

In the world of pastors there are many names that have become household names. People like Billy Graham who passed away last year. People like Joel Olsteen and Pat Robertson. There is also another very famous pastor, who may not be a household name, but who has made a profound affect upon Christian discipleship and his name is Francis Chan. In his recent book “Letters to the Church” Francis Chan talks about why he decided to leave the megachurch he planted in order to faithfully answer God’s calling upon his life.

In 1994, at 26 years old Francis felt called to start a church in his living room, after experiencing much division in the church he had been attending. He started with 30 people that day and ending up with one of the largest churches in Ventura County California.

On the outside everything was going well. The church was growing, disciples were being made, and baptisms were happening every weekend, but Francis realized that something was missing. He began to feel God calling him to leave and go do a new thing. So, after 17 years Francis resigned and left the megachurch he started. He traveled the world with his family for a couple of months as he continued to discern God’s calling. He ended up in San Francisco, California where he started a new movement called “We Are Church.”

Francis’ goal was to go back to the basics of the church as outlined in Acts 2. He now helps Christians start house churches where they can grow in their discipleship together.

I am thankful for pastors, like Francis Chan, who continue to answer God’s calling on their lives to “follow God” in ways that they would never have imagined.

Today we remember that Christ is still calling us to “Follow Him.”

Through our Scripture from Luke 9 we see all the excuses we make to not follow Jesus Christ. Jesus asked three people to follow him, and yet all three have an excuse of why they cannot drop everything and follow Jesus Christ.

It has always been amazing to me to see the commitment and dedication of Jesus’ 12 disciples who immediately dropped everything to follow Christ. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark we see Christ’s call to Peter and his brother Andrew. Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 1:19). The Bible tells us that “Immediately they left their nets and followed him” (Matthew 1:20).

In the Gospel of Luke, we see this same call to discipleship embodied, when Jesus tells Andrew and Peter to cast their nets into the water on the other side of the boat. In this miracle moment they catch an abundance of fish, where there had been none.

We see that Peter’s response to this miracle is much that like that in our Scripture today he said: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). I think one of my favorite scriptures of the call to discipleship is from the Gospel of John where Jesus offers this simple invitation: “Come and see” (John 1:39).

Jesus Christ is still inviting us every day to follow Him, but in our humanity, we are much like Peter and the other three people Jesus called in Luke 9. We end up making excuses, rather than following God’s calling upon our lives.

I find myself in this same boat. When serving my first appointment in Newport News, Virginia, I was called by God and the church to plant a new service. I found myself asking God, “Are you sure? Do you really mean me?” I kept making every excuse to not pursue this calling. Here are all the excuses I made: 1) This service had failed to start seven times before 2) I had only been practicing ministry for two years, surely I was too inexperienced to start and be in charge of a new service 3) We did not have the laity support that it needed to survive 4) No one had volunteered to set up the 100 chairs in the gym for this service every week.

Surely the odds were stacked against us. So, I did what I always do when I am uncertain of the way that God is calling me to go. I prayed about it. I soon realized that this service would only thrive if it was built around the Bible and the gifts of the laity.

We chose our foundational verse from Matthew 5:14-16 which reads: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

The leadership and I chose the name for the service called “The Lampstand” from these verses of scripture. The name “The Lampstand” was significant because in the temple in the Old Testament there was a lampstand outside of the room of the “Holy of Holies” where the people of God believed that God resided. In this room the lampstand was the only source of light guiding the priest Aarron into the next room to the presence of God.

Then this lampstand mentioned in Matthew 5 carries forward this same meaning because Christ is the light of the world and our calling is to continue to share this light of Christ with others. This chosen name of the service continues to define its ministry.

I have to tell you honestly, that starting a new service was not easy. It required a lot of time and sacrifice. For two years, I was that person setting up all the chairs. In my naivety, I made some mistakes along the way, thinking I could carry the service by myself, but it was not until I started sharing in ministry with others that this service began to thrive. In three years, we went from 52 in worship attendance to 100 and became the largest service offered at Warwick Memorial UMC. Today this service continues to grow and thrive because of its biblical foundation and because of the pastors and laity who offer their gifts together.

The biggest mistake we make about not following Christ, is we think that we have to do it on our own. Sometimes we think that it is too much of a sacrifice. I mean is it really possible to surrender our whole lives to God?

