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# *Grounded in Grace To Run the Race*

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## *A Bible Study in Six Parts*

*Reflections on our call to DiscipleLife  
as we walk together in mission and ministry  
within the*

*Northern Texas – Northern Louisiana Mission Territory*



**Let us run  
with perseverance...**

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# *Grounded in Grace*

## *To Run the Race*

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### **Welcome!**

We're glad you've accepted the invitation to experience *DiscipleLife* on a new, and hopefully deeper, level. Consider this an invitation to join the "great cloud of witnesses" who have sought to follow Jesus in the way of the cross - through lives of joyful proclamation, humble service and grateful generosity, what we call "***DiscipleLife!***"

The Apostle Paul speaks of our life as disciples as a "race". I suspect he means that not so much in the sense of racing through life, as having a sense of urgency for sharing the Gospel, and an understanding that being and becoming disciples involves some preparation – education, strength training, and high quality nourishment, just like an athlete preparing for a race. As Lutherans, we understand that it is God's grace toward us made known in our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ that grounds us in faith, and sustains us in all ways; so we are

### **Grounded in Grace to Run the Race**

The Bible studies offered here are intended to help you both as an individual disciple as well as a member of your community of faith, with the focus question being:

### **What can we do better together than we can do separately?**

In other words - what are we called to be and do as members together in the Body of Christ, the Church, that we cannot be or do separately? Hold this question in mind as you work through the studies, engaging the scriptures and one another in reflection and conversation.

There are six study units, suitable for use as a Lenten course, or anytime; in a small group setting, for Sunday School, or as a congregation-wide endeavor. The studies vary in length, some longer than others. We recommend you allow at least one hour for each study. You may want to allow more than one session for some. If possible, we ask that you consider using these studies in preparation for the upcoming Mission Assembly, especially encouraging your voting members to join you.

Each study was written by a different person, each one involved to some extent in the *DiscipleLife Alive!* conversations that have been taking place since December of 2009. The authors' personalities, perspectives and backgrounds are diverse, and each speaks with their own distinctive "voice" as they share insights, reflections and questions. Our hope is that these studies will inspire stimulating and thoughtful conversations that lead to even further exploration of what it means to be –

### **"Grounded in Grace to Run the Race" and to live fully our *DiscipleLife!***

Joyfully in Christ, The Reverend Debra Loudin-McCann, **Editor**



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# *Arounded in Grace to Run the Race*

## **Introduction: Warm-up and Stretch**

Have you ever run in a serious race? A sprint? A 100 yard dash? A marathon? Think back to what is involved in preparing for a race: the practices, the warm-ups, the stretching, the dreaming. Perhaps the race took place as a child in your neighborhood, or in school on the track team, or as you got a bit older. Perhaps the race you think about is the “rat race”! Even that takes preparation! As you introduce yourself to others in this small group Bible Study share your thoughts on the race for which you prepared and all that was involved.

**Scripture**      **Hebrews 11:1-6**      New International Version

*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: ‘He could not be found, because God had taken him away.’ For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*

## **Reflection and Conversation**

### **The Starting Line**

The Lutheran Study Bible tells us that the New Testament letter to the Hebrews is a sophisticated document, written in elegant Greek around 70 c.e., perhaps in Rome (13.24). Some thought it was written by Paul, but most believe we do not know the author; Luther thought the author might be Apollos (Acts 18:24). Hebrews was written for Christians of the second-generation which means that they have moved beyond the perception of the first generation Christians that Jesus would be coming back again in their life time. It was now time for them to move on with their faith and establish a game plan for the longer race ahead. People were beginning to drift away from the faith, to lose interest. Hebrews is

much more like a sermon than a letter, written to encourage them to persevere in faith to the end.

Look together at Hebrews 11 and discover the meaning of “*faith*” in verses 1-3. Read them aloud and discuss:

- **What is “faith” in verse 1? What do “assurance” and “conviction” mean? Is there room for questioning in faith or do assurance and conviction mean that there can be no questions in the Christian’s life journey?**
- **What, do you suppose, is the opposite of faith? Is it “non-faith”? Or, perhaps, is it fear?**

Hebrews 11 is like walking through an art exhibit of famous people ... a portrait gallery. As we move from portrait to portrait, we look upon the great patriarchs, forebears, judges, even prostitutes. We note something about them...that is their faith. Briefly look at this chapter and reflect on these questions:

- **What marked the life of each person in our portrait gallery? Were they all perfect?**
- **How did faith guide each life?**
- **Luther often quoted Hebrews 11:6: “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” What do you think?**
- **Where, in fact, does our faith come from? (If you are unsure, check out the third article of the Apostles’ Creed in the Small Catechism!)**

### **Running the Race**

Our key focus for DiscipleLife is on Hebrews 12:1-3

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Unpack some of the phrases of this text together.

