

Invited To...Discipleship

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Preacher: Anthony Parrott

[0 : 0 0] So again, my name is Anthony. I'm one of the pastors here. I've been here, it'll be four years in March. And we're starting a new sermon series today. Let me give you just a little bit of background and story.

Anybody know what I mean by the word deconstruction? Deconstruction. Religious deconstruction. Yes, all right, yes. Represent, that's right. Yeah, deconstruction is this word that gets at a feeling that a lot of people who grew up in religious spaces have had, that they were handed a faith or a tradition in their childhood, or maybe even in their adulthood, that they've found the need to question, sort of pull apart, deconstruct, take the bricks down, and then rebuild some sort of belief system.

And it's a very common story in our church in particular, and in Christian faith, honestly, over the centuries and millennia. It's been a necessary piece. And we've used different words over the decades.

When Emily and I were in college, we talked a lot about the emergent church. We talked about postmodernism. Now in the 2020s, we're talking about deconstruction. And I bet in the 2030s, there'll be another word for it, because it keeps happening.

Every time a generation comes of age, they find a need to kind of undo or deconstruct, take apart the pieces of the faith that they were handed to them, and then try to find something worth believing in again.

[1 : 3 1] My own life, I had the joy of being part of lots of different Christian traditions. I was baptized Catholic. I was put in the foster system. I was baptized Lutheran. I was adopted. I was baptized missionary church and baptized by the Spirit and by fire and spoke tongues.

I was homeschooled in an independent fundamental kingdom, version-only Baptist denomination. I was part of a charismatic movement where we would go to bonds and cast out demons.

I've seen the gamut. I would worship for fun in an Eastern Orthodox church and try out my Greek. I've seen lots of different traditions about Christianity.

I've been handed lots of different faiths. My deconstruction as a believer, as a Christian, has not been sort of a crisis moment. It's happened over the years as I have been confronted with different belief systems, the ways that different belief systems harmed or traumatized people, the way that my own belief systems sort of failed to work in any sort of helpful way.

And I've had to constantly, continually be in a process of saying no to beliefs that were handed to me and saying yes to new beliefs.

[2 : 5 7] One of the first conversations I had when I moved here was to somebody in this room. You know who you are. And we got on a Zoom call at the time. This was early in the pandemic. And this person said to me, like, man, I feel like the table is really great at saying all the things that we are against.

And every once in a while, I wonder, like, what are the things that we are for? And this is a conversation that comes up a lot. And we've done sermon series like this a lot. But we do it, you know, every, I don't know, 12 to 18 months because it's important to be reminded of the things that we are for.

And so we're starting this series called Invited To dot dot dot. Over the next four weeks, we'll be talking about the four different invitations of what we believe that Jesus is inviting us to.

I'm going to take this off because I think it's causing problems. Thank you. That's never happened once in my life.

Okay. We believe that Jesus is giving us an invitation to something, not only to reject.

[4 : 07] Yes, rejection is important and necessary, but also towards something, to agree with something, to affirm something. And today we're going to talk about Jesus's invitation to follow, to follow in the way of Jesus.

We're talking about sort of a churchy word, the idea of discipleship. Discipleship very simply means a student or a learner or an apprentice. Anybody for their career have to do an apprenticeship of some sort?

Yeah, an apprenticeship is something that's very practical. It's hands on. It's actually going through the motions and the actions so that when the person who's leading or teaching you steps away, you have physically done the thing.

Like when you go to a doctor, that doctor did not just read a bunch of books about how to be a doctor. They also practiced, they apprenticed to other, you know, surgeons, optometricians, whatever, so that your first time is not their first time.

Okay? That's an important part. So, apprenticeship, discipleship is following in a way of life, and Christians have decided to put their way of life to follow after the way of Jesus.

[5 : 19] So, if you have a Bible on your phones, physical, whatever you want, we're going to be in the book of Luke chapter 9. Gospel of Luke chapter 9.

