

Liturgical Day: The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Date: October 1, 2006  
Sermon Title: A Place to Begin

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I received my first banjo as a gift from my parents on a Sunday in October of 1971. Believe it or not, it was a confirmation gift. I'm not entirely sure how that transpired – I must have recently seen the movie "Deliverance" or something. At any rate, I've been playing the banjo on and off now for nearly thirty-five years.

I've learned some things along the way. I can rip out a classic Earl Scruggs riff or two without too much trouble. [*demonstrate*] I've learned a few jazz licks. [*demonstrate*] I even have a couple of classical pieces in my repertoire [*demonstrate*] – although Alicia has been reluctant to let me do a duet with her during the Sunday morning offering.

But at the same time, as my wife will attest, my playing is not always as pleasing as it could be. There are those whose banjo playing is fresh and rhythmic and compelling in a way that mine just isn't. I am aware of what is possible with a banjo, and awed by those who do it well, but I haven't developed the capacity to play that way myself. Especially when my fingers are cold, I can't play licks in public that I can easily play at home in my room. My rolls are not as steady or as solid as I wish they were. And I have a lot of trouble soloing in keys other than G.

Now there is a solution to that, of course. I could find a good instructor, or take seriously some of the instruction books I've found along the way. And taking it seriously would mean setting aside a certain amount of time each day to work on drills and songs and study scales. I'm actually pretty sure that if I could commit to doing that for just one year, my playing would be at an entirely different level (and the guys in my band would probably be quite thankful).

The problem is, it just isn't high enough of a priority for me to make that kind of commitment. My family, my faith, my work, my health, these other concerns keep me occupied enough that there isn't enough time left over for the kind of growth I know is possible. Don't get me wrong, I am very fortunate to be able to practice a time or two each week, and to be able to play a couple times a month with a bluegrass group. I even get to play here on Sundays when Steve is out of town. But I know what it would take to pick it up a level, and now just isn't the time for me to make that kind of commitment.

There are times when I'm able to discern this same dynamic in the development of our faith lives. I've been talking to people lately about faith issues, and it seems as though most of us realize we aren't where we ought to be – either based on what we want for ourselves, or what we believe God wants for us. Many of us don't read the Bible as often as we think we should, or pray as diligently as we might, or prepare well enough for weekly worship, or spend as much time working in the community as we'd like to. As is the case with my musical aspirations, we know what is possible. We know that heightened

FIRST LESSON

**JOSHUA 24:14-18**

GOSPEL LESSON

**ST. MARK 12:28-34**

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**LORD GOD OF OUR  
SALVATION, IT IS YOUR  
WILL THAT ALL  
PEOPLE MIGHT COME  
TO YOU THROUGH  
YOUR SON JESUS  
CHRIST. INSPIRE OUR  
WITNESS TO HIM, THAT  
ALL MAY KNOW THE  
POWER OF HIS  
FORGIVENESS AND  
THE HOPE OF HIS  
RESURRECTION. WE  
PRAY THIS IN HIS  
NAME. AMEN.**

9300 E. BELLEVIEW AVE.  
GREENWOOD VILLAGE,  
COLORADO 80111

VOICE

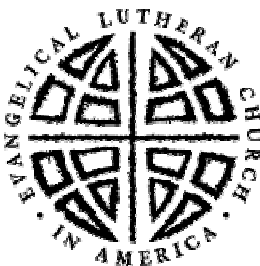
(303) 770-9300

FAX

(303) 770-9301

WEB

[WWW.STPLC.ORG](http://WWW.STPLC.ORG)



attention to the faith and to our relationship with God can give us a strength and a hope and a sense of meaning that blesses our lives in a variety of ways.

The problem is not that we can't do it. The problem is that we won't. A friend of mine brought a speaker to his church recently who made this point. He said to them that when the church asks us to raise our involvement with the faith and with the church, we are tempted to say, "I can't do that." But that's not the truth. We could, if we wanted to. We have just ordered our priorities differently, and there isn't enough time or energy left to do what we know would richly bless our lives and the lives of our families. He encouraged the members of my friend's church to be honest with themselves, and admit it. Say that I choose not to be involved with my God or my church at that level. And that, at least, could be an honest starting point for us, in determining whether or not we need to make some life changes.

You see, if we are honest about where we are starting, we are far more likely to be able to set a course to end up somewhere else – somewhere we'd rather be.