- **Who is the “great cloud of witnesses”?**
- **In a race what is the value of “laying aside” that which clings to us?**
- **What does it mean to “run with perseverance”?**
- **What does it mean that Jesus was both the “pioneer and perfecter” of our faith?**
- **What does the cross have to do with the race in which Jesus found himself?**

- **Thinking about this key text, how is the Christian life today similar to the race that was before the believers in the time of the ancient Church?**
- **What's more important in a race: the starting line, the race itself, the finish line? Why?**
- **What do you need from others and from God in order to endure or persevere in the Christian race?**

### **The Race Called: "*DiscipleLife*"**

"*Sowing and Growing Disciples of Jesus*" is the Mission Statement of the Lutherans across our Mission Territory in northern Texas and Louisiana.

- **What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?**
- **Are you a disciple of Jesus? What are the marks of your discipleship?**
- **Where does faith fit in? Where does action fit in?**
- **How do Lutherans usually go about "sowing and growing" disciples of Jesus?**

We have said that there is one thing we can do better together than we can do by ourselves and that is to form leaders. Leadership Formation for *DiscipleLife* is our current theme and focus for missional outreach.

- **What is needed to form leaders for *DiscipleLife* in our own missional context?**
- **How can we form leaders for *DiscipleLife* better together than we can separately?**
- **What do you need to join in this race?**
- **What can you offer as a runner/disciple to inspire others?**

### **Nearing the Finish Line**

As Christians, we are not going to actually cross the Finish Line until sometime in the distant future; perhaps in the life to come. In other words, this life is all about the race that is set before us, not the finish - for we will never be done this side of heaven.

- **What commitments are we willing to make to renew faith in our own community of faith?**
- **What commitments are we willing to make to grow our ministry together?**

Share within your group how you understand God is calling you to your own personal commitments and your community's commitments to *DiscipleLife*, and discern how God is helping you grow in faithful perseverance over the weeks to come. Gather for prayer and allow each person to offer a word or sentence prayer of thanksgiving or need as you bring this Bible study to a close, and remember, it is not just about us, therefore -

*"let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,  
looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith!"*

## Prayer

Gracious God, you call us to run the race—the race of faith; to run with perseverance, looking to Jesus, the one who ran the race before us and who equips us to run the race today. Deepen our commitment to be followers of Jesus Christ and stir us to action as people who yearn to live our DiscipleLife with joy and grace. Amen

## Hymn

**Canticle of the Turning ELW #723**  
**Or**  
**Bless Now, O God the Journey ELW #326**

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### About the author

**The Rev. Dr. Kevin Kanouse** is Missionary Bishop of the Northern Texas - Northern Louisiana Mission Territory (formerly known as “synod”). He has served two congregations, one in Pennsylvania and at Advent in Arlington, Texas, before being elected bishop in 2000. He has a passion for seeing each baptized person as a missionary for Jesus. He and his wife Billye Jean (a 7th grade Reading Teacher) live in Arlington, and they have two grown sons. A die-hard Texas Rangers fan, the highlight of his entire life (beyond his baptism, which he hardly remembers) was attending the three home games of the 2010 World Series in Arlington.





# The First Converts

## Introduction

Following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, Peter preached his first sermon. This outpouring, he declares, is the fulfillment of God's promise through the prophet Joel. Inspired by this same Spirit, Peter then launches into his proclamation of the Gospel - the story of Jesus, concluding with the words, "... let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." And his listeners respond, "What should we do?"

**Scripture**      **Acts 2:37-41**      New Revised Standard Version

*Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, and for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.*

## Reflection and Conversation

Promises made, expectations of fulfillment, promises fulfilled. This is the rhythm of our life with God. This is our *DiscipleLife*. In light of that, let's begin to mine this passage for its richness of profound phrases.

"... when they heard this ..." Heard what? Heard all that Peter proclaimed, but summed up in chapter 2, verse 36: "God has made the Crucified One both Lord and Messiah". This is the whole Gospel in a nutshell.

- **What does verse 36 mean to you?**
- **How do we share this Gospel with those who haven't as yet heard it?**
- **How does this Gospel shape your own community of faith?**
- **Would first-time worshippers, with little knowledge of the Christian faith, walk away from your worship knowing this is the central message of who we are and what we believe?**

"... they were cut to the heart ..." What an image!

