**Discipleship and Christian Formation
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**Discipleship on the margins
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Let me begin with a story from the Kosovo war in 1999. As the United States was bombing Serbia, a half million refugees flooded into Albania, a country of only 3.5 million people. 95% of the Albanian refugees were Muslim, and they were fleeing from what they perceived as a war with Serbian Orthodox. I was serving as a missionary for the Orthodox Church of Albania at the time, and we were placed in a unique position with the refugees as fellow Albanians, yet also as Orthodox Christians. Archbishop Anastasios quickly mobilized our Church to respond to the tragic needs of the refugees. We set up a refugee camp, and then the Archbishop asked all the faithful, and particularly the university students and our seminarians to volunteer and help out wherever they could. So when he talked with our seminarians, and we planned out how we were to visit the refugee camps each day, one student asked the Archbishop, “Should we wear our crosses when we go into the camps, so that all can see?” To which he responded, “No. Keep your crosses under your shirts. Just live the cross by serving and sacrificing for others.”

So we did. Each day, going to the camps, talking with the refugees, listening to their stories of pain and suffering, offering aid, and doing whatever we could to make their lives more bearable. Day after day we went, offering a loving presence, and slowly the refugees began responding to our students. “Who are you? Why are you coming here every day?” And friendships slowly developed.

Our students, who were initially uncertain, and even afraid to be among these mostly Muslim refugees, connected with them through their love and concern. Every day our students came back and shared their stories of how they felt a bond with the people and no longer looked upon them as “refugees” or as “Muslims” but more so as fellow human beings and fellow children of God.

One man my students introduced me to was Ramazan. Numerous times I stopped in his tent to have the traditional Turkish coffee and share in conversation. Our discussions often revolved around spiritual themes because Ramazan continually tried to understand how this tragedy had taken place. He was friends with numerous Serbs before the war. In fact, it was his Serbian friends who helped him and his family escape alive. Yet he had seen his business looted and burned, and didn’t know the status of his house. Thankfully, all his family members were still alive, as far as he knew. For two months, he stayed in the Orthodox refugee camp. Following the end of the war, he returned home.

A week after his return, however, I received a phone call. It was Ramazan telling me that he was back in Tirana, trying to buy needed supplies hard to find in Kosovo. He asked to meet with me. He came into my office with a neighbor from Djakova. This time I offered him coffee as he told me about his situation back home. His house was totally looted, but at least the structure was still standing and in good shape. And in general, his family was well, except for two nephews whose whereabouts were unknown. He was hoping that they were in prison in Serbia, but this was unconfirmed.

His neighbor, however, shared a more gruesome tale. His sister and brother-in-law were burned alive in their home. He saw the skeletons himself. As we talked together, Ramazan said that he still believed that Kosovo could be a multi-ethnic country with Albanians and Serbians living together. His friend vehemently disagreed. He bluntly said that he could never live with a Serb as a neighbor. An awkward moment followed, but since I had a relationship with Ramazan, I felt that I could express my hope for the future. From a human perspective, I surely understood his friend’s anger and hatred. I myself cringed and deeply felt his sorrow when his friend described the skeletal bones of his sister. Yet I gently told him that such human anger and desire for revenge would only perpetuate other acts of violence in the future. What Kosovo and the entire Balkan region needed more than ever was not human anger and revenge, but divine mercy, forgiveness, and love. He looked at me, not fully understanding, but he politely listened as I told him that only through the grace and power of God could hatred be transformed into mercy and even love for ones’ enemies.

**Surprisingly, Ramadan nodded in agreement and expressed hope for the future. “It will be extremely difficult, seemingly impossible,” he reflected, “yet I still have hope.”** As he got up to leave my office, he handed me a large oil painting. He apologized that it wasn’t the most beautiful painting, but it was all he could find in Djakova. He offered it to me as a small token of gratitude for all his new friends in the Orthodox Church who had done so much for him and all the refugees. **He said that through such concrete and loving actions of the Church and her people, he still had hope in humanity despite the atrocities he witnessed. He ended by saying, “I have seen what true Christianity is all about.”**

This topic about discipleship on the margins made me remember this story and reflect upon it from two perspectives. Discipleship from the perspective of trying to mentor our students and teach them what our faith truly means by reaching out to the stranger, to the other, to the refugee, to the muslim. At the same time, however, is this the beginning of discipleship in the life of Ramazan, where he witnessed Christ-centered love at a critical time in his life?

