

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Matthew 28:16-20

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Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

During my first year of ministry in Rhode Island, I received a call from the local funeral director. He informed me that Francis Sherwood had died and that the family was on its way over to plan the service. "Oh, okay, I'll be here." I replied and hung up the phone. I didn't admit it to the funeral director, but I had no idea who Francis Sherwood was. I went down the hall to the office and sheepishly asked the church administrator if she knew Francis Sherwood. She didn't know the person either. So, we checked the membership book and, lo and behold, there under the S's was one Francis Sherwood.

Now by this time, the family was arriving. I introduced myself and led them down the hall to my office, the whole time wondering how I was going to admit to them that I did not know Francis Sherwood. When we sat down the youngest daughter bluntly stated, "Yeah, you wouldn't have known Mom. She never came to church. She always thought this was a pretty church and so she joined about 30 years ago. She mailed in a check for \$5 every year so she could keep her membership and have her funeral here for free. She never came to church and none of us go to church either so if you could keep the funeral from being too churchy, that would be good."

Francis Sherwood got her free church funeral. After all, she was considered a "member in good standing" even though there wasn't a single person from the congregation at her service because no one knew her. I found it all kind of sad and a gross misinterpretation of what it means to be a member of a faith community. I was honored to do Mrs. Sherwood's funeral and as I learned about what a fun and creative person she was, I regretted that she had never come to church. I think I would have really liked having her there.

Experiences like the one with Francis Sherwood's family are, in part, what led me to write the following response to a question about church membership in my "Minister Information Form", a kind of standardized resume for ministers that your search committee used when looking for a new pastor.

The meaning of the word membership has changed significantly during my lifetime. Twenty years ago when I was a member of the Fayette Favorites 4-H Club, membership meant responsibility, opportunity, support, and belonging. Being a part of the group was an important part of my identity. I was proud to be in 4-H and felt a responsibility to, and a great deal of support from, my club. However, in our society it seems that the meaning of the word membership has evolved. With the advent of Sam's Club memberships, health club memberships,

and the American Express slogan, “Membership has its privileges”, membership has come to mean entitlement and rights more than responsibility and support. Church membership is about Christian discipleship. There aren’t really many parallels between church membership and Sam’s Club membership. I believe it is time for the church to reclaim the term “membership” and take action within the institution to restore the word to mean a sense of belonging and relationship rather than status and entitlement.

Francis Sherwood agreed with American Express. To her, membership had its privileges, in her case the privilege was a free funeral. She paid her yearly membership “dues”, much like she would to Sam’s Club. But instead of qualifying for the option to buy a case of 50 bars of Irish Spring soap at a deep discount, payment of her annual dues entitled her to a free funeral.

Membership is not discipleship. And yet, in our Congregational tradition, I believe that the words were much more synonymous than they are now. To be a member of a Congregational Church during the settlement of the original 13 colonies meant a strict adherence to Biblical principles and spiritual disciplines. The book “Remarkable Providences” is a collection of essays written by early Congregationalists in the American colonies. It contains essays in which early churchmen (very little was written by women in that day) write detailed records of their daily activities and thoughts. They scrutinize their own behavior in an attempt to keep track of their Christian discipleship. One essay in particular is just nauseating in its detail. From sun up to sun down, the author analyzed his every thought, word, and action and then prayed for forgiveness when he felt he fell short and prayed for forgiveness for feeling any pride when he felt he succeeded. If it weren’t so dreadfully boring, it would be amusing in its sobriety and attention to detail. And yet, a person’s membership in the local congregation was threatened if there was not strict adherence to the rules of the community and so it behooved a good church member to keep such records should his membership ever come into question.

Now, believe you me when I say that I am in no way suggesting that we return to that strict model of discipleship and membership. And yet, there is something to be gleaned from it. Somewhere, between the Sam’s Club consumerist membership mentality of our society and the judgmental and overly-serious membership model presented in early congregationalism, there is a happy medium where Christian discipleship, not institutional membership, becomes the goal for us as individuals and as a community of faith. Where “membership dues” are replaced with “discipleship do’s”.

Jesus concentrates his ministry on teaching the original twelve disciples, and each of us who have become disciples since, what it is that a good disciples does. Jesus makes us a list of disciple do’s and never even mentions membership dues. When taken individually, the list, based on both Jesus’ words and actions, might sound like this . . .