- **What does this mean to you?**
- **Have you ever heard a sermon that did this for you? ... tell about it!**

In Hebrews 4:12, the writer describes the Word of God as a *"two-edged sword"*. As Lutherans, we identify these two edges as Law and Gospel.

- **Why do we need both?**
- **How were both a part of Peter's Pentecost sermon?**
- **If we were "cut to the heart" - how might this make a difference in our communities of faith as we seek to live disciple lives?**

When Peter's listeners respond with the words, *"What should we do?"* Peter commands two things: *"repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus"*. The word "repent" literally means to "change your mind." It carries with it the idea that we stop going one direction and turn around 180 degrees and go back from where we came. Imagine standing up in your church pew, facing the altar, symbolic of God's presence. Now, turn around and face the rear of the church with your back toward God. We have a word for that: sin. Now, repent! Turn around and face God again. Come back to the Source of your faith and life.

- **How do we call others to repent? ... to repent of what?**

Peter's second command is, *"be baptized"*. Baptism is mentioned time and again throughout the New Testament.

- **Why?**
- **What is the significance of baptism? ... for you, for your congregation?**
- **How is the importance of baptism lifted up in your community of faith?**

Throughout the Scriptures, whenever God commands something, God always attaches a promise. In this passage, there are, in fact, two promises. First - that *"your sins may be forgiven ..."* and second - *"you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"*. Luther wrote his Small Catechism in five parts for a particular reason. The Ten Commandments are first, because they tell us what God expects of us. The Creed is second and it tells us what we can expect from God. The Lord's Prayer is third because it tells us where we can go for help. And the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are last, reminding us of what we need most: the forgiveness of our sins.

- **Believing your sins are forgiven: what power does this have to transform your life? ... the life of your community of faith?**
- **How can you share this incredible promise with those outside your community, with those who haven't as yet heard this good news?**

- **The gift of the Holy Spirit is the real presence of God in our lives.**
- **What does the Holy Spirit do for us or to us? (perhaps you can see Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism)**
- **What, in your congregation, needs to be stirred up by the Spirit?**

Peter next says that these twin promises (which he describes as one promise) are for his hearers and *"for all who are far away ..."* To whom might Peter be referring? Could it be their fellow Jews of the Diaspora, those living far from Jerusalem, scattered throughout the Roman Empire? Or could Peter be referring the Gentiles, the non-Jews of his day?

- **Who might those be today who are "far away": family? friends? those in your larger community?**
- **How will you reach them? How will you speak to them about Jesus and the promises he gives?**

Peter concludes this sentence by saying *"... the promise is for ... everyone whom the Lord God calls to him"*. This is a radical departure from what Peter said in his Pentecost sermon, in 2:21. Compare the two.

- **What stunning difference do you see?**
- **What are the implications for this amazing change?**

Lastly, we are told that *"about 3000 persons were added"* to this newborn church - 3000! Can you imagine? Even though the number may be hyperbole (exaggerated speech), a lot of folks were welcomed into the faith. And throughout the Book of Acts, we're told time and again that amazing growth took place. If it's true that in a few years 75% of the Protestant churches in America won't be alive –

- **What needs to happen to counter that trend?**
- **What will your community of faith do about this?**
- **How can we, as a DiscipleLife Mission Area, make a difference in Texas and Louisiana?**

## Prayer

God, Holy Spirit, come to us in power and stir our hearts that we may be filled with a sense of urgency, compassion and boldness to share the Good News of your love made known in Jesus Christ. Empower us to live as disciples whose lives attract the kind of attention that allows people to see Christ in us, to the glory of your Holy Name. Amen

## Hymn

God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind      ELW #400  
or  
Like the Murmur of the Dove's Song      ELW #403

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### About the Author

**Pastor Bill Waxenberg** is Senior Pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Dallas, Texas. He is a Co-Director of the DiscipleLife Alive! Initiative. Education and mentoring (making disciples!) has been an important part of his ministry as a former Director of First Call Theological Education and Intern Supervisor.



## Introduction

The great outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost has occurred and three thousand have been added to the believers. Here we see what it meant to be among the believers, those who made up the Messiah's Community.

