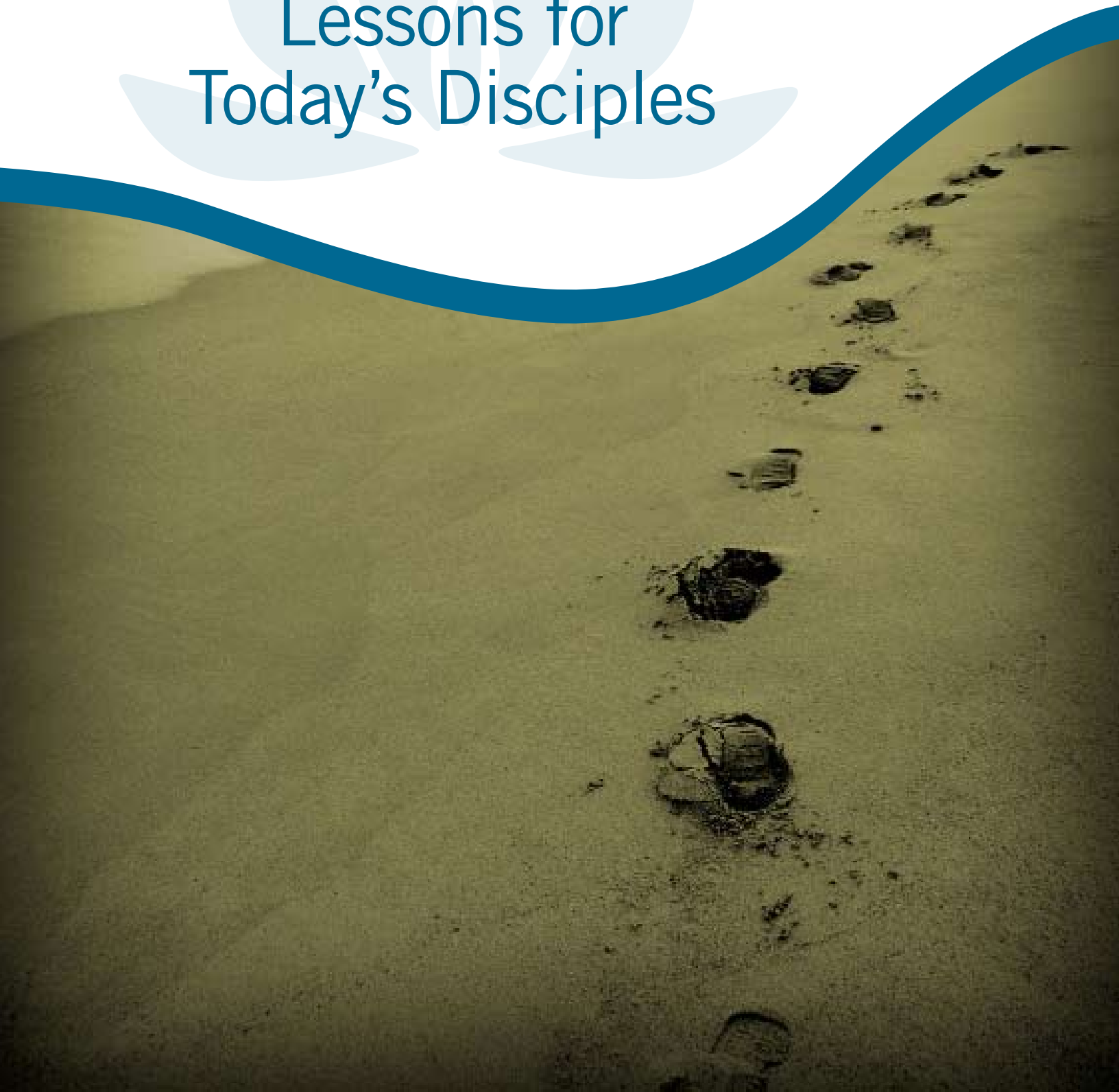




Lessons for Today's Disciples





Lessons for Today's Disciples

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Lessons for Today's Disciples was written by Valora K Starr. Theological Review by Reverend Ivis LaRiviere-Mestre.

Marks of Discipleship

What is a disciple?

