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Life in Christ

So, we're going to play an interactive game of who am I? I'm going to give some details and you tell me who you think it is?

They were twelve. And at first glance, you'd never imagine they'd belong in the same room, let alone on the same mission.

So, the first. One was bold, impulsive, and fiery. He leapt before he looked, and words tumbled out of his mouth faster than his mind could catch them. Yet when the waves crashed, he was the one who dared to step out of the boat.
Who Am I? That was Peter.

One kept meticulous records. He was careful, deliberate, precise. He'd once sat behind a tax collector's booth, despised by his neighbors. And yet, when he was called, he left the money behind on the table.
That was Matthew.

Another was quieter, cautious, always asking questions. He

wasn't satisfied with secondhand answers. He wanted proof, evidence he could hold in his hands. And when he finally believed, his faith ran deep.

Who Am I? That was Thomas.

One was a fisherman with calloused hands, use to nets and storms. He worked the water with his brothers, and he never dreamed his name would be remembered outside his little village.

Who Am I? That was Andrew.

Another was also a fisherman—but different from the rest. He seemed gentler, almost poetic. He perhaps noticed details others missed, and may have had a way with words.

Who am I? That was John.

Another was a zealot. He had once dreamed of rebellion, of overthrowing the empire by force. His eyes burned with passion for freedom, and his fists were ready to fight. Yet Jesus called him to a different revolution.

Who am I? That was Simon the Zealot.

One lived in the shadows of his more outspoken brother, often overlooked. But though history may not remember his words, his presence mattered—faithful, steady, and unseen.

Who am I? That was James, the brother of John.

Another carried the name of the great patriarch, and perhaps that was fitting. He was blunt, straightforward, not

afraid to speak his mind. Tradition tells us he carried the gospel to distant lands.

Who am I? That was Philip.

Then there was another James, often called “the Less.” We don’t hear much of his voice, but his life still bore witness to the One he followed.

Who am I? That was James, son of Alphaeus.

Another almost hidden in the story, known by more than one name. Quiet, almost invisible, yet still chosen to walk with Jesus.

Who am I? That was Thaddaeus.

And then there was the one who was known by two different names. Honest to the core, straightforward. His faith began under a fig tree and stretched across the nations.

Who am I? Nathanael, who some call Bartholomew.

And there was one who looked the part, spoke the right words, played the role well—yet his heart was divided. He followed, but for his own gain. And in the end, his choices would break him.

Who am I? That was Judas Iscariot.

Twelve individuals. Different in background, in personality, in passion, in strengths and weaknesses. Fishermen and tax collectors. Rebels and record-keepers. Brothers and strangers.

Can you see yourself fitting in with this crew? Do you see any of your own attributes in them? Maybe you are quiet and reserved like Thaddaeus, or bold, impulsive and fiery like Peter. Are you careful, deliberate and precise like Matthew? Are you blunt, straightforward, and not afraid to speak your mind like Philip? Or honest to the core like Bartholomew? A combination of any of these.

But the story doesn't stop with these twelve.

There were others who followed too, no less of a role to play—women of courage and faith.

One had once lived under the grip of darkness until Jesus set her free, and she became the first to see Him risen from the tomb.

Who am I? That was Mary Magdalene.

Another sat at His feet, listening intently, treasuring every word He spoke. While her sister bustled with service, she leaned in to learn.

Who am I? That was Mary of Bethany.

The sister who served? She loved through action, working with her hands to make room for Him.

Who am I? That was Martha.

Another was a woman of means, who used her resources to support the ministry, even when it put her at risk.

Who am I? That was Joanna.

And another stood near the cross, a mother watching in sorrow and love, unwilling to walk away.

Who am I? That was Salome.

Some of these women were the last to leave the cross and the first to arrive at the tomb. Their voices, often ignored by society, were the first to carry the news of resurrection.

