

Becoming a Disciple

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What is a Gospel?

It is obvious from the prominence that our liturgy Scripture that one of the best ways to come to know Jesus is read and understand the Bible, particularly the four Gospels. To understand what the Gospels say to us today, we need to first understand what kind of writing the Gospels are and how the Gospels relate to one another.

An account of an event in a Gospel is very different than an account of an event in someone's diary. In a diary, we read what an eyewitness understood about an event at the time the event took place. However, very often in life, we understand the significance of an event only in hindsight. Only after other events have occurred do we understand the full meaning of the earlier event.

For instance, some people claim to have fallen in love at first sight. However, a much more common experience is to meet someone whom we find attractive, and slowly, over time, to grow to know and love that person in a unique way. If, after years of marriage, we were to write an autobiography of our life, the way we would tell the story of meeting that special person would be very different than an account in a diary. The autobiographical account would not only describe the event, but reveal the significance of the event as it was understood in hindsight, in the light of later events.

A Gospel, too, is written in hindsight to teach the significance of events as they were understood later, in the light of Christ's resurrection and his appearances to his followers after his Resurrection.

The Gospel writers are not eyewitnesses, nor do they claim to be. Luke, as he begins his Gospel, explains this to us. Luke says, "Since many others have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received" (Luke 1:1-4).

In other words, Luke is saying that some years after the events involving Jesus took place, he is going over oral and written stories about those events in order to write an account that will help the particular audience to whom he is writing. Luke is not trying to teach history, but to build faith, to help his audience "realize the certainty of the teachings you have received."

So a Gospel story about an event is not comparable to an account that we might read in a diary, in a history book, or see on a video. The word itself, *gospel*, is not referring to the kind of writing we are reading but to the content of the story. The word *gospel* means “good news.” Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John’s Gospels are accounts of the Good News about Jesus Christ, written to teach a variety of audiences what was understood about Jesus after the Resurrection.

Revealed through Events

Because God inspired the authors of the Bible, many people think God dictated the Bible to those authors. However, God did not reveal Godself to us through dictation to a chose few. Rather, God’s self-revelation came through events. Over time, people talked about the events, some wrote about the events, and others rewrote accounts of those events in the light of subsequent events.

Those who passed on oral and writing traditions, and those who edited traditions about the events, were not primarily interested in writing history. They were interested in teaching their listeners and readers what these events taught the community about God’s presence and action in their lives.

It is very important to realize that our accounts of God’s revelation, which we read in the Bible, are the fruit of the Spirit’s inspiration in the community. Why? Because God still reveals to us through events. If we want to find the risen Christ in our lives, we must look at the events of our daily lives. That is where we find Christ.

If we want to increase our understanding of the meaning of those events, we will be greatly helped if we interpret them in the midst of a Spirit-filled community. We need the help of the Church, our local church, and our family as we grow in awareness of Christ’s presence in our lives. This, in turn, will help us live as Christ would have us live so we can cooperate in the coming of the Kingdom.

A Sign of Identity

One of the ways we respond to Jesus’ invitation to follow him is participating in the celebration of Eucharist throughout the liturgical year. In this way the Church community accompanies Jesus on his journey, remembering the whole story from beginning to end, every year. The liturgical year consists of special seasons and of what we call Ordinary Time. The special seasons are Advent (the beginning of the liturgical year), Christmas, Lent, and easter. We celebrate Ordinary Time between the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Lent, and after the Easter season until the beginning of the next Advent.

On the first Sunday of Ordinary Time, we celebrate the baptism of the Lord. Have you ever wondered why Jesus was baptized? During the time of Jesus, John the Baptist preached a

message of repentance. He proclaimed the coming of the messiah and the need to prepare for his coming. People sought baptism by John as a sign of their sorrow for sin and willingness to repent. This baptism was not the same as the Sacrament of Baptism, but it was a symbolic sign of person's desire to turn away from sin and toward God. Even though Jesus was without sin, he desired to be baptized. Why would Jesus, who was free from sin, seek to be baptized.

In order to explore the significance of Jesus' baptism we will turn to the accounts of his baptism in the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, known as the synoptic Gospels. John's Gospel does not describe Jesus' baptism although it does affirm that. Jesus was baptized by having John the Baptist recall the event. (See John 1:29-34)

If the Gospels were primarily historical accounts rather than theological writing, and we had three eyewitnesses telling us what happened, we would expect the accounts to agree. If the accounts contradicted each other we would draw the conclusion that one was accurate and another was not.

The synoptic Gospels are not three eyewitness accounts, but you can see significant similarities in them. To see that they are similar, although not identical, you need only read the three stories of the baptism. (See Matthew 3:13-17 read in Cycle A; Mark 1:7-11 read in Cycle B; Luke 3:15-16. 21-22 read in Cycle C). Why are these stories so similar?

