

Our Discipleship Pathway: GO

Mark 5:1-20

September 29, 2024

This weekend I drove to Itasca State Park to do some backpacking. My goal was to hike my first section of the North Country Trail. If you're not familiar, the North Country Trail stretches 4,800 miles across eight states, from North Dakota, through the Great Lake states and up into Vermont. I covered 4 of the 4,800-mile trek, roughly 0.083% of the trail. I've got a long way to go.

Maybe you've felt the same way about our Discipleship Pathway. Wherever you are on your faith journey, even if you look back and see how far you've come, it may seem like there is still a long way to go.

I remember my days as an undergrad just getting started as a follower of Jesus. Back then I would not have used words like "deeply devoted" to describe my faith. I was a Cru student trying to figure out the basics of the Christian life. I was learning how to pray. I was trying to read my Bible consistently. More mature Christians were teaching me how to live for Christ. I've come a long way, but I still have a long way to go.

This month, we've been looking at our Discipleship Pathway as part of our proposed Strategic Plan. By now, you know the four Gs: GATHER, GROW, GIVE, and GO.

When I think about the Discipleship Pathway, I can't help but picture a hiking trail. Hiking, or at least walking, is a frequently used metaphor in Scripture for the path of discipleship.

Recently we looked at Psalm 1 and read, "Blessed is the one who does not *walk* in step with the wicked" (Psa. 1:1a). Our VBS theme verse was Acts 2:28, "You always show me *the path* that leads to life. You will fill me with joy when I am with you" (NIRV). Our Trail Life Troop motto comes from Colossians 1:10 which says, "*Walk* in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him" (ESV). There are many references to walking as a disciple throughout Scripture.

Just because we've reached the fourth G of our Discipleship Pathway doesn't mean we've come to the trail's end. This isn't an out-and-back hike; this is a loop. We don't pass by GATHER, GROW, and GIVE like mile markers. As deeply devoted followers of Jesus, we are walking *continuously* along the path of discipleship toward maturity in Christ.

So let's talk about the fourth G: GO. You might expect me to mention two things in this sermon: missions and Matthew 28. Don't worry. We will definitely talk about missions. I'll also touch on Matthew 28. That passage does contain the most famous GO in all of Scripture. But I want us to look at another GO. Turn with me to Mark 5:1-20.

In this passage we read about a journey that Jesus took with his disciples. The Lord invited his disciples to sail from Galilee to the other side of the lake, to a region called the Gerasenes.

According to the end of Mark 4, it was rough sailing on the Sea of Galilee that day. Mark describes the storm they encountered as “a furious squall,” (Mark 4:37) one that nearly capsized their ship. The disciples onboard experienced the fear of death followed by the fear of God when Jesus “got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” (Mark 4:39).

The disciples were amazed by what they saw Jesus do that day. But the day wasn’t over yet. Jesus no more than came ashore and got out of the boat when he was met by a man who was severely oppressed by an evil spirit.

Mark describes the demon oppressed man as one who was spiritually unclean, physically untamed, and socially unwanted. Much like the storm the disciples encountered, there was a violent storm within this man.

But Jesus is a storm-stiller. Jesus commanded, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!” (Mark 5:8).

Perhaps you’ve read this story before. If you’re not familiar with it, go back and read it again this afternoon. Listen though to how the story ends. Mark says in verse 11 and following,

“A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned” (Mark 5:11-13).

This did not sit well with the local herdsmen. Listen to how Mark records their reaction.

“Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region” (Mark 5:14-17).

The people didn't know what to do with Jesus. Just as the disciples were asking "Who is this?" when the wind and the waves went quiet (Mark 4:41), I imagine these people were asking themselves, "Who is this? Even the demons obey him!"

What does this passage have to do with our Discipleship Pathway? Let me show you.

Look with me at the last part of this story in verses 18-20.

"As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed" (Mark 5:18-20).

There it is. There's the fourth G. GO. Jesus says,

"Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19).

It's true that this formerly demon-oppressed man now dressed and in his right mind would not have had a fully-formed understanding of who Jesus was or a complete grasp of the gospel at this point. But this man had an encounter with Jesus that left him totally transformed.

