

Ash Wednesday (26Feb2020)
Matthew 6; Isaiah 58

Disciples and apostles.

These are sometimes overlapping titles for those who hang around with Jesus. We most often think of a special set the 12 closest guys. But the terms are broader than that, and are also gender inclusive.

We might take the impression of a timeline to it, that people were disciples then became apostles, that one is BC (for Before Crucifixion) and the other AD (After Death), one with Jesus around and the other after he's gone. But that's not accurate.

"Disciple" is a word carried over from the Latin version of the Bible called the Vulgate, the commonly used Bible for almost 1500 years. Disciple is the Latin version of a word that means student or learner. In Greek, the word is "math." So if you've had to study mathematics, you've done some learning and been a disciple (of one sort or another).

The term "apostle" copies the original Greek word meaning "send away" and was kept in the Vulgate. Interestingly (at least if you're a dweeb like me), though that Greek "apostle" has stuck around as our Bible's term, the Latin version is at least as familiar and is used in church. The Latin for one sent away is "missionary." You are *sent* on a mission. Missiles are sent flying away. A decommissioned ship (or disciple, I suppose) is no longer sent away.

So, again, disciples learn from Jesus, and apostles are sent from Jesus.

The two terms come together at the very end of Matthew's Gospel after the resurrection (if you're willing to admit at the start of Lent that you know where this story is headed and what the larger point is). There Jesus gives a commission (again, a Latin word that means "sending together"). The risen Jesus says "Go make disciples of all nations, all peoples, teaching them." He's making his disciples into apostles, and the apostling is to disciple others; those who were taught are sent to teach.

But it's not just at the end of the story that

these two ideas come together. I've been talking through this because it seems they also lie behind our readings tonight and our perceptions of Lent.

First, though, we need to keep setting aside one *misperception* of Lent: that it is a season about sin, about guilt, somber remorse, and feeling bad that Jesus had to suffer to bear the burden that I rightly deserved as punishment from God. You will not, repeat won't hear that preached at the MCC. It's not only not what Lent is about, but it's also a faulty view of the crucifixion, of what happened to Jesus and why. That's neither saying that we don't sin or that Jesus didn't suffer. But the line drawn between those two is not helpful. It's not true. It's not the main message of Scripture. It's sadistic and satanic.

Tonight we have the traditional intro and invitation to Lent, built around part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins this emphasis with the phrase "be careful you don't practice your piety before others."

I like that term "practice" to think about Lent, as a time to practice our faithfulness or devotion (if those are easier terms than practicing "piety"). This is a season where we get to work on what it means to be connected to God.

It's not about getting closer to God, because nothing can separate you from the love of God. God is as near to you as every breath. Not a hair will fall from your head without God noticing. I'm not sure you can get closer to God. But this may notice the relationship, discover what it is to live into it.

So Jesus says we practice. He then gives what have become the standard practices of Lent, frequently known as Lenten "disciplines." Of note, discipline and disciple are connected. Disciplines help us learn as disciples. They are tools for learning. Maybe, then, we practice at these to learn how much God loves us.

Jesus begins his invitation to practice by encouraging our generosity, giving alms. He reminds us that works of love and giving aren't about getting a reward, like being noticed by others or receiving acclaim, or even about tax deductions. Jesus tells us to practice giving away

what is ours in order to help others. He commends charity, a word connected to “grace” and “gift,” and therefore almost certainly connected to God.

Jesus next calls us to practice praying as another discipline, and he teaches us a prayer, a way to converse with God as our loving parent, concerned for our every need and more. We’ll be wading into that prayer as a focus throughout Lent, both here on Wednesdays and in House Church small groups.

The third practice Jesus promotes is a discipline of fasting. In our typical terms for this season, it’s about what you’re giving up. One root of this holding “fast” is in self-control. Another direction is clinging tightly to God. Pausing from feasts, a fast breaks up the routine of life-as-usual and can remind us of God. Through the Bible, fasting can be a sign of grief and hope in the face of God, or of humility, or repentance.

But Jesus and Isaiah tonight both remind us it’s not about the act itself. There’s nothing in being hungry or giving up treats that makes you closer to God. It’s not that misery loves the company of God or that you really challenged yourself.

This is where I want to return to the pairing of our terms disciple and apostle.

There’s plenty in the Sermon on the Mount and in these Lenten practices that could be private. Jesus says be careful you don’t do it to show off; that’s improper for practicing faithfulness. The disciplines of a disciple can be very private—between you and God. Not tooting your horn, but going to pray in a quiet place, where one hand doesn’t know what even the other is giving. Not to earn points, but to find true treasure.

Yet piety *is* also public, before others. But the reward isn’t selfish, serving your own interests. Prayer is about relationships: in forgiveness and needs and against empire. Is the fast God would choose just to be humble, to try earning credit with God, to sit around in ashes that label life filled with sorrow?

No, God wants fasting that shares bread with the hungry and breaks oppression. Those aren’t practices you can do on your own, in private.

They are public piety, public faith. In your disciplines, you have a mission. As a disciple, you must be sent as an apostle.

I just found out in the phrase “practicing your piety,” that it isn’t really piety. The word is righteousness, or justice. So righteousness, Jesus says, isn’t just about looking good to others, being on the right side of an issue. It’s not *self*-righteousness. Faithful devotion may involve a very privately grounded connection to God. Yet it is also a public practice, practicing justice that rebuilds ancient ruins and restores streets worth living in. They are inseparable; living right with God means living with justice, “on earth as in heaven,” we’ll say.

So there you go. It’s a good program for these next 40 days. Practice living right, with God, neighbor, and creation. That is your discipleship, dear apostles. That is your mission, dear disciples of Jesus.