Jesus describes that somewhere else in this morning's Gospel. In words that are familiar to many Christians, Jesus says: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. [and] You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* [St. Mark 12:30-31] He invites us into an entirely different way to live. A life in which every decision made, every word spoken, every action taken is done in order to love God. That's a radical commitment to living the faith, and it certainly would take some effort for most of us to begin living that way. But let me promise you this: the closer we come to living that kind of life (and none of us will ever do it perfectly) the closer we'll come to experiencing the kind of blessings God wants us to enjoy.

Some of you have been praying for my friends the Bergen family during this past week, and I thank you for those prayers. I was with them yesterday afternoon and told them of your prayer support and it meant a lot to them. I joined them at a memorial service for their twenty-six year old daughter Kelly. She died in an automobile collision twelve days ago. She was an elementary school teacher, and worked with special needs children at Sangre de Cristo Elementary School in Hooper, Colorado.

It was a rich blessing for me to be able to attend that service yesterday. I was initially shocked at how small and remote Hooper is. This little farming town is about an hour south of Salida, west of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, in the middle of nowhere. I can't imagine there are even fifty residents in that town. But the elementary school has nearly one hundred fifty students, many of whom have a long car ride between their homes and the bus stop twice each day.

As we spent time with them yesterday, we heard stories about a young woman who had a strong faith, and was active in a couple of local congregations. She lived out her faith by exhibiting a deep love for the children of that school. As is the case with so many special education teachers, she had a remarkable capacity to see the beauty in each child, and it was fun to hear stories of the lives she touched and the difference she made in three short years at that school.

She is one whose faith and relationship with God called her to reach out beyond herself in a significant way. As a young, single woman she could have found many excuses to take a less demanding job, or live in a more populated area where she could have found more friends her age. But her priorities were clear, and as soon as she learned about these special needs kids in *The-Middle-*

*of-Nowhere, Colorado* – there was no turning back.

The difference between being where we are, and being where think we ought to be, has to do with clarifying our priorities and making it happen.

As you came into worship this morning, you received a “Habits of the Heart” booklet that our Stewardship Team developed for you. We want each of you to have one of your own – Middle School and High School students: we want you to be involved too. So if you don’t have one yet, please raise your hands, and our hosts will bring one to you. I’d like you to write your names on the cover, and bring them with you to worship each Sunday over the next six weeks. We’ll be using them to clarify where we are and where we would like to be in our faith lives.

If you would, please turn with me to page 3, where you’ll find a chart I’d like you to fill out right now. Take a few minutes, and make some notes on that chart, indicating where you think you are in working on the “Five Habits of Discipleship.”

*[provide time for them to complete the chart]*

Thank you for doing that this morning. We want you to have your booklets with you the next few Sundays, so if you think you won’t remember them, go ahead and leave them in your narthex mailboxes. But if you think you can remember them, take them home and read through them during the week.

The chart you just addressed is an important first step in growing spiritually. It is important that each of us honestly assess where we are, before we begin the journey of growing in faith. This booklet will also help us to assess how high of a priority our own spiritual development actually is. Is it down there around learning to play the banjo? Or is it up there next to making a living or raising a family?

I want to make one thing very clear this weekend: each of us is where we are, and there is no need to feel badly about that. Some of us are quite proficient in these discipleship habits, because we’ve been working on them for a long time. Others of us are just getting started. Where we are isn’t important. Where we want to be, and how we go about getting there is. So on this first week of our emphasis on discipleship as “Habits of the Heart” I hope you will take the time to think about how these discipleship habits are or aren’t a part of your life. Give thanks to God for the beginnings that have been made in your lives. And pray that the Spirit will guide you as you discern how God would have you growing the next year or so.

Let me leave you with these questions – two of the questions that you’ll find on page 3 of your “Habits of the Heart” booklet:

**QUESTION OF THE DAY:**

Which of these Discipleship Habits do I want to celebrate as my greatest strength(s)? Which of these Discipleship Habits do I want to develop in the coming months?