- treat all people with dignity and respect
- pray to God and ask for what you need
- share

- be humble
- be honest
- love your enemies—especially the really icky ones
- be hopeful
- feed people
- heal people
- shelter people
- clothe people
- visit people
- forgive people
- work hard on God’s behalf
- worship God
- believe in Jesus

You could probably add some more to this “To Do” list for Christian disciples. But all of these can be boiled down to Jesus’ Great Commandment—Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul and love your neighbor as yourself. What Jesus asks of us is not so much that we complete a “To-Do” list, but rather that we become transformed, converted into disciples of his church. And then, he also asks, in this passage from this morning, that we go out into the world to help other people become disciples, too.

Again, let’s return to the colonial period in America. Many Christian missionaries took Jesus’ directive quite literally. In *Remarkable Providences*, there are journal recordings from missionaries who attempted to convert Native Americans to Christianity. One of the missionaries went so far as to learn the language of the native peoples so that he could teach the scriptures and tell the stories in their native tongue. It took him years to make converts and the process was slow and sometimes tedious. Let’s juxtapose this with early conversion efforts by Catholic missionaries working with the tribes of the American Southwest. These missionaries were focused on the quantity of converts instead of the quality of conversion. They utilized signs and symbols that already existed in the native religious culture and adapted them to the Christian story. It was a successful approach and thousands of native peoples in the Southwest converted to Christianity while the New England missionaries could not possibly boast such numbers. But, and this surely isn’t any kind of anti-Catholic sentiment—it’s just the record of history—when conflicts and struggles later arose between the native peoples and the European immigrants, the native people in the Southwest quickly returned to their former religions and denounced Christianity. But, the native people who had been converted by the protestant missionaries in New England, even when wars and disagreements arose between the tribes and the settlers, the native people remained Christians because their conversions had been more complete. They had been transformed into disciples, not simply recruited into membership.

Now, I recognize that the topic of missionary conversion can be quite controversial and puzzling. How are we to deal with this passage about going forth to make disciples of all the nations when we live in a pluralistic and diverse world? I don’t know the answer to that question as I find it quite troubling myself. But, I do believe we can learn from those

early congregational missionaries. They were not so adamant about blindly forcing their faith on the native peoples. Instead, they took the time to meet the people, to learn the language, and to immerse themselves in the life of the tribe. They shared their food and resources with them. They opened themselves up to learn from the members of the tribe. And I can't help but wonder if the native converts were persuaded not so much by the words and lessons they were taught as they were by the example set by the missionaries.

I surely don't know that to be the case, it's just what I suspect. I'll use that line I used in last week's sermon again—faith is caught, not taught. It's the mantra of new church start ministry. As you know, Corey and I started a new church for the United Church of Christ. It's called the Potter's House and it's still going strong with worship services on Sunday evenings. At first, we both thought that we needed to teach, teach, teach the new folks who were coming in the door everything they ever needed to know about the Christian faith. But as we read more books and talked to more new church start professionals, we began to realize that most folks come to a church because they feel a sense of welcome and belonging there. That's not to say that there's no place for education in the life of a church. But rather, the people of a church are the first lesson that guests learn about a church. As soon as someone drives up in front of this church, they begin to see what our list of discipleship “do's” looks like. From the outside they see that the building is well-maintained, good stewardship is on our list. When they walk through the door they are offered a warm, but not too pushy, greeting, hospitality is on our list. As the service begins, a guest hears us gathering up prayer concerns, prayer is on our list. While the service continues a guest hears our music, sharing our spiritual gifts and talents is on our list. This is followed by the reception of the offering, sharing our resources is on our list. If it's a coffee hour Sunday or a guest goes downstairs to use the bathroom, he or she will see the scripture tent and the bulletin board with the creations of the Sunday School children, welcoming children is on our list. From the looks and sounds of things, we're doing pretty well. Hopefully we're a place where faith is caught. But, it's often just when things are getting good that we begin to get lazy.

That's the thing about Christian discipleship. It's not a once and for all, one-time event. It's a process that happens over a lifetime. For those of you who like to make “To Do” lists, the Discipleship “Do's” list is a little different. We never get to cross anything off. It's an ongoing transformation of our lives. But, the good news is that Jesus promised to be with us until the end. Just as he was with the first disciples and with the first Congregationalist ministers and with all disciples, he is with us. And he gives us each other to work alongside in our efforts towards discipleship.