A disciple is a student who follows the teachings and practices of a teacher. Consequently, we can say that Christian discipleship is a lifelong journey of living out and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ so that others may believe. Jesus invited the disciples, and many others along the way, to embark on a faith journey as they learned about his ministry. Each disciple responded with a resounding “Yes!”

What are marks of discipleship?

There are no physical marks that identify a disciple, only practices that disciples engage in as they follow Jesus. Jesus the teacher invited the disciples to join him for the journey, and then he modeled for them seven practices that we can call the **seven marks of discipleship: praying, studying, worshiping, inviting, encouraging, serving, and giving.**¹ They are essential to effectively accomplishing Jesus’ great commission in today’s world.

What does this mean for us?

We too are invited to embark on this faith journey. Throughout the gospels, Jesus has left for us a trail of examples of how disciples are to carry out the great commission (Matthew 28:19–20) and the great command (Acts 1:8).

It is an intentional act to claim the life of a disciple and the seven marks of discipleship. And it is a life-long commitment, not a temporary assignment. Nor can it be accomplished alone: Jesus invited the disciples to be part of his mission and ministry in community.

For Scripture says:

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the
prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*
(Luke 4:18–19)

Contemporary disciples are marked by living out the seven faith practices within the context of the great commission. If we do not include these faith practices in our daily discipleship, it may not be clear whose disciples we are.

The seven lessons that follow here will help you discover or recover the importance of these practices in the life of a disciple. Blessings, and enjoy the journey!

¹ The seven marks of discipleship were developed by the author, Valora Starr, Women of the ELCA.

How to Use This Resource

This resource is designed to support you in your calling to be a disciple in order that you may:

- **discover** or recover the seven marks, or faith practices, of discipleship;
- **practice** the seven marks of discipleship in your daily ministries; and
- **empower** other women to boldly live out their faith in Jesus Christ.

The seven lessons are based on the seven marks of discipleship and include exercises for practical application. Each lesson includes an overview of each of the marks and a biblical text that supports a format of reading, reflecting, and responding to the call of discipleship.

This resource can be used by anyone. Every woman should begin this learning experience from wherever she is on her journey.

In planning, the leader needs to remember the following:

- Some participants may be hearing about the marks of discipleship for the first time.
- Some participants may be familiar with a few or all of the marks but not actively practicing them.
- A balance needs to be maintained in which women are engaged in a healthy dialogue about these practices but also relating them to daily ministry.

The resource can be used:

- as a self-study or group study.
- to complement daily devotions.
- as a Bible study or in focus groups.
- as a weekend retreat.
- as a one-day retreat. Each lesson may be explored with limited reflection and response. You might also consider using this resource as a devotional series to begin a circle meeting or unit meeting.

Each lesson is designed to be:

- completed in one hour.
- interactive.

Be creative when engaging these lessons. Remember to pray before you begin and to close each session with prayers of thanksgiving to God for providing new insights and other blessings that were experienced in the group. Read the assigned biblical text out loud before looking for the focus verses. Encourage women to be honest with their answers.

LESSON 1

Praying the Lord's Prayer

Luke 11:1–13

Praying is important in the life of a disciple. This lesson will briefly examine Jesus' example of prayer.

We are continually called to be in communion with God through prayer. Prayer is both talking and listening to God. Our relationships with God and others grow deeper when we make these conversations part of our daily devotion. As our relationship with God deepens, we also come to know others in Christian love and grow in our understanding of our faith.

Jesus' ministry was centered in a life of prayer. He constantly prayed to God (Luke 5:16; 16:12). When one of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he taught the disciples how to be in communion with God.

READ Luke 11:1–13. Notice how Jesus arranged the prayer. First is an introduction that gives God all honor and praise. This statement of praise sets the tone before we continue with our requests: Without praising God first, our prayers can be a laundry list of needs and woes. Second, this prayer reminds us that God provides for all our needs. In our daily conversations with God, we also witness God's blessing in our lives. Third, the Lord's Prayer teaches us about God's forgiveness. This is the foundation

of our relationships with God, others, and ourselves: God's forgiveness enables us to release to God our unresolved issues and hurts.

When we are persistent and bold in our prayers, the Holy Spirit helps us change our hearts and minds while gaining clarity about what we need. Persistence shows the intensity of our need of God, who is already at work in our lives.