**Scripture**      **Acts 2:42-47**      New Revised Standard Version

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he 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.*

In the world of the first century A.D. life was hard, uncertain, probably short, and the majority of people were devoid of any way to change their society. There was no kind of safety net for the average folks – no food pantries, no soup kitchens, no social service agencies, no hospitals, no Social Security, no insurance of any kind. Medical care was primitive; justice was at the whim of the authorities; there was no refrigeration or freezing or canning for longer-term food storage; begging was your only resort if you were crippled, or incapacitated, an orphan or a widow. Hope? ... well, for very many it was just a word.

In the midst of that world a community of believers was gathering and being formed by the Holy Spirit. The believers gathered daily to hear of the wonderful act of God in Christ Jesus; listening to discover how they were meant to live in light of that outpouring of God's gracious love. Over and over believers recounted the sayings and parables of Jesus and stories of His life, and wondered how best to apply them to living in the post-Pentecost world. The believers became a fellowship; not a 'your friend is my friend' kind of fellowship, but people who deeply shared their lives and of themselves, a community bound by their faith in Jesus the Messiah.

## Reflection and Conversation

- **What do you think it means that they deeply shared their lives and of themselves?**
- **Why would this be attractive to people in that time and place?**
- **What would it look like if we too were embodying the love of Christ and deeply sharing our riches, our time and our lives?**

- **Where do you find this happening today? If you don't ... What is stopping us?**
- **Why is it easier for some to talk about caring and sharing the love of Christ than doing it?**
- **Do you have a personal story you can share of how you have experienced this kind of real Christian fellowship and deep sharing?**

These early believers were being formed by the Holy Spirit into the Messiah's community. The Holy Spirit was forming them into true disciples. The Holy Spirit, through sharing of the Word, the Lord's Supper and prayer, was forming them into leaders for Christ's mission of bringing God's love and redeeming Word to the whole world.

- **What unique challenges face us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century did not face?**
- **What is our church doing to meet these challenges? Or - What is stopping us?**
- **What can we do better together than separately to meet those challenges?**
- **Share an example of how the Holy Spirit is working to form disciples in your faith community**
- **In what ways do you see YOURSELF as bringing hope to today's world?**
- **How are you striving to be a disciple of Jesus Christ living DiscipleLife?**
- **How can your fellow Christians help and support you?**
- **How can you be of support to others?**

## Prayer

Always active Holy Spirit, we invite you to form us into true disciples of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ that we might, in this time and this place, bring God's love and grace and hope to all the world through our Disciple Lives. Amen.

## Hymn

**Lord, Speak to Us That We May Speak" ELW # 676**

**Or**

**Take My Life, That I May Be ELW #583**

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## About the Author

**Stephanie Varnum** is a retired Associate in Ministry (commissioned lay person) who has been a hospital chaplain and has served in a parish and as chairperson of the NT-NL Candidacy Committee. She is currently the Vice President of the Mission Council and a Co-Leader of DiscipleLife Alive. She and her husband, Jim, are certified Master Naturalists who enjoy teaching about and caring for the world of nature.



# Who Has Your Back?

## Introduction

**DiscipleLife** - People of faith. People living their faith. People speaking what they have heard, what they have seen, what they know of God's message for all. The question before us now is this: Can we respond in faithful ways when there might be tough consequences? It can be tough to be a Christian in a culture that seems to hold many values contrary to the Kingdom of God Jesus taught. But persecution for the faith is nothing new to Christians.

**Scripture**      **Acts 4: 1-4 and 5:17-20**      New Revised Standard Version

*While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand. ... Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, 'Go stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.'*

## Reflection and Conversation

Wow! What an example of courage and faith! Sometimes it is easy to romanticize the earliest members of the Christ followers. In the first century Christians were far from being great in numbers. Spiritually speaking, they lived in a hostile environment. They had no influence with the government. They did not impress the leadership of the Jewish religious community – the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Temple guards were like the police, and the captain of the guard's job was to stop people if they were causing commotion and making trouble in the Temple. In this scripture passage we are told a large crowd had gathered to listen to Peter and John.

The Sadducees did not believe that dead people could be alive again. The power of the Christians' testimony about Jesus' resurrection made them feel their power was being threatened. They were rich and important. They did not want any trouble with the Roman leaders. Their jobs were more important to them than the truth.

Even with Peter and John and others being put in jail, the good news could not be stopped. The believers quickly grew in number to nearly 5,000, and only males were counted. Early Christian leaders were not in a contest to be popular or gain fame or position. No, these leaders were filled with faith to proclaim the good news of Jesus the Christ and the resurrection for all, even in the face of hostility and persecution.