Scripture scholars believe that Mark wrote his Gospel first, about 65 A.D. Matthew and Luke both wrote later, Matthew about 80 A.D. and Luke about 85 A.D. Both Matthew and Luke relied on earlier writings. It is very likely that one of the earlier writings that both Matthew and Luke used was now what we know as the Gospel according to Mark.

Why is it significant to our understanding of the Gospels that Mark was a source for both Matthew and Luke? Because when we compare their accounts we can tell what was of *core importance*—that which remains unchanged. We can also tell what was of *particular interest* to each Gospel author—that which has been changed or added. We can apply these statements to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism.

Core Importance?

All three Gospels tell us that John the Baptist was the person who baptized Jesus. In addition, all three say that when Jesus was baptized the Spirit descended upon him and a voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). Matthew does alter the words slightly. In Matthew the voice from heaven says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). This is the core of the story. What is it teaching us?

At the core, each story teaches us something about Jesus' identity, an identity that was understood only after the resurrection. This identity is taught by using a teaching technique

common at the time: the Gospel writers are alluding to Old Testament passages as they recount a New Testament event—Jesus’ baptism.

The first Old Testament passage to which this description refers is Psalm 2. Psalm 2 is an example of what we call a messianic psalm, that is, it celebrates God’s anointed one. The word messiah, like the word christ, means “the anointed one” whom God will send to save God’s people. Such psalms were used in Israel over the centuries to celebrate their kings who were understood to be God’s anointed ones.

In Psalm 2 God is pictured as affirming that God has appointed the king: ‘I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.’ (Psalm 2:6).

Then the king speaks:

I will tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to me, ‘You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession. (Psalm 2:7-8).

The second Old Testament passage to which the baptism story refers is a passage from the book of Isaiah. Chapters 40 to 55 in the Book of Isaiah date to a very troubled time in the history of the Israelites—the Babylonian exile. A prophet, whom scholars call 2 Isaiah, offered the exiles hope during their time of suffering by picturing God saying these words:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isaiah 42:1).

2 Isaiah is telling his fellow Israelites that they, in their exile, are God’s suffering servant. Their suffering is not a sign that God is displeased with them. Rather, God is pleased with them, and God will accomplish something wonderful for the nations through their suffering.

The words in the Gospel stories of Jesus’ baptism that allude to these passages are: ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’” (Matthew 3:17). These words, coming from heaven, teach two things about Jesus’ identity: First, by alluding to Psalm 2, they teach that Jesus is divine; he is God’s begotten son. Second, by alluding to Isaiah 42 they teach that Jesus is God’s suffering servant whose passion and death has redeemed all nations.

Different Perspectives, One Truth

When we compare the Gospel accounts of the same event we can tell what was of core importance by seeing what remains unchanged from one account to another. We can also tell what was of particular interest to each Gospel author by noticing what has been changed or edited. By why would their accounts need to differ?

We all form what we say with an eye to our audience. A teenager, describing a party to a friend and then a parent, telling the truth in both instances, will not pick exactly the same details to tell both. A parent, giving advice to children, will not give the same advice to ever child.

As we grow in our knowledge of the Bible, we will see that the Gospel authors emphasized particular truths to meet the needs of particular audiences.

Mark wrote to Christians who were being persecuted by the Romans; they asked, “Why should I die for my belief in Christ?” Mark emphasized Jesus’ humanity, his suffering, and the Apostles initial inability to understand many of Christ’s teachings.

Matthew wrote to fellow Jews who wanted to maintain their nearly two thousand-year covenant with God. They asked, “If we become disciples of Jesus Christ, will we be remaining faithful to our covenant relationship with God or not?” So Matthew emphasized that Jesus is the new Moses with authority from God to proclaim a New Law and establish a New Covenant.

Luke wrote to the Gentiles. They were not suffering persecution from the Romans nor were they trying to be faithful to their Jewish roots. Luke wanted to make it clear that everyone is now invited into a covenant relationship with God: Gentiles, sinners, women, the poor, the lepers—all are invited. However, to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, one must acknowledge one’s sins, repent, and learn to love all people just as Jesus did. Luke emphasized Jesus’ inclusion of all people and his forgiveness of them.

John wrote to the Christians who live at the end of the first century. They had expected Jesus to return in glory years earlier. They were asking, “Where is Jesus?” John wanted to help his audience see that the risen Christ dwelled among them. John wrote in a different literary form than the other Gospel authors, as he tried to help his readers experience the risen Christ in every aspect of their lives: Christ is light. Christ is bread, and Christ is truth. John emphasized Christ’s presence in the world, in the Church, and especially in what we now call the sacraments.

