We are convinced that this is what we must focus on in the years to come. Not just calling people to accept Jesus... not just training people to know and obey Jesus... but equipping those disciples to turn around and pour their lives of discipleship into others. And ultimately be able to point to their spiritual children... and their spiritual grandchildren. 3D: Disciples making disciples making disciples. That might be a little terrifying for some of you... but that’s okay. We are going to walk through this together.

So, I left on sabbatical this summer thinking that I would plan how we might become a more effective disciple-making church. But if that's what we are going to do, there's a question we must answer first? What? What is a disciple? Right? I can't make what I don't know. So I reflected a lot this summer on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Our morning's text is a starting point.

John the Baptist, the man God had sent to prepare the way for Jesus had been arrested. Like the two journalists in Iraq, he would soon lose his head to a barbarian. It was time for Jesus to step out of the shadows and onto the stage that had been prepared for him. And he did... with a flourish. His ministry begins with two commands. Did you see them? The first in 17: "Repent!" "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." That word in Greek, "metanoia" means this: Turn around. Turn around and go the other way. Repent. You must stop, turn around and go the other way. The first call to Christian discipleship is to stop walking in the direction you are walking—the direction of the world, the direction of your own sinful choices, the direction where you are god and you call the shots and you decide what is right and wrong and important. Stop it! Stop going in that direction, turn around and go the other way.

And what is that new way? It is the way of Jesus. It is following Jesus. Jesus' second command appears in verse 19: "Come, follow me." When Rachel and Cooper climbed Mt. Rainier, they were roped into a guide; they followed him... his every step. When he walked, they walked. When he rested, they rested. When he stepped over a crevasse, they did, too. They followed him. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We follow him. Three more times that word appears. Peter and Andrew follow Jesus. James and John follow Jesus. The crowds follow Jesus. This is the essence of discipleship. Do you want to know if you are a disciple of Jesus? Repent. Stop walking in your own way, turn around, and follow Jesus. Wherever he goes, whatever he does, whatever he says... go, do, say that. Follow that. Imitate that. That is what it means to be a disciple.

This seems pretty basic... pretty obvious. We sing a song that says, "I have decided to follow Jesus." But the question is... do we, really? When you get outside of these church walls on a Sunday morning—when you get into your home or your classroom or your office or your shop—is there any evidence that you are a disciple of Jesus? My sermon title is "What Difference Does it Make?" Over the past few months, I have been struck about how easily we Christians blend into our surroundings. Our speech isn't much different than the unbelievers around us. Our gossip isn't much different than the unbelievers around us. Our marriages and our divorce rates aren't much different than the unbelievers around us. Our spending habits aren't much different. Our giving isn't much different. Our habits—our use of time, the things we watch and read and study and think about—not much different. This summer, there was a string of news articles and studies which suggested that, as far as our culture is concerned, there is not much difference between those who

claim to be disciples of Jesus and those who don't. Shouldn't that disturb us? Does it disturb you? Is it true for you?

A disciple of Jesus is someone who follows Jesus, every day. Who practices Jesus' ways every day. Who speaks and acts and thinks and emulates and imitates Jesus every day, in every situation. Not just one hour on Sunday... if you decide to go to church that week...if nothing better comes along. No; a disciple of Jesus is a 24/7 imitator of Jesus. Are you?

Does this make you uncomfortable? Well, it made me uncomfortable this summer because as I thought about these things this it struck me what a hypocrite I can be... because I am a pagan traveler. When I travel—when I go on the road—I find myself living a different kind of life. I become demanding and critical. I feel entitled and if the airline doesn't treat me as I want or if I don't get the seat I want or if the hotel isn't to my liking, I behave and speak in ways that can look nothing at all like a disciple of Jesus.

I can't tell you how disturbing this realization was to me. I am a pagan traveler. I am quick to take offense, quick to criticize, quick to judge or complain, quick with a smart remark when I see someone acting strangely or a see a large person about to sit in the airplane seat next to me. My language becomes coarse. I glance a second time at the scantily-clad woman. To my shame, I realized what a hypocrite I was. How easy it was for me to hide my discipleship on the road. How difficult it might be for anyone to recognize a difference in me because I belong to Jesus. I was vexed!