REFLECT on the different ways that God cares for you as you praise God's name.

Make a list.

Next, look at the story Jesus tells the disciples. What meaning does this prayer have in your daily life?

RESPOND to the following: Describe your prayer life.

LESSON 2

Studying God's Word

Acts 2:42–47

Studying God's word is fundamental to the process of discerning, understanding, articulating, and applying the meaning of God's word in the life of a disciple. This lesson will highlight common practices that were followed by disciples in the early church.

When Jesus was about twelve, he went to the Temple to study and listen to the elders. Studying God's word in community is one mark of discipleship: It is important to be with each other so that as we study God's word and pray, we grow in faith together. Community is the activator that encourages us, and others, to grow. Jesus always taught in community because that is where his ministry took place. Jesus frequently spoke to his disciples in parables and explained them in community so that they might struggle together to find a common understanding.

READ Acts 2:42–47. This was an exciting time for the new church. Peter was preaching the good news, and thousands of new believers were coming into the community. In studying God's word, hearing the apostles' teachings, fostering fellowship, breaking bread together, gathering to pray, and sharing financial resources, the community came alive. When we study together, we begin to see that the mission is larger than any one person could imagine or accomplish. Fellowship, which comes from studying in community, gives disciples opportunities to build

deeper relationships with God and with others as brothers and sisters in God's family.

REFLECT on verse 42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching ..." Make a list of the opportunities available to you for studying God's word in community and fellowship.

We do not study for the sake of study. Take a look at the sequence of the practices and results—study, fellowship, remembering Jesus (communion), serving the community, caring for each other's needs, and adding new believers.

Do you recognize this pattern in your faith community?

RESPOND to the following: Describe your study practice.

Personal Reflection

This reflection will help you assess your practice of studying God's word. Be as honest and open as you can so that you get an accurate picture of where you are and where you want to go with this practice.

Assess the basics. Take a quick read of your study practice.

When ... do I study God's word? _____

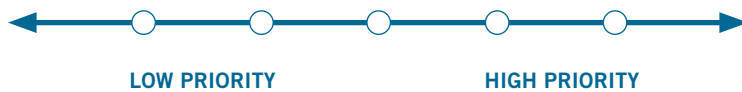
Where ... do I study? _____

What ... do I prefer to study? _____

How ... do I understand my favorite story in the Bible? _____

Plot the results.

MY STUDY PRACTICE IS ...



Plan the work. Check all that are relevant.

When it comes to studying the Bible, I need to work on ...

- studying God's word
- asking questions
- being open to learning
- balance: personal and collective study
- listening to God
- frequency of studying
- finding joy in learning
- consistency of studying
- discipline
- confidence in what I know

PRACTICE learning about God's word. It will inspire you to focus on the purpose of your study.

Read again Acts 2:42-27

Remember that studying God's word is the key to growing in faith.

Notes _____

LESSON 3

Worshiping God

John 4:19–26

Worshiping God builds and strengthens a disciple's connection to and relationship with both God and the community of faith. This lesson will reflect on the importance of true worship.

Sometimes true worship is confused with the habit of “going to church.” There is also the popular belief that an individual can worship sufficiently alone. However, Jesus, the Son of God, made worship central in his life and ministry (Luke 4:16). Jesus' example makes any rationale or excuse for not coming to worship meaningless or self-serving. Worshiping God in community was a regular practice in the lives of Jesus' disciples.

READ John 4:19–26. This story picks up in the middle of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. After a rousing round of riddles about water, the conversation shifts to an even deeper subject—worship. The Samaritan woman brings it up in an attempt to change the subject and move the spotlight away from her, but Jesus tells her that “the hour is coming” when worshiping God will not be focused on a particular location but centered in the way in which we worship God, in spirit and truth. Worshiping God with a genuine and sincere heart is what is most important.

REFLECT on how the Holy Spirit inspires you to worship.

Next, review verses 17–20. Think about the phrase “in spirit and truth.” What happens when your deepest hurts or needs connect with worship?

Just like the Samaritan woman, you may have strong beliefs about worship. What are some common worship practices in your congregation that may cause tension or bring healing?

RESPOND to the following: Describe your worship practice.

