

## **DO YOU HAVE A SPIRITUAL MENTOR?**

**ACTS 11:19-26; JOHN 4:5-42**

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We're talking these weeks about Jesus' charge to go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

What does it mean to make disciples? To be a disciple? So far we have said a disciple counts the cost of following Jesus; a disciple is someone who follows God's purpose for his or her life; and a disciple is someone whose ultimate security comes from his or her relationship to Jesus.

Today the mark of discipleship and disciple making is spiritual mentoring.

If we take seriously Jesus' charge to "go and make disciples" there are some good reasons to embrace spiritual mentoring.

The first reason is that there is a big difference, as someone said, between spiritual trying and spiritual training. Training implies practice and planning. Training implies goal setting and benchmarks. Training means disciplined living. *Trying* is less committed, less focused, less methodical.

A seventy something member of our congregation is an avid cyclist. Each summer he takes long road trips – three to five hundred miles. I don't care how old you are you can't just "try" to cycle a hundred miles a day. You have to "train" to do that. Training also implies a trainer or mentor. Following Jesus is every bit as arduous as riding a bicycle long distances. It helps to train and to have a spiritual trainer.

The second reason spiritual mentoring is important comes from today's story from the Gospel: God intrudes in our lives anywhere and anytime.

The Samaritan woman was drawing water when she met Jesus. After they talked she ran to tell others in her village, "I just met a man who told me everything about my life, he isn't the messiah, is he?"

God doesn't meet us at church says a colleague so much as at times like that when that woman went about the routines of her life. God's Spirit can fill our hearts chauffeuring the kids or feeding the dog. Spiritual mentors are people we listen to, watch and imitate in our daily living. It helps to see how a seasoned believer handles an office crisis or family dispute. If we can open ourselves to such people the Spirit will take care of the rest.

The third reason spiritual mentoring matters is that our faith is *caught* more than *taught*.

You can see this in your own life. I enjoy fly-fishing, love to ride my road bike, I'm an ordained minister because in each case someone inspired me.

Dr. John Updegrave stopped in my office in January of my first week at our church in Pennsylvania. "What are you doing on April 14?" he asked. "Wide open," I said. "Good, we're going trout fishing" he replied. His love and knowledge of the sport and our friendship opened up a new world to me. Do you have someone opening up the world of faith to you?

What is a spiritual mentor? The word comes from Homer's Odyssey. Before embarking upon the Trojan War, Ulysses placed his son Telemachus in the care of a wise, older man whose name was Mentor.

Homer reveals that Telemachus' education went far beyond book learning.

Mentor also gave the boy a healthy dose of street smarts so that later in life the son was ready to stand by his father in the epic battle for their family.

Mentoring shows up throughout the Bible. Moses mentors Joshua. Ruth leads Naomi. Elisha learns to be a prophet from Elijah. Mary is helped through her problem pregnancy by her older cousin Elizabeth. In today's story from Acts we learn that Barnabas mentors Paul.

You may remember how Paul, before he got knocked off his horse by the blinding light and voice of God, was on his way to persecute more Christians. Saul was his name then. He was a complicated, nasty, tightly wound character.

So God unravels his life. Stops him on his path of destruction. Renders him helpless and blinded for three days. God gets Saul's attention. Once Saul reflects and reforms he starts to look for ways that he too can help the Jesus movement.

But as you can imagine he is not well regarded in the Christian community.

Nevertheless, a certain Barnabas sees something in Paul – perhaps it was his zeal, his intelligence, his willingness to change. So Barnabas finds Paul, makes him his friend, shows Paul the ropes of faith. Together they preach the gospel to many. Barnabas was Paul's spiritual mentor.

Do you have a Barnabas in your life? I remember when I was the new kid on the block in a new high school in a new community. A youth minister by the name of Reid Carpenter found me. He led a large youth group in our Pittsburgh suburb.

I saw him one day at school and was surprised he knew my name. I didn't think many people knew me then – certainly not someone as important as this youth minister. I felt awkward but he was easy to talk to and seemed interested in how I was doing. He offered me a ride home one day in his vintage VW bus.

On the way he asked how I was doing. Did I like my new school, sports, social life, stuff like that. He then said I wasn't the only one struggling to make friends and fit in. I, of course, was convinced I was.

Then he told me he prayed every day for every one of the 120 students in his group.

"How do you do that?" I asked with more than a little skepticism since most of my prayers were one night stands confined to times of crisis like a test I wasn't prepared for.

"Here," he said pulling down the sun visor with three sheets of paper attached by rubber bands and filled with names alphabetically listed. "Let's see," he said, running his finger down the list. Here you are, one of the last ones. Yorty."

"When I get to a stop light," he said. "I look at a few names. Hold those people in mind. Sometimes I know specifically what to ask for. Like you, trying to find your way in this huge new school. I spend a lot of time in my ministry driving around," he said. "I take a few names here and there and usually get through the list by the end of the day."

The last time I'd been in church was in our old neighborhood. At that point, age 15 and struggling to adjust to a new stepfather, blended family and house that didn't yet feel like home I was not thinking much about church or the faith in which I was confirmed.

But something about Reid Carpenter impressed me. I wondered what would motivate someone to pray for that many people each day. I wondered how someone could seem so genuinely interested in me with acne, struggling on the j. v. football team, overwhelmed with the competitiveness at my new school.

But Reid was there for me like Barnabas. I started attending meetings he led, made friends, began feeling at home. Watching him interact with others I saw a homely man with a quick wit, great sense of humor, tons of confidence and genuine concern for others. He had something I wanted.

Probably most of us have had a Reid Carpenter or Barnabas in our lives. A parent or grandparent, older friend, coach, teacher, business partner. Perhaps some of your mentors have been brilliant authors, great preachers or historical figures.

As I think about it what I hold dear as a husband, father, minister, the head of a small business called a church has been given to me by mentors. I don't mean material things so much as a way of living, core values and behaviors.

It has all come from people who have cared enough to show me the ropes like Barnabas showed Paul. I'll bet most of you could say the same thing.

But what I'd like to put on our congregational radar is a sense of urgency for making mentoring more important to our life together here at Westminster.

Just this morning thanks to Ginny Bryan, Marcia Buhl and Dave Carstensen our confirmation class has its first mentoring program. We now have mentors for every member of the class. Experienced, cool adults here at Westminster who will befriend our confirmands and share their own life experience and faith. Ginny Bryan our interim leader of the ENERGY program talks about that twice weekly tutoring time as much more than academic help. She says adult tutors have a chance to mentor those kinds in character and faith.

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But if we're going to move from spiritual trying to spiritual training we could do more with mentoring. We could find ways to match newly weds with experienced couples, new parents with teenaged-seasoned parents, rookie elders and deacons with veteran leaders.

In business, law, health care, education, we have successful people who also happen to be people of faith. Shouldn't a church give members a chance to glean wisdom from those who have it! None of us is beyond needing a spiritual mentor.

Even the president of Harvard has reached out to his mentors recently to help him.

One of our big mission goals we are seeking Session support and approval for is a small business-mentoring program. That's what I'm talking about.

Last night Carol and I saw Tuesdays with Morrie at Studio Arena. It's clear Morrie literally saved the life of his former student Mitch Albom who was living in the fast lane.

Those are the stakes we're talking about—wholeness or brokenness, life or death.

If we're serious about Jesus' charge to be disciples and make disciples spiritual mentoring is something you and I can't live without. Amen.