

## RESTART DISCIPLESHIP

John 21:15-17, 19

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A few years ago, a United Methodist minister wrote a book which became popular in church circles. The title of the book is What's The Least I Can Believe and Still be a Christian? The title still makes me cringe a little. It seems to be indicating that the essence of Christianity can be watered down to a least common denominator. But once you open the book, you see that's not what the book is about at all. I re-read it again this week and realize it would be a wonderful book for one of our adult education classes to discuss.

The author has since written another book entitled, The Answer to Bad Religion is Not No Religion. So you can probably sense that his motivation is talking to people who have dismissed the Christian way of life and encouraging them to give it a second thought. He is a minister in Tennessee, in the Bible Belt, where churchgoing is highly popular, and where most churches are extremely conservative, certainly most large churches.

Here's a story from his ministry that illustrates why he writes his books. It's a personal story, sent to him in an email by a woman named Shelley. Shelley says this: "I was raised in a religious-right fundamentalist church. Suffice it to say that my experiences were such that by the time I finished college, I was totally estranged from religion. Twenty years later, I realized that I was neglecting an important part of my life, and I began searching for a church home. I attended a few churches and was so

discouraged. I wondered whether it was possible to find a church where my children would not hear hate and intolerance preached. Then one day my family and I visited your congregation, and were filled with joy to find a church that embraces grace instead of judgment. So here we are, a year later, and I actually look forward to Sunday services each week. I feel God's presence in my life for the first time in many years, and I want to thank you for your part in this process..."

If the Christian church is an umbrella, it is a HUGE umbrella, underneath which are all kinds of churches, and one church's teaching is very different from another's. It's important for us to be able to articulate what it is we think, not so that we can try to win arguments with other Christians, but so that we can welcome in those who are seeking an alternative. It's why we are placing such an emphasis on adult education right now.

I loved being a part of our inquirers class these past two weeks, as I heard the faith journeys of our new members.

Those of you who have been here a long while might not think about the fact that other churches are preaching messages that are far different than ours. Here are ten teachings from the book, What's The Least I Can Believe...ten things Christians don't need to believe, but things some churches are indeed teaching.

1. God causes cancer, car wrecks and other catastrophes. (Think of the people who said that God brought about natural disasters in order to teach people a lesson. Think of what that says about the character of God.)
2. Good Christians don't doubt. (If we're honest, we all doubt, and it is often through our questions that we find our relationship with God growing more vibrant.)

3. True Christians can't believe in evolution. (That is a very real teaching in some places.)
4. Women's can't be preachers and must submit to men.
5. God cares about saving souls but not about saving trees. (In other words, Christians shouldn't worry about the environment, or any other social issue.)
6. Bad people will be left behind and then fry in hell. (Remember how popular those Left Behind books were a few years ago?)
7. Jews won't make it to heaven. (Or people of any other religion, for that matter.)
8. Everything in the Bible should be taken literally. (I like to say that our Bible study motto is: we take the Bible seriously but not literally.)
9. God loves straight people but not gay people. ( Read the Plain Dealer and you'll see a letter to the editor like that about once a week. Still.)
10. It's ok for Christians to be judgmental and obnoxious. (Which is why many people have turned away from the Christian way of life altogether.)

The author then goes on to talk about what we DO believe...but many thoughtful people these days are proposing that the question, "What do you believe?" is perhaps the wrong question to emphasize. The pertinent question is, "How do you live?" Or, "Who do you belong to?"

The old way of thinking, which dominated the church for many centuries, was that you start your faith journey with belief. You say the creed, and then you become a member of the church. These days, many people are finding that they start with belonging. They are attracted to a certain group of people, a certain way of life. They

may be attracted to a church because the church has adopted an inner city school and they want to be a part of the volunteer team. They start tiptoeing around the fringes of the church, participating here and there. They come to worship on Easter or Christmas Eve. They hear a different kind of message than they've ever heard before. They sign up for a Bible Study class. There may be one "aha" moment, like we had one fall in Cross Training. You could almost feel the electricity in the room after we watched a video about different ways to understand the death and resurrection of Jesus. One man practically leapt out of his chair, "It never made sense to me before!" he exclaimed. "But now it does. This changes everything." Or it may be that very slowly and gradually it is as if a very large jigsaw puzzle begins to take shape. One day the person realizes she believes in this person Jesus and wants to follow him. She even is ready to join the church. It's happening that way for more and more people in our time. Stating a creed with certainty produces great anxiety, but living the way of life Jesus taught and lived...that has tremendous appeal.

Being a disciple of Jesus doesn't mean checking your brain at the door. To the contrary, we're told to love God with our minds. Ask questions. Argue and debate. Read. Take classes. Wrestle with it.

Being a disciple of Jesus doesn't mean we all have to end up with the very same faith statement. It means we are all trying to walk on the same path, the path of love, the path of service, the path that involves risk and sacrifice.

Being a disciple of Jesus doesn't mean absolute certainty on every matter of faith. It means absolute certainty that you want to draw closer to the spirit of the one who revealed the character of God.

At the end of worship today, when we welcome our new members, we will be saying together the United Church of Christ statement of faith. Notice how many of the words in that statement are words about how to live our discipleship, words that describe the values and character of God and God's people. So when people ask you, "Why do you go to the Avon Lake United Church of Christ", you don't need to memorize that statement of faith and recite it, but instead you can say, "Because we live in a world often devoid of hope and I need hope in my life. And when I'm delivering meals to the hungry, when I'm visiting the lonely, when I'm sheltering the homeless, I'm connected to God's spirit of hope." Or you might say, "Because in a world where people so often choose to spend time with people who are just like them, the church gives me an opportunity to be in community with people who think differently about politics, people of different income levels. At the church, older people become bonded to younger people, gay people with straight people."

The most important collection of Jesus' teachings, the Sermon on the Mount, contains not one single word about what we are to believe. But many words about what we are to do. Discipleship begins with behavior. The central focus of discipleship is on behavior. Are we living what Jesus taught and lived? Are we on the path that Jesus walked? Those are the questions of discipleship. And they're the questions Peter is asked in our story for today.

Do you remember what happens between Peter and Jesus on the day Jesus is crucified? It's one of the few stories that appears in all four gospels. Jesus is being questioned by the high priests. Some of the disciples are waiting in the courtyard. Peter is approached three times by people who have seen him with Jesus. "Aren't you

one of those followers of Jesus”? “No,” Peter says. You’re mistaken. “It’s not me.” “I don’t know Jesus.” Three times Peter denies his relationship with Jesus.

Now, after the resurrection, the risen Christ gives Peter a chance to redeem himself. “Do you love me, Peter”? And three times, Peter says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” By the third time, we hear a little irritation, though, in Peter’s voice, as if to say, “I get it...you’re reminding me of how badly I screwed up the other day, and I’m really sorry.” But words aren’t the point here. The point is what Peter is asked to do. “IF you love me, feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Follow me.”

Discipleship isn’t primarily having the right words to say; it’s knowing how to follow. It’s knowing WHO to follow. It’s a journey, and the best part is, we don’t have to walk it alone. I’m so glad to be welcoming a fabulous group of new members to join this church family today, and I am so excited for them to meet all of you, as we walk together the way of life Jesus shows us.