I guess it's on the screen as well. I say I guess, like I'm not the one who put it there. I put it there. In Luke chapter 9, Jesus is offering an invitation to his disciples, and Jesus says this.

He says, If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

For what does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Holy Spirit of God, we believe that you are in this place, that you are with us, that you are for us, not against us.

We believe that you want to illuminate your scriptures for us, so that we may read, and not just read, but read and understand. Not just understand, but be changed, God. So may your spirit speak through these words, these old, ancient words, and may they bring life and not death.

[6 : 27] May they bring freedom and not bondage. May they bring hope and not despair. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, this passage may raise up some red flags or may have some baggage with some folks, because you've got some kind of famous phrases in Christianity, take up your cross, lose your life to save it.

What is Jesus getting at with this invitation to come after him? To deny yourself, to bear a weapon of execution, to deny yourself for the sake of Jesus.

So we're going to go through this sort of point by point and see what we have to discover. And the first thing I want to say is that discipleship is not an invitation to lose or forfeit yourself.

And we'll talk about what it is, okay? But I want to begin with a not. It is not an invitation to lose or forfeit yourself. Because look at what Jesus says in verse 25, the last verse.

What does it profit anybody if they gain the whole world but lose or forfeit themselves? So there's this assumption that Jesus has said in that last phrase, the goal is not your loss or the forfeit of yourself.

[7 : 40] Now, I've been around the block enough to know that so many invitations to discipleship, so many invitations to supposedly follow in the way of Jesus, are about losing or forfeiting yourself.

That you're going to become part of a church community. You're going to become part of this family of faith. And in doing so, the expectation is that you lose any sense of individuality. That it gets smushed down in sort of a bland beige that nobody is allowed to stand out too much, except maybe the lead pastor that people whistle out occasionally, okay?

That you're supposed to just sort of flatten your character out into this not so unique, not so individual thing. And for people with any sort of, who have been minoritized in any sort of way, your race, well, that's not really allowed to be part of your character.

You're going to flatten that out. Your sexuality, your orientation, well, that's definitely not allowed. You need to flatten that out. Even if your gender is anything other than male, well, you need to sort of settle that down and flatten it out.

And so, so many invitations to discipleship, so many invitations to supposedly what it means to follow Jesus, to be part of a church community, is to lose your sense of individuality, to lose your sense of yourself, to give it up for the sake of the broader community.

[9 : 02] But that's not what Jesus says. Jesus says, what good is it if you gain the whole world and lose yourself? So the goal is not to lose yourself. Thomas Merton was a mystic in the 1900s, last century.

Some of us were born back then. And he said this, he said, for me to be a saint means to be myself. The problem of sanctity and salvation is, in fact, the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.

For me to be a saint means to be myself. Merton's idea of holiness, of what it means to become a saint, is to discover who you truly are.

Now, there are a thousand, thousand powers in this world who want to do that work for you. They want to be the ones to tell you who you are and who you're supposed to be.

They want to do the work of telling you what you're supposed to be like. And Merton says, if you want to follow after the way of Jesus, if you want to follow the invitation to discipleship, if you want to be Saint Josh, Saint Dustin, Saint Okechi, whatever, well, the way that you're going to do that is by discovering who you truly are, not based off of those thousand, thousand voices, but based off of the God who created you.

[10 : 25] Your sainthood, your sanctity, your salvation, your way of following after Jesus is discovering who you truly are, of taking off the layers and layers and layers of character paint that people and systems and powers have put over us and the lies that we've believed about who we really are.

And so many of those powers, so many of those forces in our lives that sort of try to shape our character and shape our self-identification, they're really just forms of self-hatred.

And something that I believe is that you cannot hate yourself into discipleship. You cannot hate yourself into being more Christ-like. But so many voices begin with the assumption, you are fundamentally bad, you are fundamentally evil, there is something fundamentally wrong with you.

Every commercial you've ever seen has made the assumption there's something wrong with you. Buy this thing to fix it. And many churches, many religious systems are selling the same sort of thing.