Personal Reflection

This reflection will help you assess your worship life. Be as honest and open as you can so that you get an accurate picture of where you are and where you want to go with this practice.

Assess the basics. Take a quick read of your worship practice.

When ... do I worship? _____

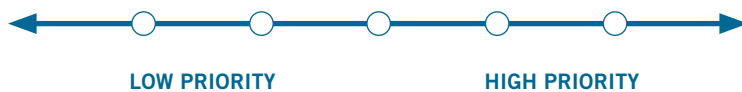
Where ... do I worship? _____

What ... do I worship? _____

How ... do I worship? _____

Plot the results.

MY WORSHIP PRACTICE IS ...



Plan the work. Check all that are relevant.

When it comes to worship, I need to work on ...

- praising God
- my worship comfort zone
- listening for God in worship
- worshipping God
- discernment
- being open to other worship styles
- balance: personal and corporate worship
- frequency of worship
- consistency of worship
- focusing on God when in worship

PRACTICE worshipping God in spirit and truth. It will help you to discern the meaning of worship in your daily life.

Read again John 4:19–26 and Hebrews 12:28b

Remember that through worship we experience God’s love and grow in appreciating the amazing gifts that God has given to us.

Notes _____

LESSON 4

Inviting Others to God's Feast

Luke 14:7-24

Inviting others to God's feast is essential to accomplishing the mission of a disciple. This lesson will introduce Jesus' model of invitation.

For months, you have been planning an elegant gala fit for royalty. Then the day of the party arrives, but no one shows up. You pace the floor and check your watch, but no one is coming.

Jesus commands that we make more disciples. But unlike other teachers, Jesus simply invited others to follow him: No previous experience or other qualifications required or needed. Jesus demonstrates that through a genuine invitation, the reign of God is open to everyone. Although the practice of inviting others to God's feast is often not included as a mark of discipleship, it is vital to the mission of all disciples to make more disciples.

READ Luke 14:7-24. All have been invited to God's feast. We must be ready to invite others and to accept and follow through on the invitations we receive. Somewhere along our journey as disciples, we have forgotten the purpose for making such a radical invitation. Disciples are to be ready to both receive and offer an invitation. Because as we invite others, we meet Jesus, who leads us as disciples to get our work done!

REFLECT on the custom of that day to issue two invitations, the first to announce the party and the second to announce "Come, for everything is now ready." Next, take a look at verses 15-20. How do you handle rejections and regrets?

God is clearly the master in the banquet story. He invites the world to come to the banquet table, where Jesus is guest of honor. How are you at inviting the "least of these" to the table?

RESPOND to the following: Describe how you are inviting.

Personal Reflection

This reflection will help you assess your practice of inviting. Be as honest and open as you can so that you get an accurate picture of where you are and where you want to go with this practice.

Assess the basics. Take a quick read of your practice of inviting.

When ... do I invite others? _____

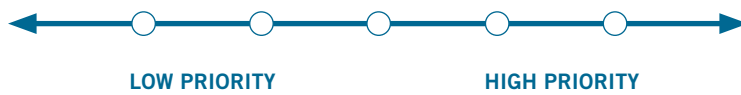
What ... do I invite others to do? _____

Whom ... do I invite? _____

How ... do I invite others? _____

Plot the results.

MY INVITING PRACTICE IS ...



Plan the work. Check all that are relevant.

When it comes to inviting, I need to work on ...

- inviting
- being open to invitations
- understanding inviting
- being confident in inviting
- discernment
- making disciples
- balance: implying and making explicit invitations
- frequency in inviting
- consistency in inviting
- focusing on God when inviting

PRACTICE by connecting the act of inviting to the act of inviting others to the banquet table. It will help you stay focused on the purpose of inviting.

Read again Luke 14:7–24

Remember that inviting others to meet Jesus is the way disciples get their work done!

Notes _____

LESSON 5

Encouraging One Another

1 Thessalonians 5:11–24

Encouraging others is work disciples can only do in community. This lesson will examine Jesus' example of encouragement as a natural part of teamwork and motivation to get the job done.