Archbishop Anastasios has repeated again and again “A Christian should never have enemies. Never call someone a ‘bad communist,’ ‘a bad atheist,’ or a ‘bad so-and-so.’ Every person has the image of God in them, and they are His children! Every day we pray ‘for those who hate us and those who love us.’ Thus, we cannot have enemies… The message is clear. Our salvation depends upon respect for the other, respect for the otherness. This is the deep meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan; we see not that someone is my neighbor, but how someone becomes my neighbor. It is a process.”

This lesson of faith, a process of transforming strangers into neighbors and friends, became a reality as our students visited and befriended Muslim refugees every day. We modeled and practiced our faith as we taught them to be disciples on the margins. Simultaneously, though, we offered a witness and became friends with the Muslim refugee strangers who no longer simply had labels – “a Muslim” or “a refugee” – but who had names with stories, who went from stranger to friend.

One other story from this same experience which offers another example of the power of modeling love in forming disciples on the margins came after the war ended. Sevdi and Vjolca discovered their house was destroyed in Kosovo. So, they chose to stay in Tirana, hoping to find a way to emigrate to Canada. As they waited day after day in the sweltering summer heat of Tirana, I suggested that maybe we could take their teenage girls to our summer camp for a little break. I explained to the parents that although this camp was a church camp with quite a bit of worship, Bible study, and religious activity, their girls would experience a lot of fun and great fellowship in other activities, and they could participate in whatever they felt comfortable with.

Since we had built a bond of trust with the parents trusted, they allowed their fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls to go. Before they came to the camp, my wife Faith and I instructed our camp staff in how to treat these Muslim refugee girls—with loving Christian hospitality, but also with the freedom to participate in whatever they felt comfortable with. Our visitors planned to stay only for two or three nights.

On the first day of their visit, a somewhat serious incident occurred. After a day of activities and fun, time came for our evening Vespers. All the girls of the camp came to the church, including Drita and Alba, our Kosovar visitors. When the fifteen-year-old Alba saw everyone making the sign of the cross, she immediately left the church. One of the counselors walked out with her and asked her if she was okay. **She simply responded, “Where I come from, the cross is associated with violence and death. I can’t stay anywhere people make the sign of the cross!”**

After the service I talked with Alba and offered to take her and her sister back to Tirana immediately. Or, I told her she could stay and participate only in whatever she felt comfortable with. Alba chose to stay, but emphasized that she wouldn’t go into the church again.

Our camp staff and girls overwhelmed Drita and Alba with incredible love. After the initial three days, Drita and Alba asked if they could stay until the end of the camp. Their parents consented. By the final days of the camp, not only were both Kosovar girls attending every activity, including the church service, they even were reading psalms in church! **On the last night of camp, Alba got up in front of all the campers and said, “I have never experienced such love in my life as I did at this camp. I will never forget this experience! It has given me an entirely new understanding of Christianity.”**

Before I took them back to their parents, they asked our camp leader for the same packet which all the other campers received. The packet included a Bible, stories of the saints, icons, and other religious material. Both girls even put crosses around their necks. When I saw them wearing crosses and carrying these packets of materials, I asked them to please be very careful when they returned home. I told them not to wear the crosses, but to show all the things they had received to their parents, and ask permission from their parents about whether to keep the materials or not. I didn’t want the parents to think we had brainwashed their children. In the end, though, I explained to them, **“You have experienced a taste of God’s Kingdom at this camp. Cherish this memory in your hearts. Seek out God, try to learn more about His teachings, and cultivate His Spirit within your hearts.”**

Experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven teaching disciples to reach out to the margins, but also creating disciples on the margins.

In these two stories, I can’t say whether the people in the margins became faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, but I can say they were treated with love, respect and dignity, and thus experienced a tiny taste of what it was like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Maybe seeds of faith were planted within these people. Maybe one day as they reflect on their journey through life, they will remember how they felt God’s presence and experienced an authentic witness of Christianity.

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Discipleship on the margins.

I have other examples of how people truly on the margins became disciples of Jesus through the respect and love they experienced from people in the church. Right now, for example, in the Church Family where I serve, we have several of my most faithful people who have struggled with various drug and alcohol addictions. One almost died from an overdose several years ago, yet today, comes faithfully to church every Sunday and even serves in a leadership role of our church.

Another former member had struggled with alcoholism for a number of years. She fell out of the Church fellowship for decades, but became sober through a 12 step program. When her 12 step program asked to use our church hall as a meeting place, she was quite hesitant. She met with me to tell me, “I’m not sure how comfortable I will be coming back here. Some of these people don’t know about my addiction, and even though I’ve been sober for 20 years, they will not understand.”