There's something fundamentally wrong with you. Do this to fix it. Whereas the invitation of Jesus, the very first pages of Scripture, is there's something fundamentally right with you.

[11 : 44] There's something fundamentally divine about you. There's something about God's image that lives within you. And therefore the path of sanctification, the path of becoming saint-like, the path of discipleship, is discovering who God made you to be.

You cannot hate yourself into discipleship. The spiritual life, this thing that we talk about in churches and small groups and all of that, the spiritual life, the spiritual life is pro-physical.

It assumes that the body is good. It assumes that when God created the universe and said, trees, good, water, good, creatures, good, people, very good, that the Bible was not lying then.

It assumes that this physical world, the stuff, the flesh and bone and sinew that you and I are made out of has an innate divine holiness to it. So you cannot hate yourself into formation.

You cannot lose or forfeit yourself into the way of Jesus. But let me offer the and, the part two, is that discipleship is an invitation to ruin your life in order to save it.

[12 : 53] Now, this may seem like an innate contradiction to what I just said. And we want to pay attention to the words of Jesus. He does say, those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

It's verse 24, chapter 9, verse 24. And I think that translation is from the New Revised Standard, the NRSV. They're sort of softening that lose language.

The word behind the word has to do with destruction or ruination to ruin something. So Jesus says, like, if you try to save your life, you're going to ruin it. If you try to ruin your life, you're going to save it.

Now, how does this square with what I just said about not hating yourself into discipleship? Well, I think many of us have ruined our lives on purpose for some greater goal or end.

When my wife, Emily, and I and our two children moved to D.C., we ruined our old life. Our life in Iowa was no longer possible because we sold our house, and we packed up all of our goods, and we packed up in a truck, and we moved here in the beginning of a pandemic.

[13 : 55] Our life in Iowa was ruined, but we ruined it on purpose. We sold our house and packed up all of our goods and put it all in a truck and moved to D.C. on purpose. We ruined something for the beginning of something else.

Whenever you start a new habit or a new routine, an exercise or a diet or just a new way of waking up in the morning, like we all tend to do in January 1st, you're ruining your old routine because you have some hope that by starting a new one, something good will come out of it.

So the invitation to ruin your life, to destroy, to lose a way of life, yes, there is some amount of letting go, of you can't go back to the way it was before, but there is a positive end goal in mind to save your life, to have healing in your life.

We'll talk a little bit more about healing in a moment. Discipleship is an invitation to ruin your life in order to save it. We ruin our lives at times on purpose so that we can start a new way of life.

We unravel the things that have come before so that we can weave something new. Mac McCarthy, a pastor, says you cannot consume your way into a fully formed disciple of Jesus.

[15 : 13] So many discipleship invitations and methods are about just taking on more, about, you know, here's three more activities that you can add to your life this week so that you can be more Christ-like.

Here's three new things that you can do in order to be a more fully formed discipleship. And we just consume. We read another book. We do another Bible story, study. We watch another video. We listen to another podcast and we consume our way into trying to be better at all times.

And I think there's something actually freeing about the invitation to go ruin something, to go let something go, to go unravel something in order to follow Jesus. Not just start new things, to take on new things, but say, you know what?

I'm done with this. I'm not going to do that anymore. Dallas Willard puts it this way. He says, Disciples simply are people who are constantly revising their affairs to carry through on their decision to follow Jesus.

Discipleship simply are people who are constantly revising their affairs to carry through on their decision to follow Jesus. At some point, At some point, you may have made a conscious decision to follow Jesus or to follow in the way of Jesus.

[16 : 30] Tanetta and I were once asked, you know, what is it that holds the table together? And we both had a similar answer. I think Tanetta said at first, it was like, we all have some fascination with the way of Jesus.

But that decision is not just a one-time decision. You have to constantly revise your affairs to follow up on that decision.

