

The Joy of Making Disciples

**A Sermon Preached by
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March 21, 2010

This is the fifth message in a five-part series on what disciples do. Today's message is on making disciples. Previous messages were on worship, living like Jesus, giving and serving, and pursuing spiritual growth. All of the messages are available through www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons

Sue left her husband about a year ago and took her two little kids with her to live with her mom and dad in a place she has never called home: Carlisle. When she got here she had no job. No friends. No prospects. Sue is the first person I want you to remember.

Ethan and Holly have great jobs, a beautiful home, and lots of ambition. They're also the parents of Ruthie, their only child. Ruthie's a handful. When she was five her kindergarten teacher spoke to Holly about Ruthie's temper. When she was 10 Ruthie's Girl Scout leader spoke to Ethan about some things Ruthie said and did on an overnight; things that scared the other girls. When she turned 15 the police spoke to both parents about what they found Ruthie doing behind the school after hours. Ethan and Holly feel like failures. They're used to being in control of everything. But with Ruthie they need help.

Richard just moved into Cumberland Crossing, but it might as well have been Chapel Pointe or Green Ridge Village; it doesn't really matter, because he didn't have much of a choice in the end. His kids pretty much made him move after his wife died. He likes his new neighbors well enough, but misses being around young people. His own kids and grandkids are just half an hour away but they might as well live in California; they're always too busy to stop by. Richard, the retired Army Colonel, won't admit it, but he's lonely and depressed.

They're looking for help, hope, home. That's where we come in. We can help them find what they're looking for. If--*and only if*--we're willing to do what Jesus asks us to do: make disciples.

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."

Matthew 28:18-20 NRSV

People like Sue and Ethan and Holly and Richard need what we have: a Second Family and a life-changing relationship with Jesus. That's the good news—that we have something really great to offer people. The bad news is that most of us are so afraid of the e-word (evangelism) or “making disciples” (which sounds a little like we're making widgets) that when we meet people who really need a great church home and a solid relationship with Jesus we don't say anything. We'd rather say nothing at all than risk embarrassment or awkwardness or rejection.

I understand your fears. I also think those fears can be overcome if we re-think this whole thing we call evangelism. But before we do that, we have to remember that disciple making is something Jesus thinks is really important – for us and for the world. If we're serious about following Jesus with our whole selves – if we want to *be* disciples, then we need to learn how to *make* disciples. It's something that is life-changing—for ourselves and for the people we care about, and it's as easy as:

Inviting people,
Welcoming them, and
Nurturing them.

You'd be amazed at the power of an invitation. In a recent survey 82% of people without a church home said that they'd come to worship if invited by a friend [Barna Research]. I bet many of us came here for the first time because someone invited you. And the invitation doesn't have to be to worship—it could be to a concert, Vacation Bible School, a Christ Care group, or the Easter Egg Hunt. If you're inviting someone who's already a friend, you'll know what kind of experience is likely to be a good

starting place for them. You don't have to sell them on it. Just say what the first disciples did: "Come and see." [John 1:39 and 46] "See for yourself what it's all about, and then decide."

And when people finally come here for the first time (or the zillionth time, for that matter) we want to welcome them with open arms, like long lost relatives – the kind of relatives we really like. It takes so much courage to accept an invitation to come inside our doors, we want to make new people feel at home right away. If you see someone fumbling with a bulletin or admiring our beautiful windows or looking for the nursery – reach out to them. The Bible tells us that when we welcome strangers we may be entertaining angels unawares. How 'bout that? You might be sitting next to an angel. Husbands, nudge your wives, and say, "I think it's you!"

Once a person joins the congregation and feels at home here we don't stop caring. That'd be like planting a seed and not watering it. People need to be continually nurtured in their relationship with God and with other people. There are inevitable ups and downs on faith journeys. Wrong turns and detours aren't uncommon either. Nurturing people along the way might mean pointing them in a new direction, sharing a good devotional book with them, or praying for them. Sometimes it means crying with them. Those tears water their seed of faith. Over time you'll see the growth. Given enough time you might even get to see a spiritual redwood growing. And you'll be able to say, "I was there in the beginning."

Does this approach to evangelism, to "making disciples," sound manageable? You can do this without mentioning the word "brimstone" even once! Being an "evangelist" doesn't mean we have all the answers; it means we want to invite others to join us as we grow in faith together. And "making disciples" isn't about manipulating people to do anything they don't want to; it means respecting people enough to offer them something really helpful and necessary – and then trusting God's timing for their response.

It all begins with a simple "Come and see" invitation. That invitation to an Easter Service or to Kirk Night or to a barbecue at your house can set off a chain of events that can lead to something really wonderful in a person's life. I used to think that evangelism was something that happened all at once – like at a Billy Graham crusade or a Krislund Campfire. But

now I see those events as part of a much larger process that can take months or years. Every person's journey to the cross is different.

Seeing evangelism in this way takes a lot of the pressure off of both us and the person we're hoping to help. Did I ever tell you about the time I tried to introduce a guy to Christ while on a plane ride from Chicago to Newark? I'm sure those 150 minutes in the air were the longest of his life. I was fresh out of seminary and had just gotten out of a conference on evangelism and I was eager to put everything I knew into practice. I had a thick binder of ideas and I was going to try all of them. I don't think I left a very good impression. I'm sure he's somewhere today saying, "Fifteen years ago I was flying from Chicago to Newark, and if that wasn't bad enough I had to sit next to this Chatty Cathy pastor who was trying to convert me in the aisle...."

