Doing and Saying – a Christian Pilgrimage

An Introduction to Discipleship – Week 43

Living the life of Jesus

Day 295. Almsgiving

The world *Alms* is descended from the Greek *eleos*, which means pity or mercy. Almsgiving is therefore the giving of mercy. Almsgiving is the act of giving to those in need, often in the form of money, food, or other material assistance. It is an act of kindness, compassion, and generosity towards others.

Jesus said, "Be careful not to display your righteousness merely to be seen by people. Otherwise you have no reward with your Father in heaven. Thus whenever you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in synagogues and on streets so that people will praise them. I tell you the truth, they have their reward! But when you do your giving, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your gift may be in secret.
And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you."

The Apostle Paul wrote,
With regard to the collection for the saints … On the first day of the week, each of you should set aside some income and save it to the extent that God has blessed you … (1st Cor 16:1-2)
and
… the grace of God given …, that during a severe ordeal of suffering, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in the wealth of their generosity. … they gave according to their means and beyond their means. They did so voluntarily … for the blessing and fellowship of helping the saints. … they gave themselves first to the Lord and to us by the will of God. … As you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and in all eagerness and in the love from us that is in you—make sure that you excel in this act of kindness too. … For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that although he was rich, he became poor for your sakes, so that you by his poverty could become rich. … If the eagerness is present, the gift itself is acceptable according to whatever one has, not according to what he does not have." (2nd Cor 8:1-12)

And finally Jesus had this experience:
(Jesus) sat down opposite the offering box and watched the crowd putting coins into it. Many rich people were throwing in large amounts. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, worth less than a penny. He called his disciples and said to them, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the offering box than all the others. For they all gave out of their wealth. But she, out of her poverty, put in what she had to live on, everything she had." (Mark 12:41-44)

Almsgiving was celebrated as a discipline in the early church (see Acts 5:1-11 for just how seriously they took it). It has been claimed we should give so that God can give us even more – but to give in order to pander to our own selfishness is not why God instituted almsgiving (and is actually taking the Lord's Name in vain). Almsgiving is a form of saying "thank you for your blessings" to God, and it is a form of copying God: "we bless as we are blessed." It is also, like fasting, a way of telling God that you rely on Him, and Him alone – even more than your bank account. Most of all though, almsgiving is a concreate way of loving your neighbour as you love yourself – your neighbour within the church, and your neighbour outside of it.

The money which the church spends is your money, created by your donations (acknowledging all the other people who donate as well). Is the church spending your money as God desires? How could it spend it in a more Godly fashion? Are you giving what God desires of you? How could you give so others see the blessing of our Father through you? Give yourself the discipline of giving to the church as God has blessed you, for God to bless others as well.

Who should you talk to so the church will spend your money to glorify God better?

Day 296: Fellowship

On the surface, fellowship seems simple: "let's spend some time together." Fellowship at its heart though, is much more than casually spending time together. It's "let's share each other – with each other and with Christ." Christian fellowship is built on a shared faith in Jesus Christ. It is for mutual encouragement and support, spiritual growth, and practical actions such as serving each other through sharing resources and hospitality.

Fellowship is built on commonality of faith in Christ: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And **our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.**" (1 John 1:3-4)

Fellowship is a means of mutual encouragement and support: "Let us consider how we may **spur one another on toward love and good deeds**, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

Fellowship is essential for spiritual growth and maturity: "Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, **so that the body of Christ may be built up** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:11-12)

Fellowship is demonstrated through practical actions, such as sharing resources, serving one another, and showing hospitality: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47)

Fellowship is so that the body of Christ may be built up in unity. It is not to socialize, it is not to enjoy company with friends, it is not to go and have a fun time. Ultimately, it is to be one with Christ as Christ is one with the Father. The more people who are one with Christ, then the more people who are one with each other through Christ (whether they actually like each other is, actually, immaterial). Fellowship is to gather to celebrate the presence of the Father, to be equipped and perform works of service, to spur each other to further love and good deeds. It is meeting with an agenda. When people do not engage in fellowship, they must depend on themself alone with God – and while not impossible, it is much harder to achieve as one person instead of a body working together.