Just like a relationship is not just a, yes, I do, or let's go steady, or anything like that. It's a, you wake up the next morning and you have to continually revise your affairs to be in that friendship, or relationship, or marriage.

You have to not just say yes once, but keep saying yes to it. And eventually, as you keep saying yes to that relationship, or friendship, or marriage, or you decide to become a parent, you decide to take on a job, or a hobby, or whatever, that's going to take up room in your life.

It's going to take up space in your life, that the things that you used to be able to say yes to, before that relationship, or friendship, you can't say yes to anymore, because you said yes to the relationship instead.

[17 : 38] So how do you revise your affairs, and how do you ruin something, in order to say yes to something new, and good? So, discipleship, it is not an invitation to hate yourself, it is an invitation to ruin your life, in order to start a new one, and, part three, it is an invitation to wholeness.

Brian Zahn talks about discipleship, as an invitation towards the well-being, of your soul. The word, for save, or salvation, in the New Testament, is the word sozo, let me hear you say sozo.

Sozo, and it can be translated, save, or heal. And so, when you hear, hear, or read the stories of Jesus, healing someone, it's often the word sozo, he healed them, he saved them, and so, Jesus says, yes, if you just try to save, or heal your life, you may end up, destroying it, unraveling it, ruining it.

But, if you unravel parts of your life, you will find healing, you will sozo, save, heal your life. The invitation to discipleship is one that is towards well-being, and wholeness, and healing.

We talked about those layers of pain, the powers of the world, the systems of the world, try to put onto us, to tell us what our identity should not be, and should be instead.

[19 : 09] And, we need healing from that. When we have been part of systems, that hurt us, or traumatize us, or shame us, you can't just walk away, and expect there not to be cuts, and scratches, and bruises, and pain.

There are traumas, trauma is a word that just means anything that overwhelms our ability to cope. There are traumas, that stay with us, and that need healing.

And so, Jesus is saying, there are parts of your life that need to be ruined, in order for you to find that healing. We are, indeed, called to grow.

Things like seeds grow into trees. Things like children grow into adults. We are, indeed, called to grow.

And where I think things go a lie in churches, religious systems, is when people try not to encourage or facilitate growth, when they try to facilitate transformation or change.

[20 : 15] Now, it depends on how you define these words. There are good and bad ways to define words, and, you know, I don't want to get caught up too much in, just like, wordplay. But, one of the other recurring questions that's come up at the table, is the idea of, you know, God loves you enough, just the way you are, but loves you enough not to leave you there.

That sort of attitude. And, that sounds good, until that is weaponized against fundamental parts of your identity. Well, God loves you just the way you are, but God loves you enough to make sure that you don't stay, fill in the blank.

Some part of your identity that someone has questioned, or made you feel shame about. And, the invitation, I think, to discipleship, is one of growth.

Seeds to trees, babies to adults. That's natural. When growth is stifled, and growth doesn't happen, something is wrong. But, where I think, religious systems go awry, is when they say, you are a cherry tree, but now we need you to be an airplane.

Right? You are fundamentally this person, but we need you to be fundamentally this kind of person. There was somebody I knew, my mic fell off. I didn't even know. There was somebody I knew, you could have flagged me down.

[21 : 36] Jeez. If you can whistle at me, you can tell me my mic fell off. There was somebody I knew, who said, you know, I took a personality test, I got introvert, but I'm trying to get better.

Like, no. No. Introvert is not something, that you need a cure for. Like, take two pills, tell me how it feels in the morning. Like, no. Introvert is fine, okay?

We, you know the things I'm talking about. We can talk about sexual identity, we can talk about racial identity, we can talk about gender identity, talk about all of these things, that are fundamental to who you are, that religious systems have tried to say, take two pills, and tell us how it feels in the morning.

Like, do this thing, to change your fundamental identity, transform from cherry trees to airplanes, and that is not what discipleship is about. Discipleship is about growth, and about healing.

Now, I do believe that God is capable, and at times desires transformation, but that's divine spirit work, not the work of people and systems.