**A word about Luther:** Luther also went up against the religious establishment when he felt its teaching became corrupted. A price was on his head and he was thrown out of the church. He risked his life for the truth. He also gave us a clear understanding of “The Theology of the Cross” which teaches that part of the fabric of the Christian life can be suffering for the truth of the Gospel. Luther understood this suffering servant theology to be central to the Gospel proclamation. Perhaps we need to rediscover this teaching today.

Lutherans have been put to the test many times. Many German Lutherans and many of the pastors were active in the resistance against the Nazis during WWII. In more recent times Lutheran churches in East Germany provided their churches as safe meeting places for those youth and other citizens who would eventually bring down the Berlin wall, risking punishment by authorities.

Lutherans historically have been active in addressing the abuses brought against people in the minority and at the margins in society: people of color, women, workers, refugees and immigrants. The Lutheran church has questioned our country’s part in many conflicts with other nations. Most recently the action taken by the ELCA in behalf of sexual minorities has caused serious controversy and cost us many members. We have sought to be a Christian community with a voice for the poor, the aging, people in poverty, and children at risk. Many in our church see this current age as a time to once again hear God’s call to feed, house, welcome and comfort those abandoned, rejected or left behind by society.

- **What were the risks taken by those early followers of Jesus?**
- **Why was Jesus considered a radical by the governing authorities?**
- **Why was Jesus considered a radical by the religious authorities?**
- **What is the example and testimony of the early martyrs?**
- **How would you define discipleship in the early followers of Jesus?**

A word from Douglas John Hall:

*“How could we have been listening to the Scriptures all these centuries and still be surprised and chagrined by the humiliation of Christendom? How could we have honored texts like the Beatitudes (‘Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account ...’) and yet have formed in our collective mind the assumption that Christian faith would be credible only if it were popular, numerically superior, and respected universally?”*



*How could we have been contemplating the ‘despised and rejected’ figure at the center of this faith for two millennia and come away with the belief that his body, far from being despised and rejected, ought to be universally approved and embraced? Are we trying to return to Christendom when everyone thought like us, acted like us and listened to us? Were we ever there?”*

- **Do you have a personal story to tell about others rejecting your faith journey?**
- **What do we do for strength and confidence when our neighbor rejects our faith?**
- **What price are we willing to pay for practicing our faith at home or on the job?**
- **Who are the religious Pharisees and Sadducees of our time?**
- **Can we be authentic without the religious institutional structures we have taken for granted?**
- **What do we think the future will hold for any community of faith in the next 30 years?**
- **WHO has OUR back?**

## Prayer

God of creation and redemption, as we seek to grow in faith, give us courage, vision, and boldness to witness your presence in our lives and the hope we have in the promise of the resurrection to which all are invited. Amen

## Hymn

**God of Grace, and God of Glory ELW #704**

or

**When the Poor Ones ELW #725**

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### About the Author

**Donn Rosenauer** is a former pastor and representative for Kairos, a group that works with churches and organizations in leadership and capital fund development. A graduate of Texas Lutheran University, he recently moved to the Dallas area.





# How Can I, Unless Someone Guides Me?

## Introduction

Opportunities to make disciples may come at the most unexpected times, in unexpected ways and places, with unexpected people. Can we be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit in such a way that we recognize these opportunities? How do we prepare ourselves to become disciples ready to make the most of these opportunities?

**Scripture**     **Acts 8:26-31 & 35-38**     New Revised Standard Version

*Then, an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Get up and go toward the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ (this is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it.’ So Philip ran up to it and heard him (the Ethiopian eunuch) reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ He replied, ‘How can I unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ... Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.*

## Reflection and Conversation

“Dad, can we talk? I’ve got something important that I need to discuss with you. Can we get together tonight when you get home?” My son’s question hit me like a truck. This was serious. We’ve always had a good relationship and it always seemed that he would share things with me freely, but he’s never sounded like this before. It was like he was making an appointment with me and that is something he’s never done. I responded, “Of course, as soon as I get home.” I left work early!

I'll never forget that drive home. I kept reflecting on what this could be. Of course as is my nature, I immediately went to the worst possibilities and the kind of things a father never wants to hear from his seventeen year old son. As I got home we sat down at the kitchen table. My son opened, "Dad, I've got something very difficult to tell you, something you're not going to want to hear, but something you need to hear." My heart began to race and I'm not certain but, I think beads of sweat started to form on my forehead. He went on, "I'm atheist." I said, "You're a what?" He replied, "That's right, I'm an atheist. I know how important your faith is to you, and I'm very concerned how the members of your congregation are going to respond to you when they learn your son's an atheist but it's true, and I can't keep it to myself any longer."