Discipleship was and is not one shape, not one kind of person, not one background. Fishermen and tax collectors. Rebels and record-keepers. Brothers, sisters, and strangers. Women and men. Bold or hesitant. Outspoken or unseen.

And the list goes on. But they had this in common: each of them heard the same voice say, *“Follow Me.”* And so they did. Jesus didn’t call the qualified, he qualified the called.

Do you see yourself on this list? It’s not just for the select few. Jesus calls us all to follow him and then to make disciples of the nation. You might think, oh I can’t do this, I’m not outspoken enough, or I don’t know enough, or whatever excuse you can come up with. We can sometimes think more to our mistakes or what we can’t do, or can’t do well. But when you answer the call of God to Follow Me, he will give you the means and the skills necessary, when necessary, to do whatever he needs you to do if you rely on him. That doesn’t mean we’re just an observer. When we say yes to God, it’s not an observer relationship. We don’t say yes one day and just sit back. We don’t stand still. The

decision to Follow Jesus can take place in a moment, but discipleship is the work of a lifetime. Salvation is free but discipleship is costly. “I have decided to follow Jesus” is a decision. “No turning back” that is discipleship. “The cross before me, the world behind me” that is discipleship. Don’t stand still.

Mackenzie and I were having a conversation Friday morning, before I sat down to finish this message and before he headed off to school. God had been writing a lot of things on my heart for this message and I had been keeping scribbles of them throughout the week but I hadn’t had the opportunity to sit down and put it all together, to finish it until Friday morning. He was feeling overwhelmed with the amount of school work he had to do himself. He had just been given an essay to write for a class other than English (and he hates writing essays, I think he gets that from me), besides his other usual homework that he would get from his other classes. Anyway, I was helping him schedule out what he should work on in his class that day so that he were prepared to write the essay this weekend with my help, for him to do the research and jot down the notes for each paragraph using the outline given at school, and then we could put it together on Saturday. I said I had a ton of work to do this weekend myself so we didn’t have any plans, I still had two papers to write for Wednesday, and three reflection questions to write for

Tuesday. He looked at me and said, wow, I'm glad I'm not going to be a pastor, I couldn't write that much. At which point I said, I thought the same thing when I was your age about not enjoying writing, I loved math and hated writing, but I've always loved learning. And God has such a cool way of using your gifts, sometimes in ways you never thought possible, but also of stretching you to do things you never thought you could do.

That conversation reminded me how easy it is to stay where we're comfortable, to avoid what feels hard or overwhelming, to stand still. Writing was something I once thought I couldn't do, yet God has used it as a tool for my growth. The same is true in our spiritual lives—God doesn't call us to stay standing still but to keep learning, stretching, and moving forward.

In many, if not all churches, we face the problem of inactive members who have never grown spiritually. As Vance Havner put it, "Some took a stand for Christ thirty years ago and they are still standing, standing still. They took a step but the Christian life is a walk." Jesus said in John 8:31 "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples;" Jesus didn't call the qualified, he qualified the called.

Whether you've been following Jesus for a month, 12 months, 12 years, or 60 years or more, we can't forget that God's great purpose in salvation is not simply to grant us an assurance of eternal life, but that we might be

conformed to the image or likeness of God's Son, so that we might have Christ-like character as it says in Romans 8:29 "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family." We all bear the image of God, and we need to continue our faithful walk with Christ to conform more and more to the likeness of Christ. And if you haven't followed Jesus yet, what better time than now to say, Jesus I need you, I believe in you, and repent of your sins.

I enjoy listening to Rick Warren and it boggles my mind, and I have told you this story before how he has told his congregation many times "You know how many times I've felt like giving up? Every Monday morning! But I just don't know how to quit." I, on Monday mornings, can sometimes think, I can't do this, or I don't know how to do this. To get out of my own head I go for a walk in creation and God finds me there, reveals himself, I am reminded it's not about me, it's about God and allowing him to use me.