How could you change your gatherings into true fellowship?

Share with your fellow explorers.

Day 297: Communion

Communion is fellowship taken to its logical conclusion. As shared on Day 283, Holy Communion is intended to be a profound experience. Communion with your fellow explorers should also be profound. The ultimate example of communion is given by Jesus Christ on the cross for us – and the exemplar of a community in communion is given to us in Acts 2:42-47:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

True communion is treating another as if they were an extension of yourself. The most common example which the church gives of this communion is Marriage: "so they are no longer two, but one flesh." Communion has been attempted different ways throughout church history, most notably in monastic communities where everything is held in common. In Article 38, the Anglican Church of Canada recognizes that common property is not the ultimate aim of communion, *"nevertheless everyone should give alms of what they own liberally to the poor according to their ability."* The ultimate aim of God is to walk in one-ness with His people, i.e., to be in communion with them. Devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching, to Holy Communion, to praying, giving to anyone amongst us who has need, and with glad and sincere hearts praising God and encouraging each other, treating our gathered fellow-believers as if they were an extension of ourselves – that is experiencing the love of Christ and sharing it. That is Communion.

What is preventing your congregation from being in communion? What will you do about it?

Share with your fellow explorers.

Day 298: Simplicity

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'tis the gift to come down where you ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
...
(Joseph Brackett, 1848)

Jesus was available -- He had no clutter in his life to get in the way of his ministry. Being a disciple means modeling your life on His.

Jesus said,
"Do not accumulate for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and devouring insect destroy and where thieves break in and steal. … Accumulate for yourselves treasures in heaven … For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. **…** You cannot serve God and money. Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't there more to life than food and more to the body than clothing? **…** So then, don't worry saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' **…** Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. **A**bove all pursue his kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:19-33)
and
Then he said to them, "Watch out and guard yourself from all types of greed because one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." (Luke 12:15).

And Paul wrote, "Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content." (1 Timothy 6:6-8)

It is so easy to be distracted by all that is available to us in the world – not only food and drink, clothing, money, but even experiences, sights, and sounds. Gluttony, trying to grasp everything we can in the short life we have, is a real temptation. Yet Jesus said, "don't worry about all that. Pursue your Heavenly Father's Kingdom, pursue right living with Him, and you'll receive everything that you need." This was echoed in Paul's finding, "being content with Godliness is a great benefit." No matter how much money you have, you cannot change how you eat, drink, or defecate. You cannot change your number of limbs, how your body was designed. No matter how many things you have, someone will always have something you don't. Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. All those distractions stop being gifts and become distractions or even burdensome when they get in the way of us living righteously and pursuing God's kingdom together. It truly is a gift to live simply.

What is preventing you from living righteously and pursuing God's kingdom? How can you simplify your life to remove that distraction?

Share how you're simplifying to rid of whatever is preventing you from walking with Jesus (if nothing is preventing you, congratulations!).

Day 299: Solitude

We've talked about the important disciplines of fellowship and communion – so isn't it at cross purposes to state that solitude is also a discipline of Christ? For everything there is a time.

Jesus would often slip away to the wilderness and pray (Luke 5:16).

He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God (Luke 6:12).

Jesus left and went to a secluded place (Luke 4:42).

Jesus said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (Mark 6:31)

He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. (Matthew 14:23)

Getting away can be restorative for rest, for concentrating on communicating with God, for introspection. Like all the disciplines, in its' proper place solitude is healthy. Remember: the disciplines are for the disciple, not the disciple for the disciplines.

Do you need solitude at times? Are you able to have it in appropriate amounts?

Share your thoughts on solitude.