He wasn't invited to join the twelve disciples in the boat back to Galilee, but he was given a commission. Jesus told him to go and tell his friends and neighbors all about what the Lord had done for him. He was to go and tell them about the Lord's transforming mercy.

If you've had a chance to peruse our Strategic Plan document, you saw a fleshed out explanation of our four-step Discipleship Pathway. I want to read through each of these steps and as I do, see if you can pick out a repeated key word.

- Step 1: We want everyone at E-Free Bemidji to regularly GATHER for congregational worship.
- Step 2: We want everyone at E-Free Bemidji to join a small group where they can GROW by forming relationships and learning to apply the Bible.
- Step 3: We want to enable everyone to GIVE by using their spiritual gifts and resources in serving the church body.
- Step 4: We want to mobilize everyone to GO and make disciples locally and globally as the Lord provides the opportunity.

Did you catch what was repeated in each of those steps? The word *everyone*. We want *everyone* to GATHER, GROW, GIVE, and GO.

Everyone gathers. Everyone grows. Everyone gives. Everyone goes.

That's right. I said, "Everyone goes." We want to mobilize *everyone* to GO and make disciples locally and globally as the Lord provides the opportunity. Let's talk about what that looks like.

First, I want to be clear that this does not mean that every believer is or will be called to the mission field. However, it does mean that Jesus intends that every disciple is to be a disciple-maker.

To put it another way, every deeply devoted follower of Jesus is to make deeply devoted followers of Jesus. But what's the distinction between being a disciple who makes disciples and a disciple who we might call a *missionary* or *Global Partner*?

A few years ago our Global Connections Team revised our church's *Global Connections Missions Policy*. Much like our church's *Strategic Plan*, we wanted to make sure that we were doing what our Global Connections ministry was supposed to be doing.

Early in the process, we asked, "What do we mean by *missions*?" We wordsmithed a definition and here's what we came up with.

The Lord Jesus Christ commissioned his Church to *make disciples of all nations* (Mt 28:18-20; cf. Jn 20:21; Lk 24:44-49; Ac 1:8). Every follower of Jesus Christ is called to be a disciple who will make disciples. Every Christian is called to bear witness to the message of the gospel. Every believer is called to show Christ-like love, compassion, and justice to all people.

Yet, not every disciple will be called by God and gifted by the Holy Spirit to take the gospel to the nations and to make disciples outside of their local context. While all believers are to be about the mission of making disciples, we have defined a *Global Partner* as someone who has been uniquely called and gifted by God, and has been sent out and supported by the church, to make and strengthen deeply devoted followers of Jesus, outside of the context of our local congregation. (Ac 13:2-3; 14:21-22, 26-27; Rom 10:14-15; 15:20-21).

Therefore, missions is a formal partnership in the gospel between the local church as senders and supporters and those who have been identified as called and gifted by God for the purpose of global disciple-making (Php 1:3-5; 4:15-16; 3 Jn 5-8).

We want to mobilize *everyone* to GO and make disciples locally and globally as the Lord provides the opportunity. Lord willing, that means we should expect God to uniquely call and gift *some* of us to become disciple-makers outside of our home context.

It would be tragic if in the coming years, we do not send out more disciple-makers to the missions field. As the Lord provides the opportunity, some of us will make disciples locally and others globally. Whether local or global, all of us are to be disciples who make disciples.

But what if you're not called to be a Global Partner? Can you still have a global impact? Yes!

One of the ways that you can have a global impact is by giving. We talked about giving last week, so I won't rehash the importance of that third G. But if E-Free Bemidji is your church, you should know that a portion of your giving goes to support our Global Partners. That also means that when giving is down, that has an impact on our ability to financially support our Global Partners. One way to GO is to GIVE.

Here's another way you can have a global impact. You can join a Barnabas Team. Maybe you've paged through our Global Partner flipbook and have wanted to learn more about a particular Partner. Or perhaps you've been impacted by a visit from one of our Global Partners on a Sunday and you've wanted to do more to support them. Here's your opportunity. Barnabas Teams are small groups that gather regularly (notice how I slipped that g-word in) to pray for, encourage, and communicate with a Global Partner.