[22 : 43] And when we get those two crossed, when pastors or churches try to do the work of transformation, you're trying to take over the job of the Holy Spirit. Now, what churches and religious systems ought to be up to, what all of us ought to be up to, is facilitating environments for growth.

Seeds to trees, babies to grow. And you create consensual relationships. Do you want to be part of a relationship, where you challenge me, and I challenge you, so that we can grow up?

And if somebody says no, fine. If somebody says yes, okay, we're in business. But when you make that an unconsensual relationship, I'm going to try to change you, whether you like it or not.

That's where toxicity happens, that's where trauma happens. And if somebody tries to get part of a system, where they are changing from cherry trees to airplanes, that's where trauma happens as well.

So discipleship is an invitation to growth and healing. Growth and healing that we give some sort of consensus for, permission for. And we work on that together, and we check in with each other, and we don't do the work that's reserved for God and God's spirit, the work of transformation.

[23 : 58] Crispin Mayfield is a therapist, psychologist. He works on attachment theory and spirituality. And he says, knowing that we are liked as we are, is discipleship.

Creating an environment where you know, you're confident that you are loved, and not just loved, but people like you, gosh dang it. That's discipleship.

Fourth and final point. Discipleship is an invitation to a vision of a radically different society. Discipleship is often reduced down to individualistic personal choices.

What are you as an individual single person going to do differently this week? How can you change? How can you grow? How can you be transformed? But the invitation to discipleship is not merely personal.

It is society-wide. It is transformational of our culture. It's collective. Jesus uses this language about denying yourself and taking up your cross.

[25 : 04] And we have the baggage of nearly 2,000 years of religious jargon to sort of make us think certain things when we hear language like, take up your cross.

Excuse me, I'm going to read this part because I took a long time writing it and I want to get it right. We have a lot of Christianese associated with that. In a world where power is often measured by wealth and status, where success is often defined by material possessions, and where worth is often equated with social standing, I think that Jesus, in a modern era, might be calling us to strap on our electric chairs or to carry our lethal injections to hug our firing squads.

And these phrases, harsh and chilling as they may be, serve as stark reminders of the cost of discipleship and the radical redefinition of our culture's values that following Christ entails.

When Jesus urged his followers to take up their cross, he was not merely referring to a literal crucifixion, but to a complete and radical reversal of societal norms and expectations.

He was calling for a subversion of the status quo and a rejection of the prevailing values of the Roman Empire and a commitment to a kingdom not of this world. So when we strap on our electric chairs, we're challenging the justice system and its use of capital punishment.

[26 : 23] We advocate for life and the power of mercy. When we carry our lethal injections, we're questioning the right of society to decide who lives and who dies. We promote rehabilitation over retribution.

When we hug our firing squads, we're contesting the militarization of society and the glorification of violence. We champion peace over war. We're called to be countercultural, to challenge and to subvert the prevailing values of our society.

This is what it means to take up our cross. It's not merely a, you know, harm yourself so you look good in front of God. It's about subverting the values of empire.

That's what it means to follow Jesus. It means to stand up for justice when it's unpopular. It means choosing love over hate, peace over violence, forgiveness over vengeance. It means living out the radical, subversive, transformative love of God in a world that often seems hell-bent on power, wealth, and status.

So the invitation is to take up our crosses and strap on our electric chairs and to hug our firing squads and in doing so change and transform the world.

[27 : 30] I think many of us, we sort of blanch at the invitation to deny yourself, but there's so much that I would love to deny. I want to deny the parts of myself, the lies that I believe that I am not enough.

I want to deny the privilege that I got where I am, that got me to where I am, and I want to use that privilege on behalf of someone else. Deny that your sexuality is holding you back from God.

Deny that your maleness makes you better or your femaleness makes you less or your non-binariness makes you not belong. Deny that you deserve comfort at the cost of someone else's suffering. Deny that you are giving someone the same privileges that you have had.