As my son spoke I kept thinking to myself, is that all? I never shared that with him however, and God seemed to put the correct words in my mouth. I responded, "Well you know that I'm not an atheist, but maybe that's okay for you ... for now ... maybe this is the road to discovery that you need to walk, and maybe this is how your faith will become your own."

As our conversation ended I was filled with mixed feelings. I was troubled with what my son shared, but I was not disheartened. In fact, I was somewhat proud of him because I could sense that he was now embarking on his own faith journey. My concern was where that journey would take him and who would guide him? I released my son to God's care that day; as if I really had a choice, but I knew I had done all I could. If my son was to become a man of faith, God would need to work through others to reach him.

That is exactly what happened. A year later my son was preparing to graduate from high school and go off to college. He had heard a great deal about Texas Lutheran University and after a visit in the fall of his senior year decided that TLU was where he wanted to go to school. He applied, was accepted and offered several scholarships. His search for a university ended with his acceptance to TLU. Later the following spring I received a call to a new congregation. Every summer the congregation went to Juarez, Mexico, on a mission trip. I invited my son to join me as I went on my first trip with the congregation.

My son, still claiming to be atheist, has always had heart for serving other people, and with no summer plans he agreed to join me. He proved to be an extremely hard worker and helped put a roof on a community center. I was assigned to another project so I wasn't able to work directly with him. Working on the community center he had the opportunity to develop relationships with other men in the church and the affirmation he received for his work on the center really made a positive difference. On the same trip to Juarez he also got an opportunity to get to know some of the high school students from the congregation I was now serving. They immediately invited him to join the group for some late night conversations and to simply hang out. With that invitation my "atheist son" became a part of the congregation's youth group and he developed meaningful relationships with other young people of faith.

When we returned home we learned of horrific flooding at Briarwood. Moved by his experience in Mexico my son volunteered to dig ditches and do whatever was necessary to help repair damage created by the floods.



After volunteering for a few weeks he was invited to become a part of the Briarwood staff where he worked for the next couple of summers and the development of relationship continued. The next spring my son joined a group of young adults who, led by our Bishop, spent their Spring Break traveling to and experiencing life and ministry in Sierra Leone. Throughout the trip my son was able to engage a number of people in conversations of faith and he got the opportunity to experience life and faith in an extremely different setting. When he returned home our “atheist son” was wearing a cross. In fact, to this day the only time he takes it off is when it is in need of repair.

My son no longer claims to be an atheist: he is a man of faith. In fact, I wonder if he truly ever was an atheist. I am convinced, however that he needed to break from the faith of his parents in order to develop a faith of his own. He has been on a journey of faith development and on that journey his faith became real for him. Yet, it didn't just happen. God worked through a variety of people, and spoke to my son in a variety of settings to bring his baptismal faith to life. Two summers ago my son participated as a Voting Member of the Churchwide Assembly. He is now studying theology at Texas Lutheran University, and next year he hopes to enroll in one of our seminaries. The journey continues ... as does the discipling ministry of our NT-NL Mission Territory.

An old proverb states that it “takes a village to raise a child.” The church is that village! Through ministries and leaders from the Mission Territory of Northern Texas - Northern Louisiana, God accomplished in my son what could not be accomplished individually by me. God brought my son to faith in Jesus Christ through the guidance of many disciples living and serving in the church. This is just one story of faith development in our mission territory, but it is not the only story. God works through all of us together in the faith development of many young people; one example of what we can do better together than we can do separately.

- **Have you ever been overwhelmed by the challenges facing someone you dearly loved? How did you respond? Were you surprised by your response? Where did the response come from?**
- **Did the person you loved need more than you alone could provide? Where did you turn for help?**
- **Have you ever witnessed the effect a community can have on raising a child in the faith? Can the community accomplish things that an individual cannot?**

The Book of Acts provides for us a narrative of the formation of the church and the power of the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection to change the lives of all who heard it. Acts traces this impact as it tells the story of the church and its growth from a small group of disciples, who were the first followers of Jesus, to a worldwide movement that included not only Jews but Gentiles as well.

The birth of the church and its subsequent growth did not come about easily as many barriers had to be overcome. One such barrier was race and reaching those outside of the Jewish community.



The writer of Acts (who is also the writer of the Gospel of Luke) provides for us a recording of the challenges overcome by the disciples as they shared the good news about Jesus and fulfilled the Great Commission that was given them by the Lord prior to his ascension.