Day 300: Submission and Humility

Submit to God. But resist the devil and he will flee from you. (James 4:7)

Do not lord it over those entrusted to you but be examples to the flock. … In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. 6 And God will exalt you in due time, if you humble yourselves under his mighty hand 7 by casting all your cares on him because he cares for you. Resist him (the devil), strong in your faith, because you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are enduring the same kinds of suffering. And, after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. (1st Peter 5:3-10)

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:3-8)

The reward for humility and fearing the Lord is riches and honor and life. (Proverbs 22:4)

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:11)

Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions use their authority over them. It must not be this way among you! Instead whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:25-28)

There was a star who would look around at the planets surrounding it and think "I am so much greater than anything around me." The other stars would chide its arrogance and remind it, "You serve those planets, they don't serve you. You exist to share your light with them, so they may have life on them if God wills it." The star didn't listen to the wisdom of others but would loudly proclaim its brilliance – focussing on getting brighter and brighter and brighter. It became so bright, and so hot, that it burnt all the planets around it. I became so bright, and so hot, that it expanded and enveloped those planets and they disappeared within it. It became so bright, and so hot, that it exploded, shouting out to the entire galaxy, "Look at ME!!!!" and then it collapsed, unable to hold itself any longer, becoming smaller and smaller and smaller until finally it was a black hole, from which no light at all could escape.

God came and talked to the star that had become a black hole. "I am disappointed in you. I created you to give light, and life, and instead, you gave death." The star replied, "I was the greatest around! I was mighty and strong! I glorified YOU in my excellence!" And God said,

"You were arrogant and proud. You glorified only yourself. Look where it has taken you. Now you are destined to be invisible, unseen by anyone, unless they happen to get very close to you – and then you shall suck them of their light and kill them. You will be avoided at all costs. You could have been among the greatest – you could have nurtured those planets, fostered life, and been a blessing to Me and to all around you, for billions of years. You did not submit; you did not humble yourself – you rejected your intended destiny of being a life-giver and joy-bringer. I am so disappointed." The black hole grew colder and lonelier, its heart filled with bitterness, resentment, and anger – at God, at creation, and, though it dare not admit it, at itself. Sometimes, if another heavenly body did come too close, it gleefully tore it to pieces and consumed it in the bitterness it had become. God cried.

Submission and humility are inter-related – they both require an understanding of reality. The reality is, no matter how "great" we may seem to our own eyes or in the eyes of others, compared to God we are not much different from worms, amoeba, or viruses. We are closer to unconscious lumps of rock than we are to God. We have nothing to place any pride in ourselves on, if we truly understand reality. The reality is that any reason we have for pride – intelligence, beauty, achievements, power, fame, fortune—the reality is that it is all dependent upon God. As Jesus told Pilate, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above." (John 19:11). The reality is that everything we have, everything we are, including our eternal salvation, is a gift to us from God. Recognizing reality means that we acknowledge that we are wholly dependent on God and that without Him, we wouldn't be who we are, and we wouldn't have what we have or lead the life we live. Recognizing reality means we realize that it is true that we are no better than anyone else, we are no better than anything else. The honest response, when truly understanding this, is not pride or arrogance, but thankfulness, submission, and humility. If Jesus of Nazareth humbled Himself so much that He gave His life for you, what true response can you have, except thankfulness, awe, and humbleness in return? Anything else, perhaps, is arrogance. Let us serve each other, recognizing the true reality of our situation, and lift not ourselves up, but God in Christ.

Write down your thoughts on the above, reflecting them against your life to date.

Share with your fellow Explorers in Christ, as is most helpful to you.

Day 301: Rest

Rest, receive nourishment, feed both body and soul. Reflect on the past week and care for your needs (body and spirit). Pray. Dedicate this day to God. In the evening get together with a group you trust and share what you would like to from the previous week – good points, hard points, what you've learned, what you've struggled with, etc. Decide again if you wish to continue journeying together or want to stop.

Know that God loves you. Celebrate, Rejoice, Give thanks, talk and walk with God.