It means that you have less privilege. Deny that someone else gets permission to tell you that you aren't good enough or likable enough or white enough or girly enough or manly enough or gay enough or too gay or too girly or too Christian or too black or too whatever.

Deny that. And then, by unraveling those parts of your life, you can heal it. Missionary and missiologist Leslie Newbergen puts it this way.

[28 : 38] He says, a preaching of the gospel, that calls people to accept Jesus as Savior, but does not make it clear that discipleship means commitment to a vision of society radically different from that which controls our public life today, must be condemned as false.

In other words, when you preach the gospel to people to accept Jesus as Savior, you must make clear that that includes a commitment to a vision of a radically different society.

table church over the past couple years, we have merged with Resurrection City, D.C. In many ways, 2021 kind of serves as this relaunch, rebirth of the table.

Now there's two congregations in one. And since then, we have been wrestling with our vision and our mission and our values, thinking about all of these invitations.

What are we for? Not just what we are against, but what are we moving towards as a community. And so, we've begun to slowly introduce this language to the congregation. I want to sort of formally introduce it to you today.

[29 : 44] We have a vision that says this. Our vision is to embody a more beautiful gospel that announces collective liberation and the renewal of all things.

One of the first questions that comes up with this vision statement when we've introduced it to people is a more beautiful gospel than what? And if you read through the New Testament, you'll see a couple of examples where Paul talks about my gospel, the gospel that I preach.

I think Peter does the same thing. There are many gospels out in the world that are all competing for our attention. Dr. Brad Zerzak says he wonders that there are at least two competing religions all using the same word Christianity.

and what the table wants to be up to is embodying. There's that body word. It's flesh and blood and bone and sinew and muscle and effort.

We want to embody a more beautiful gospel than anyone that has ever told anybody, you don't belong. You're not good enough. That announces collective liberation.

[30 : 52] Yes, it's about you. You need to be liberated. But that liberation does not come at the cost of others. It is collective and it announces the renewal of all things. God is up to something good in this world.

Our mission is that we are cultivating communities of authentic belonging following in the prophetic, thoughtful, and radical way of Jesus.

Some of these words will be familiar to you if you've been part of the table over the long haul. Some of them may be new. Thoughtful and authentic of long been part of the tables.

Ethos. But we wanted to add in the words prophetic and radical as well because being mystics, believing that there's a spirit in the world that's up to something good can be awfully radical.

Tearing down systems of oppression can be awfully radical. Prophetic, being willing to speak the truth, to be clear in our values and what we are for can be prophetic.

[31 : 52] Believing that God is still speaking in this world can be prophetic. And so we want to create communities where that happens. There's the big community, there's the small communities that are scattered throughout the DMV and are honestly across this world.

That is how we make that vision happen. And so, personally, for you, the challenge and invitation is this. What needs to be denied?

What needs to be unraveled in your life? What lies you need to stop believing? What layers of paints need to be taken off? What needs to be said no to so you can enter into healing?

What needs to be healed? What traumas, hurts, and pains, and hang-ups have been given to you? Maybe even self-inflicted, maybe not.

But naming what needs to be healed so that God can do the work of healing and growth and transformation and the invitation to follow in the way of Jesus to be part of a community that's about authentic belonging that, by permission, gives the ability to experience growth and healing.

[33 : 08] I want to continue in this series over the rest of this month. There are more invitations that we will give, but I invite you to consider these. Would you pray with me? Good and all-loving God, we thank you for the way of Jesus that invites us into something beautiful, something true, something good.

We thank you for the invitation of Jesus, which is not an invitation to lose ourselves, not an invitation to forfeit ourselves, but rather to experience healing and salvation.

Not salvation from your wrath, God, because your posture towards us is one of love, a salvation from the powers of death and evil that want to bring us harm.

God, I pray for each person here that they would know your love, that they would know your goodness, that they would know your affection for them, that you like them.

God, we pray these things in the unity of the Spirit, in the name of Jesus. Amen.