In Acts 8 we read of the disciple Philip, who responded to the call of “*an angel of the Lord*” who shared the good news of Jesus and in doing so forever changed the life of an Ethiopian eunuch. Traveling down a wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza, Philip encountered the Ethiopian who was a believer in God reading from the prophet Isaiah but who had not yet heard the good news about Jesus.

Philip responded to the opportunity presented to him to share the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Alone, the Ethiopian did not fully understand what he read in the scripture, but through the guidance of Philip, the eunuch was moved by the good news of Jesus and ultimately requested a baptism that he too could become part of the community of the Messiah.

Luke’s particular emphasis in this conversion story (which is different from other stories in previous chapters) lies in the need to understand Scripture. And such understanding, according to Luke in this passage, only occurs if the relevant Old Testament text is connected with the story of Jesus and his death and resurrection. Baptism becomes a sign of conversion, and nothing - not his race or his biological state - prevents the eunuch’s baptism and his becoming a part of the community. When Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch, he does so not in accordance with tradition, but in obedience to the promise of God and following principles of the Gospel as taught and lived by Jesus.

- **In what ways does Jesus fit the picture of the one described in Isaiah 53?**
- **What is the relationship between divine preparation and human initiative in this story?**
- **Is a disciple one who merely follows Jesus or is there a call for disciples to share the good news of Jesus death and resurrection that others may believe? Is this DiscipleLife?**
- **Are disciples called to live beyond the traditions of the past and in obedience to the promises of Gospel? What does that look like?**

## Prayer

Gracious loving God, we give you thanks for the gift of your Son who through his death and resurrection won for us salvation. Help us, Lord, to cherish this gift that we, as Philip, may be willing and ready to share the good news of Jesus with all we meet. Lord, the world is filled with people who are on a journey and searching for meaning in life. Fill us with your Spirit that we may be faithful disciples, willing to meet people where they are, to guide and share what

has been shared with us, so that together with all the faithful we may enjoy the abundance of the life you give. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

## Hymn

**We are Called    ELW #720**  
**or**  
**All Are Welcome    ELW #641**

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### About the Author

**Pastor Phil Geleske** serves the community of Rejoice Lutheran Church in Coppell, Texas. He is a Co-Director of the DiscipleLife Alive! Initiative and, as a member of Mission Sierra Leone, has made several trips to Sierra Leone. Together, he and his wife Anna also own and manage a School of Cosmetology in Dallas, Texas.



# Go! ... Make Disciples

## Introduction

The missional focus of the Northern Texas - Northern Louisiana Mission Territory is expressed as “*DiscipleLife*” and the defining question being asked these days is “What can we do better together than we can do separately?” There is no better time to focus on this scripture passage than our current time with the church experiencing such rapid change and upheaval. Jesus gives the final instructive word to and for his Church in this scripture passage known as “**The Great Commission.**”

## Scripture

**Matthew 28:16-20**

New Revised Standard Version

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

## Reflection and Conversation

Jesus wants us to finish what he began. He called the disciples, taught them, and worked with them. Before he left this world he gave them (and us) this “Great Commission”-- to share the Good News by making disciples. Some doubted, even though Jesus had been crucified and raised from the dead. But Jesus, who doesn’t show partiality, accepted all those who worshiped him and did not reject those who doubted.

The goal for making disciples is to help individuals develop a personal faith in God. Not everyone is qualified, or wants to teach Bible study, but everyone can help cultivate the soil to grow disciples, and can engage in planting seeds of compassion, kindness, humility, service, etc. We can invite others to experience and enjoy new life in Christ. We can invite others to Church. Even if we don’t feel confident in our ability to teach we can invite them to Bible study or Sunday School, introduce them to other disciples so they can come in contact with someone that will be able to teach them the way of life in Christ.

## What is Discipleship?

The simplest definition of a disciple is one who follows a teacher. In Jesus’ day people would follow a rabbi in order to learn from that rabbi.

The rabbi would choose only the best of the best to follow him, and these disciples would follow the rabbi closely to learn from him. We are called to become disciples in order that we may learn from Jesus and make disciples who in turn can teach others the way of our “rabbi”, our Savior and Lord Jesus the Christ.