I emphasized to her that this community had radically changed from 20 years ago, and that this church was now a place that welcomed former addicts, welcomed those who were broken and struggling, welcomed those who were sick and in need. The church isn’t a place for saints, but for sinners in need of healing and recovery and renewal. She was skeptical but she decided to try and come to our church, not only during her 12 step meetings, but on a Sunday.

That was five years ago. Today, she feels loved and cherished. She is one of my most faithful and active members who brings her grandkids every Sunday to Church, and is encouraging two of her children who are themselves struggling with addictions. She tells everyone how she finds her peace and strength from her family of faith!

Her story reminds me of the words of Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, of blessed memory. These words aptly apply to discipleship on the margins. "*Unless we look at a person and see the beauty there is in this person, we can contribute nothing to him. One does not help a person by discerning what is wrong, what is ugly, what is distorted. Christ looked at everyone he met, at the prostitute or the thief, and saw the beauty hidden there. Perhaps it was distorted, perhaps damaged, but it was beauty none the less, and what he did was to call out this beauty.*"

We are called to see the beauty of God’s image in each and every person we encounter. This is especially important when we relate to those on the margins – those who feel rejected, despised, forgotten, hated, broken, ugly, lonely – those who feel like the OTHER.

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, he didn’t see a woman who had been married five times, a woman so despised by society that she had to seek water from a far-away well in the middle of the day. Instead, he saw a woman filled with beauty from within and called forth that beauty! This Samaritan woman found healing and love from Christ, despite her immoral past, and became known in Church history as St. Fotini, one of the most beloved saints in our Orthodox Church. A saint honored twice a year in the church calendar, on her feast day on February 26th as well as on every fourth Sunday after Pascha. Imagine a woman married five times honored in the church twice every year!

When Jesus met Zaccheus, he did not see a chief tax-collector, a thief, and a traitor to his Jewish nation. Instead he saw a lost man looking for something more, and thus, he called him down from the tree, entering his house and changing his life. Zaccheus’ life was transformed by Christ’s visit, changing his life from a thief to a philanthropist and disciple of Christ, giving half his goods to the poor and repaying those he cheated fourfold!

And if we are focusing on discipleship on the margins, we need look no farther than Jesus choosing another tax-collector to enter his inner circle of friends. Matthew the tax-collector becomes Matthew the evangelist and apostle and disciple.

Christ never allowed one’s fallen condition, or sinful past, to blind him from the beauty that lay hidden within.

St John Cassian highlighted, **“When someone has no compassion for another’s transgressions, but pronounces a severe judgment on them, it is an obvious sign of a soul not yet purified of evil passions.”**

**And here lies the foundation for our Orthodox Christian understanding of discipleship on the margins. We are challenged to cultivate inner eyes to see God’s beauty all around us and in everyone we meet. We live in an impure world where it seems so much easier to focus on the negative, to point out the evil and darkness and impurity in others. In fact, our impure hearts and minds often lead us to question and doubt even that which is most pure and beautiful. Our fallen nature and fallen world tempt us to focus on the darkness and evil all around us. That is why we see so many people tear down others, and concentrate on what they see as negative and evil.**

**In Genesis, we remember how God created all things good. God’s original beauty and goodness still lie within all people. This goodness and beauty may be covered up by our fallen nature, it may be distorted or even damaged, yet God’s goodness and beauty still exist in everyone and everything. The mission according to our Orthodox Faith is to bring out this beauty in others, “to bless all things and by doing so, to participate with God synergetically in the recreation of the entire universe.”**

Fr. Anthony Hughes reflected on Anthony Bloom’s words by noting, “We have no time to meditate on darkness or on the evil that lives in this world. That is the work of the devil. We have the heart only to see goodness and to rejoice in it. This is the meaning of the scripture that says, “*To the pure all things are pure*.” Impure hearts see darkness in everything, and even rejoice in this darkness. Let that not be so of us. Let us participate every moment of our lives in the calling out of the beauty of creation, of our neighbors, of our friends and even our enemies. Let us call out the beauty especially within ourselves!”