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (October 3, 2006)

English Text: <sup>i</sup>

<sup>28</sup> One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup> you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' <sup>31</sup> The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." <sup>32</sup> Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; <sup>33</sup> and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." <sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question. <sup>ii</sup>

Greek Text:

<sup>28</sup>Καὶ προσελθὼν εἰς τῶν γραμματέων ἀκούσας αὐτῶν συζητούντων, ἰδὼν ὅτι καλῶς ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς ἐπηρώτησεν αὐτόν· ποία ἐστὶν ἐντολὴ πρώτη πάντων; <sup>29</sup>ἀπεκρίθη ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι πρώτη ἐστίν· ἄκουε, Ἰσραὴλ, κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν, <sup>30</sup>καὶ ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς διανοίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ἰσχύος σου. <sup>31</sup>δευτέρα αὕτη· ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν. μείζων τούτων ἄλλη ἐντολὴ οὐκ ἔστιν. <sup>32</sup>καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὁ γραμματεὺς· καλῶς, διδάσκαλε, ἐπὶ ἀληθείας εἶπες ὅτι εἷς ἐστίν καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλος πλὴν αὐτοῦ. <sup>33</sup>καὶ τὸ ἀγαπᾶν αὐτὸν ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς συνέσεως καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ἰσχύος καὶ τὸ ἀγαπᾶν τὸν πλησίον ὡς ἑαυτὸν περισσότερον ἐστὶν πάντων τῶν ὀλοκαυτωμάτων καὶ θυσιῶν. <sup>34</sup>καὶ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἰδὼν [αὐτόν] ὅτι νουνεχῶς ἀπεκρίθη εἶπεν αὐτῷ· οὐ μακρὰν εἶ ἀπὸ τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ. καὶ οὐδεὶς οὐκέτι ἐτόλμα αὐτὸν ἐπερωτῆσαι. <sup>iii</sup>

## October 1: *A Place to Begin* (St. Mark 12:30-31)

The mission of Saint Peter Lutheran church is simple, and based on the final words Jesus spoke to his disciples, as recorded in St. Matthew 28:

*Jesus said, "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 I have commanded you."*

God has called us to help other people become disciples of Jesus Christ. However, one cannot invite another into an experience that one does not know. Therefore, we begin with the realization that if we are going to help others become disciples, we must first become disciples ourselves.

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? How does that look in daily life? What implications does it have for the decisions I make, the actions I take, the words I speak? Discipleship, as a concept, is sometimes hard to understand. That is why we have chosen to focus on "Five Habits of Discipleship" in our efforts to be faithful to God's claim on our lives. As we develop these habits, discipleship becomes more and more a part of who we are and how we experience life.

For some of us, these Habits of Discipleship will be descriptions of realities we have been experiencing for many years. For others, this will be the first time we have ever thought of ourselves as disciples – perhaps the first time we have considered what it means to grow in faith and faithfulness.

It is important to state, from the beginning, this important principle of discipleship:

**It does not matter where you start.  
What matters, is where you are willing to let God take you.**

The first step in becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is making an honest assessment of our personal spiritual health and development. Only when we see clearly where our strengths and growth areas are, can we begin the process of becoming the people God has called us to be. Which Habits of Discipleship come naturally to us, or have been developed by years of practice? Which ones have we not yet explored? These questions mark our beginning points, as we set out to grow in discipleship.

What follows is a description of the Five Habits of Discipleship as we practice them at Saint Peter – and some exercises designed to help each of us set goals for what discipleship will look like in our own lives. Our hope is that these descriptions and reflections might help us all better understand what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

At Saint Peter, we invite you to join us in developing habits of discipleship in your life. Will you study what these habits are, and how God wants to bless you through them? And will you make specific, measurable, achievable goals for how you will involve them in your life? We cannot guarantee where this journey will take you. But we can assure you that it will be worth every bit of effort you put into it.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Where are my strengths and growth areas as a disciple of Jesus Christ?

<b>DISCIPLESHIP ASSESSMENT TOOL</b>					
<b>Daily Prayer and Bible Study</b>					
Growth Area					Personal Strength
1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Weekly Worship</b>					
Growth Area					Personal Strength
1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Monthly Community Service</b>					
Growth Area					Personal Strength
1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Financial Generosity</b>					
Growth Area					Personal Strength
1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Faith Nurture in a Small Group or Faith Partner</b>					
Growth Area					Personal Strength
1	2	3	4	5	

1. Which of these Discipleship Habits do I want to celebrate as my greatest strength(s)?
2. Which of these Discipleship Habits do I want to develop in the coming months?
3. Who might be willing to work with me in developing this Discipleship Habit?
4. What goals am I willing to set for myself in the next two weeks?

<sup>i</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at [www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church\\_year/lectionary.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html).

<sup>ii</sup> St. Mark 12:28-34, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iii</sup> St. Mark 12:28-34, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.