And then it struck me: how can I make disciples of others when I am so undisciple-like in parts of my own life? Such a pagan traveler. So for me—for your pastor—my sabbatical become a time of repentance and following. I repented to Jesus of my sloppy discipleship. I told him I was sorry for my cynical behavior and judgmental and caustic language. I surrendered my tongue and my expectations and my irritation and my impure thoughts and my sense of American entitlement. I submitted those things to him as sins. I repented and turned from them and determined that, by His power, I would walk in a different direction... in His direction.

I told Cyndi of this. In fact, it was her words about my behavior that really brought conviction to my heart. I was so angry with a certain English airline that will remain unnamed—but it rhymes with Skittish Airways—that I said some very coarse things. And my beloved helpmate said, "I don't like it when you talk that way!" And I realized, to my shame, neither does Jesus.

There were still times my tongue slipped and my mind slipped and my attitude slipped, but the number of times I caught myself—or should I say the Holy Spirit prompted me to hold my tongue, to change my mind, to go a different direction—only convinced me how far I have to go in order to be a 24/7 disciple of Jesus... in

every country, in every time zone. To help me, I memorized Colossians 3:12-17. I repeated that passage over and over again, especially the last verse: "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the father through him." That's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus!

And I found my heart beginning to change. I remember, more than once, standing on a crowded sidewalk or in a long queue... and looking at one person at a time, trying to look at them with the eyes of Christ and repeating to myself, "God loves this person. Christ died for this person." You have no idea how that practice can change your attitude. Instead of viewing people as travel combatants—competitors for seats or tables or space—you begin to see them as the beloved of God for whom he sent his son, Jesus, to die. This wasn't as easy when I caught a guy trying to pick my pocket on the subway, but it really did put to the test my determination to live and be and act like the disciple of Jesus I claim to be... all the time... in every place and hour.

That's what a disciple is. Not just someone who claims Jesus. Not just someone who prays the prayer and then goes about his life. But someone who repents... turns around and follows the most brilliant person who ever lived and who knows better than anyone what it means to really live life well. And may I say, I am in a better place. This act of repentance and following has brought me to a place of greater integrity and joy and peace. I find a sense of satisfaction and contentment in being a consistent, on and off the clock disciple of Jesus because no one can give me a better life than he can! I want the Kingdom of Heaven to break into my life not just someday when I die... but right now. Don't you? That's what it means to be a disciple.

Our starting point as a church, then, in this season of ministry, is not "How do I make disciples like Jesus told me to do?" Not yet. Our starting point as a church must first be, "How can I be the disciple Jesus calls me to be?" Now, if this doesn't matter to you—if you view your Christian faith and church life as simply one little corner of an otherwise occupied and satisfactory life—then you are not likely to want to allow the Holy Spirit to disturb you. Perhaps you are satisfied to show up at church once in a while and then go about your real life the way you want to, with you in charge of your life. If so, then, all of this will seem radical and excessive to you.

But if, like me, you look at your life and say, "There are parts of my life where I do not follow Jesus and do not even really want to follow Jesus, but I don't want to live in hypocrisy"... then I invite you to join me on this life-giving journey of as a revolutionary disciple of Jesus. Next Sunday, we start where Jesus did... in the Sermon on the Mount. And I will share more about what I believe to be God's call upon our church. If you are haphazard in your worship attendance, I hope you will be there next week. It will matter.

Honestly, I am a little daunted and very excited about a future where we learn more and more what it means to be church of disciple-making disciples. And I am grateful that God has brought a new partner in that journey after a nationwide search for our new Pastor of Renewal. I want you to meet him this morning.
[Introduce Bill and Jennifer MacDonald]

Do you believe that Jesus is your creator? Do you believe him to be the most brilliant person who ever lived? Do you believe that he knows us better than we know ourselves? Then who better to follow in order to have the best, richest, most satisfying life we can possibly have! Discipleship is not a chore; it is life, joyous life, but it starts with repentance. Are you ready to do that? So what is one thing of which you must repent? Do you need to turn around? Are you ready to be a real disciple of Jesus? I want you to think about that, and then we will pray.

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. We use the word "disciple" and "discipleship" often, and yet it is not a very common word in our culture. Are you a disciple of Jesus and if so, what do you think that means?
 2. How many times does the word "follow" appear in this text? We obviously cannot follow Jesus in the way that the first disciples did. So what does it mean for us to follow him?
 3. Pastor Mark shared his own experience of conviction and repentance this summer. As you think about your own life, what specific things do you need to repent of? Put differently, in what ways have you viewed following or obeying Jesus as optional?