Our Scripture from Luke 9 gives us hope that we too can answer Christ’s calling to follow Him.

Let’s take a closer look at the three people who found discipleship difficult:

The first man that Christ encountered immediately pledged himself to follow Christ. He said, “I will follow you wherever you go.” It seems that Christ is admonishing him through his response, but really Jesus was sharing with him that discipleship comes at a cost. That in following Jesus Christ he would become homeless, not knowing where he would lie his head each night. He would have to leave everything familiar.

To the second man that Christ encountered he invited him to follow him. The man explained that he wanted to follow Christ, but first he needed to bury his own father. Then we hear Christ’s response: “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” When we are trained as pastors, we are taught to respond to those who are grieving with compassion, on the outside this response from Christ, does not seem compassionate.

Commentary further explains Christ’s intention. Christ was sharing with the grieving man that discipleship is not something that starts and stops with the highs and lows of our lives. Discipleship is something that is constant.¹

Also, Christ was trying to show the man that his first goal in life should be that of Matthew 6:33 to “seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

So often in life I think we can relate to the plight of this man. We see the needs of the people that we love, and we put them first, even to the detriment of ourselves and our faith.

Yet, we find it is possible to actively practice our discipleship and care for those we love. In the Bible we see that Jesus responded to the needs of the family members of his own disciples. For instance, Jesus spent time healing the mother-in-law of Peter.

Of course, we are called to care for sick members of our family, but Christ warns, not at the expense of our own discipleship. I find in life that when I am caring for others, I need God more, I need the church more. To cut off these lifelines is not a fruitful way to live our lives.

We do need God, we do need the church, and these are God’s gifts to us.

With the third man in Scripture today, we hear a similar plight. He wants to follow Christ, but first he wants to say goodbye to his family and friends. Who wouldn’t? We see Christ rebuke him and tell him that to look back is to not be “fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Commentary more deeply reflects Christ’s rebuke sharing that if this man went back to his family and friends and told them he had been called to follow Christ, that they would most likely talk him out of it.ⁱⁱ

I think this is a situation that Francis Chan encountered. He had been called to answer Christ’s call in a different way and many people at his church tried to talk him out of it, but he knew that there was no going back.

I also feel that John Wesley experienced a similar situation. He was very faithful to God, but something was missing in his life. He realized that he had all the head knowledge, but he did not yet feel in his heart that Christ had saved him. Christ was calling him to serve in a different way.

So, what did he do? Did he go off by himself to find God on his own? No! He went to be with fellow Christians at a church worship service. This came to be known as a turning point in his practice of discipleship: “Wesley records in his journal what happened on May 24, 1738:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading [Martin] Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This moment changed John Wesley’s life. He was now able to pair head knowledge of God and heart knowledge of God which resulted in Methodism spreading like wildfire into the church that still exists today.

People like John Wesley and Francis Chan inspire me, because we too are called to something new. Throughout our lives, we will continue to be called through the power of the Holy Spirit to continue to follow Christ to places that we don’t want to go and yet, God goes before us and God goes with us.

The good news for our lives today is that Christ is still calling us to serve.

Here on the Rappahannock Charge, our gift is that we have three small churches, churches where we know one another and care about each other. We do not have the plight of a megachurch where the glitz and glam have gotten in the way of pure discipleship, but we are faced with a different challenge: the challenge of complacency.

We are called not simply to survive, but to thrive and I believe God is calling us to do something new together so that others may come to know the love and grace of God. The Holy Spirit continues to compel us forward.

I urge you to pray each day as I will as we discern what new thing God is calling us to do together. This fall we will start by hosting a farmer’s market in the same space we will enjoy fellowship.

What other ways is Christ calling us to follow Him? Discipleship is not easy, but it is life-giving, beautiful, and a life worth living. As we join in discipleship together may God bless all the gifts we have together as we make disciples for the glory of God. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/Luke.9.57-Luke.9.62>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/matthew-henry/Luke.9.57-Luke.9.62>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/holy-spirit-moments-learning-from-wesley-at-aldersgate>

Additional Resources

Francis Chan. “Letters to the Church.” David C. Cook. Colorado Springs, Colorado. 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/WUMCTheLampstand/>