- **Who did (and who does) Jesus choose to be his disciples?**
- **How do we make disciples?**

Many years ago, I had a friend named Rose who used to give copies of her favorite devotional book *Portals of Prayer* to her friend who did not go to church. Five years ago, her friend called her and said, “Rose, thank you for your encouragement. Because of you I started going to church after my marriage.” Many people say they are not comfortable with the idea of helping others to become disciples of Jesus. Maybe they feel too shy, or think they don’t know enough about the Bible or the church or Jesus to share with someone else. It is my opinion that if anyone truly wants to be a disciple of Jesus, they need to come out of their comfort zone and in faith be willing to take a risk to heed his call of the Great Commission.

- **Where in your life have you been willing to risk leaving your comfort zone in order to become a disciple who invites others to join them in *DiscipleLife*?**
- **Are you ready to try? ... if not, why not? ... what’s holding you back?**
- **In what ways does your faith community help make disciples?**
- **In what ways could your faith community better help YOU to become a disciple who makes disciples?**

Jesus commands us to make disciples, by “*Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*”. So, we understand baptism as one of the ways in which we make disciples. We speak of baptism as the way we enter the church, are adopted by God and made members of the family of God.

- **What does your baptism mean to you? ... how do you remember your baptism?**
- **How does your worshiping community remember, affirm and give thanks for Baptism?**
- **How does the Baptismal Covenant shape your understanding of what it means to live the *DiscipleLife*?**

When Jesus said “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations*” he did not necessarily mean people from different countries. He meant all groups of “peoples” even, maybe especially, the people in our own lives. What more motivation, do you need? You can do it, do it right where you are with those you meet, those you work with. *DiscipleLife* can mean to be a witness for Jesus by the way we live our lives and (according to St. Francis\*) when necessary, to talk about to him. But, notice that Jesus did not say that you are on your own. He promised, “*I am with you, even to the end of the age*”. What a powerful promise we hear. It reminds me of what the



Lord promised to Moses, “Now go and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak” (Exodus 4:12).

I can personally relate to this promise of the Lord. He spoke to me the same message, and though I was born and grew up in India, Jesus sent me to this country. If many Christians today have lost a sense of Jesus’ presence and purpose among us, it may be because we have failed to hear the call to *DiscipleLife* and mission that our Lord has given us, a call that is affirmed in our baptism.

## Prayer

Loving God, we give you thanks for what you have done for us. It is only with your Holy Spirit that we are able to understand your call. Open our hearts and minds to understand what you want us to do that we may glorify your name and be your faithful disciples. Be with us as we go on our way seeking to fully live this *DiscipleLife*. Help us to obey your command and answer the call of the Great Commission. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

## Hymn

**Lord You Give the Great Commission ELW #579**

or

**The Lord Now sends Us Forth ELW #538**

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## About the Author

**Pastor Gnana Segaran** is pastor of Salem Lutheran Church in Rosebud, Texas. Gnana was born in India, and raised as a Lutheran. She worked as a Registered Nurse for 40 years and then accepted God’s call to become a Pastor. Gnana is married to Peri Segaran. They have two daughters (one of whom, Jamie Segaran Bruning, is also an ordained minister of the ELCA) and three grandchildren.



*A Concluding Word*  
*A Blessing for the Journey*

**So ... now that you're well on your way in this race of grace we call *DiscipleLife*** – how do you feel? Are you energized by imagining new possibilities for how you as an individual, and we as the people of God together, can witness to the meaning of Christ's presence in our lives? Is your hope for the church renewed as together we prayerfully consider how God may be re-shaping and re-forming the church in our time? I hope so ... and hope is what we're all about as Lutherans of the Northern Texas – Northern Louisiana Mission Territory committed to

**Sowing and Growing Disciples of Jesus Christ**

And think of it - this is just the beginning of what we can imagine through the Holy Spirit! God's dream for the world is the redemption and renewal of all Creation. Amazingly, God has called us to join in this work as servants of the Servant and workers together in the Kingdom of God.

**Therefore, ... let us run with perseverance the race set before us, looking to Jesus – the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.**

And may God the Giver of all life, Jesus Christ the Lord of the Church + and the Holy Spirit who “calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies and preserves” bless us all as we seek to live out in action and proclamation – ***DiscipleLife!***

**A Prayer as we go ...**

“O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Amen!

- from the Service of Evening Prayer, ELW page 317

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**About the Editor**

***Pastor Debra Loudin-McCann*** is a second career pastor interested in Transformational Ministry and the Emerging Church. Formerly a Pastoral Musician, she is currently serving in interim ministry. Pastor Deb and her husband Tim live in Mansfield, Texas. They have 5 children and two grand-girls. You can reach Pastor Deb at [pastor\\_mccann@yahoo.com](mailto:pastor_mccann@yahoo.com) or on facebook.