We would like to get two new Barnabas Teams started, one for our Global Partners serving with Reach Global MENA (Middle East-North Africa) and one for those serving right here in northern Minnesota with Native peoples. If that sounds like something you would like to be a part of, please reach out to me or let us know in the church office that you're interested.

I mentioned our Global Partner flipbooks. That's a third way you can have a global impact. You can pray for our Global Partners.

Last weekend we had some of our newest Global Partners serving with Reach Global MENA with us. When I asked them about what they needed most from us a partnering church, do you know what they said? Prayer. They need us to pray. Not once in a while. Not when someone reminds us. They need us to be praying *daily* for them.

Whether or not God gives us the opportunity to make disciples globally, every one of us is called to make disciples locally. Jesus's words in Mark 5 apply to each of us as deeply devoted followers. Jesus said,

“Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19).

When was the last time you sat down and reflected on how much the Lord has done for you? How often do you pause and meditate on how the Lord has shown you mercy? Time and again, when I've worked with people to help them think through their faith story, it has been an eye-opening experience for them.

In the church world, we call this a personal testimony. If you want a great example of what a testimony sounds like, I invite you to listen to the most recent episode of our church's podcast.

If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you've got a faith story too. We want to help you put yours into words. That's one way we can help you to GO and make disciples.

Jesus says in Mark 5 that as disciple-makers we are not only to *go* but we are also to *tell*. Telling implies that there is a message to be delivered. Declaring what the Lord has done and telling of his mercy is necessarily a verbal act.

Certainly, we can show others the love of Christ through acts of mercy, kindness, and good works. You will see that come through in our Strategic Plan where we talk about our church's core values.

But the gospel is necessarily verbal. What I mean by that is that the gospel is a message that must be spoken. If we are to GO and make disciples, whether here at home or in cross-cultural contexts, we need to be a church that is competent and confident in sharing our faith.

Last year we ran a Sunday School class called *I Want to Tell Others about Jesus (But I Don't Know How)*. This was more than an evangelism training course. The goal was to become more competent and more confident in sharing our faith.

We become more *competent* in sharing our faith when we grow in our understanding of the gospel. Yes, gospel competency is theological competency. But this doesn't mean that you've not really shared the gospel unless you've unpacked the nature of penal substitutionary atonement.

You could start by reading a book like *What Is the Gospel?* by Greg Gilbert. I'll give this copy away to the first person who promises to read it. And I will order copies for anyone who wants one, as long as you promise to read it and tell me what you think.

It's hard to share the gospel if we don't really understand the gospel.

But as disciples who are called to make disciples, we also need to grow in our *confidence* when it comes to sharing our faith. As is true of any skill, confidence comes with practice. And with sharing our faith most of us just need more practice.

I'm going to put some people on the spot this morning. Please raise your hand if you feel at least semi-confident in sharing your faith with another person. Don't worry. You're not bragging. Folks, these people aren't evangelism experts. I certainly am not. But any one of us can help you grow in your confidence in sharing your faith. We'll show you the ropes.

Don't worry if you didn't raise your hand. Every disciple starts at zero when it comes to competence and confidence in sharing our faith. We need to work together to become disciples who make disciples. My challenge to you is to find someone who has a little more confidence in sharing their faith than you do and say, "Show me how!"

When I was preparing this sermon, I read through Mark 5 (naturally). I actually started in Mark 4 and kept reading. I read Mark 4, then 5, then 6, and finally 7. But when I got to the end of Mark 7, I saw something I never noticed before. Here's what jumped off the page at me.

"Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him" (Mark 7:31-32).

In this account, Mark mentions Jesus returning to the region of the Decapolis. At the end of Mark 5, the locals wanted nothing to do with Jesus. By the time we get to the end of Mark 7, the people living in this same region are *begging* Jesus to stay. What changed? Jesus said to the formerly demon-oppressed man,

"Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed" (Mark 5:19-20).

Perhaps Jesus knew the kind of impact this man's story of transformation would have not only on the Decapolis but on disciples who would make disciples for generations to come.

Let's pray.