You don't have to be a preacher like Billy Graham, though God may call you to do that, but you can talk about Jesus with those around us. When I taught at NKEC I worked extremely closely with my teaching partner for 7 years. We became instant friends. I miss her terribly, but we keep in contact frequently. Just the other day she wrote me and asked for me to pray for her daughter. We didn't talk about

faith at school very much, she of course knew I believed as I was taking classes, playing at church and then, particularly when it became evident that I was leaving my job to become a full time pastor, and while she hasn't declared her love of Jesus that I know of it has started with her texts to me to pray for her daughter. I continued to check in for a few weeks and then this week I stopped by to check in with her about her daughter who has just started university and she is doing better, an answer to pray. I have no idea the seeds that have been planted, but I continue to pray for her and her family. Are you standing still?

Think about Nicodemus who we talked about last week. Nicodemus met Jesus in the dark, did Nicodemus come to the light? Did he, in coming to Jesus, already begin his journey toward the light? We do not know of Nicodemus' immediate response to Jesus' challenge. Nicodemus was a seeker of wisdom, but not able to perceive in Jesus what he desired, it was impossible, but it didn't end there. Nicodemus appeared two more times in the gospel of John where we can see gradual shifts to his openness to Jesus. These two other appearances in the gospel of John suggest that the initial encounter sent him on a journey of progressive understanding. The sign of Jesus, the Son of Man, on the cross, may have brought about a new birth for him, and has finally brought perception of the kingdom of God.

Are you standing still?

We don't know the seeds that God helps us to plant, how they will grow, but God calls us to follow him as we read this morning in Matthew 4 when the disciples immediately left their nets and followed Jesus and to make disciples of the nation as it says in the Great Commission, "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."

I love the story of Paul's conversion in Acts 9.

Saul (later called Paul) was fiercely persecuting Christians, arresting them and seeking to destroy the church. On his way to Damascus to arrest more believers, a bright light from heaven suddenly surrounded him. He fell to the ground and heard the voice of Jesus saying, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" When Saul asked who was speaking, the reply came: "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*"

Blinded by the light, Saul was led into Damascus where he remained without sight, food, or drink for three days. Meanwhile, God spoke to a disciple named Ananias, instructing him to go to Saul. Though hesitant because of

Saul's reputation, Ananias obeyed, laid hands on Saul, and told him he was chosen to carry Jesus' name to the Gentiles, kings, and Israel. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, his sight was restored, and he was baptized.

From then on, Saul began proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God, astonishing many who knew him as a former persecutor of the church. Someone who persecuted Christians later proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God and became one of the greatest missionaries, church planters, and writers of the New Testament. As Paul says in Acts 20:24 "But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace." or in 2 Timothy 4:7 "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Baptist missionaries brought Christianity to the Garo tribe in northeastern India in the mid-19th century. A man named Noxen, along with his wife and two sons, converted to Christianity. The village chief, angered by the conversion and its impact on his community, threatened Noxen and his family with execution if they did not deny their faith. Noxen refused to give up his faith, declaring, "I have decided to follow Jesus". His wife and children were killed, but he continued to affirm his commitment, singing verses from the Bible and the now-famous hymn. He was then

martyred. Noxen's ultimate sacrifice and demonstration of unwavering faith moved the village chief. The chief, in turn, renounced his own pagan beliefs and embraced Christianity, leading the entire village to follow suit.

The hymn, I have decided to follow Jesus, was written to commemorate that faith, as Noxen was singing parts of it before he was martyred: it emphasizes a personal, deliberate decision to follow Christ, no matter what others say or what dangers may come. The lyrics repeat the idea that following Jesus is a conscious, irreversible choice.

The list of disciples did not end in the first century, it does not end now. The call to follow Jesus did not stop with Peter or Mary, with Matthew or Joanna. The voice of Jesus still speaks: *“Follow Me.”* And the question now is this—as the story is being written today, as chapters are added, will your name be on that list? Will you be counted among the disciples—not perfect, not always strong, not always certain—but willing to follow the One who calls or are you standing still?