Encouragement from others at just the right moment speaks volumes. It can mean the difference between giving up and knowing you're okay. The receiver knows someone cares and feels that she matters. Just as Jesus encouraged Peter to walk on water, we also are called to encourage others to stretch beyond what they think they can do. Encouragement in the faith community is not just a pep talk: It is an affirmation and blessed assurance of what God can do in our lives.

READ 1 Thessalonians 5:11–24. Jesus left a trail of "encouraging" accounts for the disciples and the early church. This mark of encouraging is meant to be practiced in community. The practice appears to be about how we treat others, but it has less to do with others than it does with the change that occurs in ourselves. The act of encouraging another places the encourager in the other's shoes. A deep sensitivity for the other's situation and circumstance is important, and you make a conscious decision to let your actions be guided by the Holy Spirit. Your words of encouragement have a two-fold effect—they are affirming for the other and faith-building for you.

REFLECT on the ways we are called to encourage others. Make a list, and explain how you would carry out each one. Hint: There are eleven more directives in verses 12–18.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____

Build each other up—tell someone you appreciate them and their gifts to the community.

RESPOND to the following: Describe how you are encouraging others.

Personal Reflection

This reflection will help you assess your practice of encouraging others. Be as honest and open as you can so that you get an accurate picture of where you are and where you want to go with this practice.

Assess the basics. Take a quick read of your practice of encouraging others.

When ... do I encourage others? _____

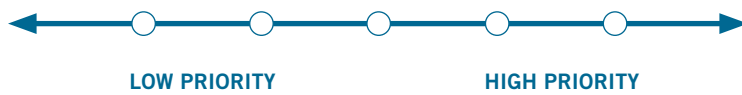
What ... prompts me to encourage others? _____

Whom ... do I encourage? _____

How ... do I encourage others? _____

Plot the results.

MY PRACTICE OF ENCOURAGING IS ...



Plan the work. Check all that are relevant.

When it comes to encouraging, I need to work on ...

- understanding the practice
- receiving encouragement
- knowing when to encourage
- confidence in encouraging
- discernment
- developing relationships
- appreciating the gifts of others
- frequency of encouraging others
- consistency in encouraging others
- focusing on God

PRACTICE examining the three commands (verses 16–18) to be joyful, pray, and give thanks. It will help you stay focused on the foundation for encouraging others.

Read again 1 Thessalonians 5:11–24 and Romans 1:12

Remember that when we encourage others, we are ourselves encouraged. Our faith grows and the community benefits.

Notes _____

LESSON 6

Serving Our Neighbors

Matthew 20:20–28

Serving is at the heart of Jesus' ministry. A disciple's goal is to do as the teacher does. This lesson will focus on serving as Jesus serves.

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear "serve" and "to serve as Jesus served"? Making the connection between Jesus feeding five thousand and setting up food pantries and soup kitchens is easy. But Jesus calls us to be more than good waitstaff. There is nothing wrong with the ministry of feeding, but connecting serving with Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman, his taking time for children, or his comforting of friends Martha and Mary moves us beyond projects and charitable activities to relationships.

READ Matthew 20:20–28. Jesus and his disciples had been in ministry together for a long time. Jesus was a walking example of committing one's life to serving God's people—healing the sick, raising the dead, teaching, feeding, showing compassion and praying for all he came in contact with. Even with all that, his disciples James and John and their mother, Mrs. Zebedee, missed the point. It wasn't about positions of leadership, notoriety, and power; not a single one of these is more important than caring for others. You are a disciple when you do what you never thought you would ever do. Jesus calls us to think differently about how and why we

serve others—not merely "doing for" or picking and choosing who gets our attention and when. Serving as Jesus serves brings us closer to Jesus, the one who did not come to be served but to serve.

REFLECT on positions of authority and power in your congregation, women's groups, and community organizations.

Jesus had an odd way of describing leadership and authority. Instead of the people serving the leader, the leader will serve them. What does it mean today to be a servant leader? What does this kind of serving look like today?

RESPOND to the following: Describe your practice of serving.

LESSON 7

Giving Freely

2 Corinthians 9:1–15

Giving is a heart exercise, and one of God’s unexplainable mysteries. This lesson will reveal that when we decide to give, things happen.