The Baptism of the Lord

When we read Matthew’s account we notice that he includes a unique exchange between John the Baptist and Jesus that does not appear in his source, Mark, nor in Luke. Matthew begins the story of the baptism with these words, “Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to

be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.'" (Matthew 3:13-15).

Why would Matthew add this interchange to his account of Jesus' baptism? It seems that Matthew might have been responding to the question: since Jesus is sinless, why should Jesus be baptized?

Matthew explores this issue by having John the Baptist express reluctance to baptize Jesus. John sees no reason for Jesus to receive a "baptism of repentance." Nor does John consider himself Jesus' equal. However, Jesus tells John to allow the baptism, "for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Jesus allows himself to be baptized for the same reason that he does everything else—to fulfill the will of God, who is his Father. In this way Jesus sets an example for us. He teaches us that in Christian baptism, which the Baptism Jesus instituted, we would embrace our vocation to do the will of the Father. It is also the sacrament through which we, like Jesus, receive the Holy Spirit, thus giving us the power to be faithful to our call as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Begins His Ministry

Let us look at the first words that Jesus says to his listeners when he begins his public ministry. In the Gospels, according to Matthew and Mark, Jesus' first words as he begins his public ministry are very similar.

Mark pictures Jesus saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). In Matthew Jesus says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). In what ways do we disciples of Jesus Christ need to repent in order to do God's will and cooperate with the coming of God's kingdom?

We can begin to answer this question by turning to the Gospel according to Luke and seeing how Luke introduces the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Luke pictures Jesus returning to Nazareth where he had grown up, and teaching in the synagogue:

"He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'" (Luke 4:16b-19).

As disciples we are to model ourselves after Jesus. He is our teacher, and we are his students. We seek to model our lives after his; doing as he did—the will of the Father, thinking as he did, loving as he loved. His ministry is our ministry. We must not only stop doing those things that are against God’s will, but we must start doing those things that help build up the kingdom of God.

Baptism into Christ’s body is our birth as disciples. Through Baptism we not only receive forgiveness for our sins, but we, like Jesus, receive the power of the Spirit.

The more we respond to Christ’s call to repent, and the more we model our behavior on Christ’s, the more we will correctly discern the will of God and cooperate in the building up of God’s kingdom. Our Baptism sends us on a mission to bring the good news about Jesus to everyone we meet.

Called to Be a Disciple

What exactly does a call to discipleship involve? Several of the stories that we read in the Gospels can help us answer this question. Some of the call stories, if misunderstood, could cause us to act in ways that are not the ways a disciple of Jesus Christ should act. Take the call of James and John, for example.

Mark tells us that as Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee he, “saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him” (Mark 1:19-20). Many of us, when reading this call story, ask, “What about their poor father? Is being a disciple incompatible with being a loyal and devoted member of a family?”

Once again, to understand what a story is teaching, we have to know the kind of writing we are reading. We also have to put each story in the context of the whole Gospel. One story might be emphasizing one truth, while another is emphasizing a different truth. We disciples will have to learn to keep these truths in balance with each other.

The stories that describe the call of the disciples are emphasizing the wholehearted response necessary for discipleship. They are not teaching that one must neglect family duties in order to be faithful to one’s vocation.

Just before the call story of James and John we read the call story of Peter (Simon) and Andrew. They were also fishing when “Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:17-18). Did Peter and Andrew abandon their families in order to become disciples of Jesus Christ?

We know they did not, because later in that same chapter Mark tells us that Jesus went home with Peter: “As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them” (Mark 1: 29-31). Peter’s following Jesus turned out to be a blessing for his whole family.

Mark’s Gospel reaffirms that discipleship is not an excuse to shirk family responsibilities later in the Gospel. The Pharisees criticize Jesus and his disciples for not scrupulously following the laws of purification, such as washing their hands before eating (see Mark 7:1-5). Jesus responds to the criticism by telling the Pharisees that they have disregarded God’s commandments and clung to human tradition.

As an example of this kind of behavior Jesus says, “For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)— then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on” (Mark 7:10-13). Here Mark shows Jesus making it very clear that a person doing the will of the Father will be faithful to family responsibilities.

Growing into discipleship is a challenging journey—no matter what our age or stage in life. Discerning and responding to Jesus’ call has many implications.

If we respond to Jesus’ call we will become more faithful, not less faithful, to our family responsibilities. Families, too, are called to discipleship. We are called to sense God’s presence in our family life, place ourselves at God’s disposal in some way, however minor or major. Discipleship also calls us into works of mercy and justice for others. Ironically, these works often have great bonding and healing power in our own family.

Yet, is there more that Jesus asks of us? To answer this question let us look at the first words that Jesus says to his listeners when he begins his public ministry. In Mark and Matthew’s Gospels Jesus’ first words as he begins his public ministry are very similar.

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