

“On One Hand or the Other”  
Genesis 18:17-19; Isaiah 42:1-8;  
Matthew 25:31-46; Matthew 28:18-20

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This fall we have worked our way through a sermon series on our journey of faith. Since we are at the end the series, I thought it would be a good time to think back over it and review what we talked about. We started out with “opening the door:” the idea that we can knock, search, and find. If we knock on the door, God is waiting to open it to us, and through Jesus, we are able to search for and encounter the grace of God. As we then come through the door, we find a place to be. It’s a good place; a place where there is grace. And then we discover that not only are we knocking on the door, but Christ is knocking on the door of our lives asking to be let in and inviting us to know the fullness of the grace he would bring into our lives.

Then we went on to talk about “cultivating community” and the way that we cultivate the ground so that we can sow the seed, and it grows. That’s what we do as we gather in faith. We remember that as we gather, we are fed. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness find it in Christ and in the community that Christ gives us. It seems that one of the things that God wants of us is to gather together, to be a community, to be a place where our faith can grow and be supported and encouraged, and become more than it can be on its own. We can be more than just faithful people. As we become the Body of Christ, we become much more.

Out of that gathering together, we grow in Christ. We thought about the way a plant grows and is nourished and watered, and how in Christ we are fed and grow. As we grow in Christ, we learn that life fits when we follow him. The yoke of our lives, the burdens we bear, the weariness we feel is not as great when we follow Christ. In fact, the burden begins to feel lighter, the yoke easier. We remembered then, as we grow in Christ, as we trust in him, as we grow further and deeper into that trust, some of our worry falls away. The weariness and worries of the world fall away as we are truly rooted and grounded in Christ.

Next, we discovered that where he is leading us is to greatness as servants. He invited us to know that the greatness of following him comes out of service, the serving of all. In fact, we hear him tell Peter, “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” We thought about how he was encouraging Peter and all his disciples to care for one another.

So that is the trajectory we have been on, and it sounds pretty linear. But if we try to visualize this life of faith, this journey we have talked about, it’s more like a circle. We start with opening the door, and move around to cultivating community, and then go on to where we grow in Christ, and then we go serve the world, which leads us to open more doors. Even that makes it look like it just goes in a circle. The thing I want to note is that while we can sometimes feel like that’s the trajectory of faith, sometimes you might go directly from opening a door to growing in Christ. From cultivating community,

it may open more doors, or lead us to grow, or may lead us directly to serving the world. As we grow, we may recognize that we go back and cultivate more community or we go serve the world, or may open some doors. As we serve the world, we certainly open some doors and cultivate some community and we grow. It's not that we just go around the outside of the circle; sometimes we go through the middle and perhaps it makes sense that it looks a little like a cross.

As we think about this life of faith, it's multi-dimensional. There is a sense that there is this web created by the parts of our faith. As we are thinking about that big picture, we can think about how that works out in our lives. How does it become who we are?

As I was thinking about that, I thought of an old movie. There's a movie from the 1990s called *Groundhog Day*. Some of you may have seen it. It's about a reporter who was going to cover the story about whether the groundhog would see his shadow or not. It ends up that the whole movie is about him reliving that same day over and over again. Initially, what comes out is his dark side, especially as he realizes that by the next day nobody is going to remember what he did. He does anything he wants to do. Then it just gets old and he begins to feel the burden of living that day over and over again, so he ends up killing himself. But he wakes up the next day, and the next day. Finally he talks to somebody he really cares about and who cares about him, and while the person thinks he might be a little cracked, he suggests that the guy should do what's good. So he begins to recognize what is happening on that day. Because he gets to live it over and over again, he can find all the places where there is need, and he can do one good deed after another for the whole day. As he does that, he finally is able to truly love other people in the town and show that love to those he cares about. When he finally gets everything right, the day moves on.

We don't do one day over and over again, at least not in time. We sometimes do the same thing over and over again. What it makes me think about is that it is what we do each day that leads us to be who we are the next day. We have a new day, but it's a new day to try again to do what's right, and good, and in relationship with God. As we do that, as we let each new day be a new possibility of how we can do good, when we can discover again where the grace of God is in this new day, we begin to let this all become part of who we are. What's incredible to me is when Christ is talking to these folks in this passage in Matthew about the good they have done, they said, "When did we do this?" They didn't even realize what they were doing because it had become part of who they were. Part of it is that they might not have recognized Christ in the others they were helping, but the other part of it is that they didn't recognize who they had become because they had followed Christ and learned his ways so that it became part of them each new day. They became disciples of Christ.

Jesus comes to his disciples at the very end of his time on earth and tells them to go make disciples of all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Let's think about what that means. I would like to talk about it in two ways. First, the word there is taking the word "disciple" and making it into a verb. So the idea is to create disciples, make disciples. In that time, to be a disciple meant to

carry on the teachings of the teacher. One of the things we will find here is that these disciples didn't just carry on the teachings of a teacher, they were a witness to who the teacher was. It's a little different from just carrying on the teachings, because they want to be witnesses to who Jesus was—the one who brought the grace of God into our lives, who gave us the opportunity to know the full forgiveness and grace of God, the one who would guide us into life, the one with whom we can have an ongoing relationship, and who will live on into this age to be with us. So part of the idea of being a disciple was not just bringing the teachings, but bringing the very essence of who Jesus was into the world to others.

The other piece I want to think about is the word “make.” Be careful when you are working with the word “make” that you are not suggesting that it means to compel or force others to become disciples. Sometimes I think we hear that in that word “make.” How can we think about that in another way? Perhaps what we could say is “be reasons” for others to become disciples. Be the reason. I think about what Jesus is doing when he is talking to the two groups, and is saying that they fed him and clothed him and all those things. Those folks were reasons why other people would want to be disciples. They were reasons because they were showing the love and grace of God in their very lives. Jesus is inviting us to be reasons so that others will want to know the grace of discipleship.

When I think of discipleship, I think of it as grace, a gift to us that we can follow Christ, and as we do, to discover the wonder of being his family, his children. We can discover what it means to be part of a community, to grow in him, to serve the world, to continue to let doors open in us. It is an incredible journey that he invites us on. He invites us to be reasons to share the gift of discipleship, the grace of discipleship, with all the nations and to baptize them and then to teach them. It's an incredible gift.

As we live our lives, we get to practice who we will become, and we will become some kind of person. We are invited into this kind of living—living into the kingdom, living into being disciples, living into being Christ-like, living into being the Body of Christ. Why not? We will, after all, end up on one hand or the other. Amen.

Gracious God, we are thankful for all that you do and for the incredible nature of your walk with us. You sent your Son that we might recognize your grace and might be led to create and cultivate community and to become the Body of Christ. It is as we grow in Him and through Him, that our lives are fed and the thirst of our souls is quenched. You lead us into serving the world and finding as we do it that more doors are opened, that your community is cultivated, and that we grow even deeper, our roots going down further into the grace of Christ. Lord, we remember those who have served—our veterans. We think about those who have served to encourage us, those who have served in your church to guide us, and those who will serve on our mission team in Nicaragua in a few days. Guide us, Lord, to be yours, to do your work, to serve you. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.