Giving does not start with our pocketbooks. Rather, it begins with our hearts. We must know (not intellectually but in our hearts) that everything belongs to God. Giving is merely the mechanism for distributing the resources needed (time, gifts, dollars, actions) to care for God’s creation. Giving is often confused with “giving up” or losing something, or creating scarcity and deficiency. This mark of discipleship is the toughest to grasp because of our culture’s practices around giving and receiving and the power of resources. However, the mystery is that when we give generously and freely, we find that the more we give, the more there is to give. This practice is too complex for our heads but not for our hearts. Our attitudes about giving and its importance to God’s plan are more important than the amounts we give. (Luke 21:1–2)

READ 2 Corinthians 9:1–15. Paul was on his third mission trip to raise money for the impoverished churches in Jerusalem. While in Macedonia, he witnessed an overwhelming act of sacrificial giving—the churches in Macedonia were poor themselves but collected an offering and presented it to Paul. They wanted to help. Their giving was genuine and from the heart. Paul had not been expecting it—he

had made judgments about this “poor” church and their ability and desire to give. He soon learned an important lesson: We all have something to give.

REFLECT on these familiar words: “Merciful Father, we offer with **joy** and **thanksgiving what you have first given us**—ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord” (from the liturgy). Concentrate on the bolded words.

Do you generally think of what you might give as what God has first given you—yourself, your time, and your possessions? Look again at verses 6–15. What are the benefits of generously giving to God’s work?

RESPOND to the following: Describe your practice of giving.

Personal Reflection

This reflection will help you assess your practice of giving. Be as honest and open as you can so that you get an accurate picture of where you are and where you want to go with this practice.

Assess the basics. Take a quick read of your practice of giving.

When ... do I give? _____

What ... do I give to? _____

Why ... do I give what I do? _____

How ... do I decide to give? _____

Plot the results.

MY PRACTICE OF GIVING IS ...



Plan the work. Check all that are relevant.

When it comes to giving, I need to work on ...

- giving freely
- taking opportunities to give
- listening
- confidence in giving
- discerning my giving
- tithing and/or first fruits giving
- being a cheerful and sacrificial giver
- frequency of giving
- consistency in giving
- complete giving: time, money, gifts

PRACTICE separating the mark of giving and what our culture says about giving. It will help you stay focused on the purpose of giving and your part in God's mission.

Read again 2 Corinthians 9:1–15

Remember that everything belongs to God. Giving helps us participate in God's mission as full partners making things happen!

Notes _____

Counting the Cost

Luke 14:25–35

Jesus teaches about the cost of being a disciple. This section will help you discern where you need strengthening and growth.

We have often heard, “anything worth having will cost you.” That’s all the motivation many people need, but following Jesus is not the same as deciding to buy that dream car or book a family cruise. Yes, discipleship will cost you, and it is a decision that must be weighed carefully.

And Jesus stops yet again to teach.

READ Luke 14:25–35. Jesus was growing in popularity. He and his disciples had been on a whirlwind journey of teaching and healing, and the crowd now was bigger than ever after the healing of the “bent over” woman. Everyone was caught up in being with Jesus, and now in the presence of his host, a prominent Pharisee, Jesus heals another. Everyone was ready to throw caution to the wind and sign on to being a disciple. In the midst of this, Jesus interrupted himself and told them: “Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Jesus wanted the crowd to think through their excitement about him and to acknowledge what it would mean to really follow him.

REFLECT on what it means to “give up everything.”

Take a look at verses 28–30. Then describe the cost of discipleship today.

RESPOND by making a list of the attributes and common uses of salt after rereading verses 34–35. Describe what salt and a disciple have in common. How salty are you?

REMEMBER that discipleship is total submission and commitment to the teacher.

Settling up

After figuring the cost, settling up gives you a complete picture of where you're going and what you need for the journey.

Discipleship is a way of life, and over time, these seven marks become natural parts of how you live your life. Remember, this change occurs over time through faith and practice. It will not happen overnight but instead one step at a time.

Plot each practice (refer back to each Personal Reflection page) at the points on the scale that you feel best reflect the expression of that practice in your life. Take a few moments to consider your practice as a whole. Revisit this page from time to time, as your priorities will change as you practice.