I should have begun with a *relationship*. The old adage is true: people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. A relationship opens their ears and their hearts. Take time to forge a genuine relationship, built on mutual interests like quilting or NASCAR or the boss you both can't stand. It doesn't matter what the subject is. Once you have something in common you may get the opportunity to talk about deeper things. Or it can start with a meeting a person's obvious need. Jesus knew that people listen better on full stomachs, so he fed the 5000. He knew they listen better when they aren't sick, so he healed them. We might not be able to pull off those miracles, but we can still earn a chance to be heard.

In his book *Messy Spirituality*, Mike Yaconelli

tells the story about an idealistic college student who ended up on a mission trip to one of the more dangerous housing projects in Philadelphia. ... Frightened and anxious to share his new faith, the young man approached a very large tenement house. Cautiously making his way through the dark, cluttered hallways, he gingerly climbed up one flight of stairs to an apartment. He knocked on the door, and a woman holding a naked howling baby opened it. She was smoking and not in any mood to hear some idealistic college boy tell her about Jesus. She started cursing him and slammed the door in his face. The young man was devastated."

He walked out to the street, sat on the curb, and wept... [And prayed.] Then he remembered that the baby was naked and the woman was smoking. The plan forming in his head didn't seem terribly spiritual, but....

He ran down the street to the local market and bought a box of diapers and a pack of cigarettes. When he knocked on the door again, he showed the woman his purchases. She hesitated and then invited him in. For the rest of the day, he played with the baby and changed its diapers (even though he had never changed diapers before). When the woman offered him a cigarette, he smoked (even though he wasn't a smoker). He spent the entire day smoking and changing diapers. ...

Late in the afternoon, the woman asked why he was doing all this, and finally he got to tell her everything he knew about Jesus. Took about five minutes. When he stopped talking, the woman looked at him and said softly, 'Pray for me and my baby that we can make it out of here alive,' so he did.

[Messy Spirituality, 89-90]

That's how disciples get made: meet people where they are and then love them enough to help them take the next step toward help, and hope, and home – toward God and God's people.

Remember Sue, Ethan, Holly and Richard? I bet one of them reminds you of at least one person in your life. A divorced single mom looking for a fresh start. A couple approaching middle-age and struggling with a challenging teen. A senior citizen who looks like he has it altogether but is really hurting inside. Any people come to mind? They are not in your life – or on your mind -- by accident. God put them there. If you don't already have a common-ground relationship with them—and you genuinely want to—find out what they're interested in. Or try to meet a practical need they might have – for babysitting or fresh baked cookies or a ride to the store.

Then look for an opportunity to invite them to something. The tax collector, Matthew, had a party for all his old IRS buddies soon after he became a disciple. And guess who he also invited to the party. Jesus, of course. [Matthew 9:10] Invite your friend to something where Jesus is likely

to show up – whether it be to worship, or a Final Four party, or a workday at Project SHARE. I’m sure Jesus will be there if you invite him.

You don’t have to do all this disciple making by yourself. Ask for God’s help and guidance. Remember your friend in prayer every chance you get. It may take years for the door of their hearts to open up, but when their heart opens all those things you’ve said and done will come flooding in. No act of love is ever wasted. Don’t give up.

This morning I’m especially thankful to God that some people named Tracy and David and Charlie and Adrienne and David and Jimmie and Linda accepted someone’s invitation to come here. And that when they arrived they found people who welcomed them like family. And that over the months or years they’ve been coming here they’ve been gently nurtured in their relationship with God and this congregation and that today they are ready to be counted as disciples and brothers and sisters in our Second Family. We’ll receive them as members in a few moments. As we do that let’s look forward to the day when, with God’s help, we can welcome people like Sue and Ethan and Holly and Richard, too. Amen.

Sermon Discussion Questions

When was the last time you spoke about your faith with someone who doesn’t already have a strong relationship with Jesus? When was the last time you invited someone who doesn’t already have a church home to an event or activity with Second Presbyterian Church? Describe what happened in each case.

How do you *feel* about the word and phrase, “evangelism” and “make disciples”? Excited? Anxious? Embarrassed? Sad? Confused? Peaceful? Something else? Sometimes re-casting an activity or concept in our minds can help us to feel more comfortable with it. Do you feel differently about the words “invite,” “welcome,” and “nurture”? Does “sharing your faith” feel different, too?

If we think of “evangelizing” as a long-term process that is relationship-based and may take many events and encounters (perhaps fifteen or more over an extended period of time), where do you think you might tend to fit

into the chain? Are you better at inviting, welcoming, or nurturing? Can you reach out of your comfort zone and try the other two activities as well?

If someone asked you what difference your relationship with Jesus makes in your daily living, what might you say?

If someone asked you what difference your relationship with this particular faith community (i.e., Second Presbyterian Church) makes in your daily living, what might you say?

Think about your friends, family, and acquaintances (including neighbors, co-workers, and classmates). Whom do you think you would like to – with God's help – invite, welcome, and nurture into a closer relationship with God and this community of faith? Why not take the next step with that person today by praying for them and reaching out to them?

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