Key: **P**=Praying, **St**=Studying, **W**=Worshiping, **I**=Inviting, **E**=Encouraging, **S**=Serving, **G**=Giving

NEXT STEPS Return to the *Plan the Work* section of each mark. Choose one entry from the “I need to work on” exercise and record it below. This list will give some detail to the line graph above and give you a very good place to start. Since discipleship is a journey, you will concentrate on the other entries in time. You have a lifetime to be on this journey, so enjoy the trip!

Praying the Lord's Prayer _____

Studying God's Word _____

Worshiping God _____

Inviting Others to God's Feast _____

Encouraging One Another _____

Serving Our Neighbors _____

Giving Freely _____

Study Notes

For today's disciples, practicing the seven marks of discipleship will come in many forms. But the keys to building an effective discipline for practicing these marks are recorded in the gospels. The time Jesus spent with the disciples is well documented in these four distinct and personalized accounts, and as a disciple of Christ, insight into Jesus' mission and ministry through these accounts is essential to your discipline and practice of these marks.

Here are a few additional notes and Bible texts to expand your thoughts and actions.

Spiritual Gifts

All good teachers give their students (disciples) the tools and techniques to continue the learning process. As Jesus began to prepare the disciples for his earthly departure, he promised to leave them with a "substitute teacher" in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in turn presented each disciple with tools—spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts (Ephesians 4:1–16; 1 Corinthians 12:1–11; Romans 12:1–8) unify Christians in their faith and are the tools disciples use to complete their mission and ministry: making more disciples (Matthew 28:16–20).

Spiritual gifts are given through the work of the Holy Spirit. Everyone has spiritual gifts, and you cannot choose or trade the gifts you receive. It is exciting to discover and reveal your gifts. Taking a spiritual gifts inventory will affirm what comes naturally to you and assist you in understanding why you struggle in other areas of ministry.

Prayer

Disciples are most effective in ministry when all the marks of discipleship are being practiced and are in balance. However, prayer is both how we communicate with God and how we deepen our relationship with God. Therefore, paying closer attention to your prayer life will strengthen your relationship with God.

Jesus communicated with God through prayer. Jesus' prayers followed a pattern of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. The acronym ACTS will help you remember these four parts of prayer.

Adoration is acknowledging who God is. (John 11:41–42)

Confession is acknowledging sin and the need for forgiveness.* (Luke 11:4)

Thanksgiving is simply offering praise and gratitude to God. (Luke 11:1–4)

Supplication is to humbly and earnestly make a request. (John 17:6–26)

*Note: Jesus was without sin and had no need to confess, but by example taught the disciples. Also see Matthew 18:35 and Mark 11:25.

Marks of Discipleship

Journaling

Any successful journey includes a plan and other documents (maps, directions, itineraries, tickets, schedules) to help you stay focused and mark the path to take.

As you map out your directions and listen for God and the Holy Spirit to help shape and redirect your journey, you will need a place to record your itinerary. A journal is helpful because in the writing process, you get a chance to see your plan in a different light. It allows you to adjust, rethink, and discern your plan (count the cost) before you act on each step.

It seems there are as many journal designs as there are people. Choose a journal that will assist you in keeping an account of your journey and telling your story. Journaling should not be time-consuming or a chore. Think of journaling as writing “the gospel according to me.”

Ministry

Ultimately, God’s plan is for disciples to do ministry in community. Jesus invites his disciples to be in relationship with God, other disciples, and others (the world). The mystery of God’s plan is that the deeper our relationships with God, other disciples, and the world grow, the more we are motivated to engage the world. You can’t do one without the other.

Life as a disciple is being God’s hands and feet in the world. The activities of ministry are not mere projects created to keep disciples busy—we are engaged in ministry for the sake of the world.

One more statement or two...

The faith community is not only a place to receive fellowship and support but a place where you can be a support to others. Women of the ELCA’s purpose and mission statements are very good reminders of our call as disciples.

Women of the ELCA Purpose Statement

As a community of women,
 created in the image of God,
 called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and
 empowered by the Holy Spirit,
 we commit ourselves to
 grow in faith,
 affirm our gifts,
 support one another in our callings,
 engage in ministry and action, and
 promote healing and wholeness
 in the church,
 the society, and
 the world.

Women of the ELCA Mission Statement

To mobilize women to act boldly on the faith in Jesus Christ.