**Remember, each person we meet, no matter how difficult he or she may be, was created in the image and likeness of God. Nothing can take away that divine image. A person’s sinful ways and evil choices may distort or damage that image of God within them, yet our role in following our Creator and seeking to disciple others is to help each person rediscover and restore their own divine image. We must strive to bring out the divine beauty that lies hidden within them**

I remember as a seminarian 28 years ago visiting a prison every week. I did this for three years, and developed a number of friendships with the men incarcerated there. One of my friends there ended up spending 25 years in prison. I met him there as a seminarian for three years. I kept a correspondence with him over the 10-year period when I left the country and served as a missionary in Albania, sending letters back and forth. And then when I returned to the States, I visited him again several times again before he was finally released from prison.

**Imagine, leaving prison after 25 years. Leaving with the stigma of being a sex offender. Feeling despised and unwelcomed by society. Realizing it is almost impossible to find work with the label of a sex offender, extremely difficult to find a place to live, and coming to the realization that society is just waiting to send you back in prison! (40% of sex offenders return to prison within three years of their release.)**

With this man, though, I kept in touch and saw his beauty within. We talk on the phone regularly. We have lunch monthly. I would visit each of his new apartments whenever he moved from place to place, and would offer the Orthodox tradition of blessing his house. I even began going out to lunch with him and his elderly 100 year old mother. I tried to hold him accountable, to keep him safe. I encouraged him to stay involved in his various meetings. I’m sure he still has temptations, but it is now seven years since he has been out of prison, and he is tries to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

I’ll remember hearing a talk by Fr. Anthony Gittens, a Roman Catholic priest who works among the “nobodies” in Chicago, befriending and discipling them. He emphasized that **“We Christians cannot get into the kingdom of God until we move from the VIP category, the somebody category, and reach out to the outsider category, to the nobodies of the world! Again, let me repeat, if the only person we meet daily is the person in the mirror, people like ourselves, then we’ll never enter into God’s Kingdom!”**

When we talk about discipleship in the margins, this implies reaching out to those in the outsider category. Too often we divide the world into the “us” and “them” categories. The “us” are people like ourselves, with whom we identify, whether religiously, ethnically, socio-economically, politically, or in whatever other ways we look at our own tribe. The “them” are the strangers, those who are different, those who we may not understand or find difficulty relating to, and thus, we reject.

In the Old Testament, the “us” was Israel (the people of God), and the “them” were the Gentiles. Yet, today, how many ways do we divide the world into us and them – Christian/non-Christian, Americans/Immigrants; Democrats/Republicans; Rich/Poor; Insiders/Outsiders. Ultimately, we divide the world into the “somebodies” (who are us) and the nobodies (who are those different than us)!

Discipleship on the margins means imitating the life of Jesus, cultivating the mind of Christ, which implies reaching out to the nobodies of the world – to sinners, to prostitutes, to thieves, to lepers, to the poor and lame, to the marginalized, to the forgotten of the world. Our Lord’s entire ministry was one of reaching out to those rejected by the world. “I came not to condemn the world,” Christ taught, “but to save the world. I came to seek the lost. I came to reach out to the sinners!” I came to bring light into darkness, good news to those in despair.

It all begins by first noticing the other, and the acting, responding, sharing God’s love.

In the Gospel of the Rich Man and the poor beggar Lazarus, we see clearly the sin of consciously ignoring, or even unconsciously not noticing the poor and needy right in front of us. Day after day, the rich man walked past Lazarus, without ever helping him, *without ever noticing him!* Jesus concludes the Gospel story by saying that Lazarus went to paradise, while the rich man went to hell.

The central sin of the rich man sin is that he DID NOT NOTICE the poor man right outside his door. Daily he walked out of his house, and either consciously or unconsciously passed by the poor man without even noticing him. In other words, his sin was not something that he did, but something that he did not do.

How often do we fall into the same temptation? We walk out of the church, having heard the Gospel lesson to notice and help the poor, and yet we still do not see the poor who are begging for our help. So often, we are quick to judge the poor as lazy people who don’t want to work, yet, can we say we really know their situation? Have we sincerely befriended the poor, and listened to their story?

And the poor are not only those who have material needs. The greatest poverty here in America is the poverty of loneliness, the poverty of feeling unloved, the poverty of feeling unwanted, those who feel marginalized.

How are we noticing the “nobodies” of the world, reaching out to them, and disciplining them? How are we making them feel loved, a part of the somebodies of the world? To love, we must meet the other. We must encounter the other. We must engage the other. We must disciple them.

How many of us can say we really know these people? Knowing “about” the marginalized is no better than knowing “about God.” Our faith is one of encountering God. Of coming in contact with Him and then truly knowing Him.

There is a story of a wise rabbi who asked his students, “When does the night end and the day begin?” One student responded, “When we can look in the distance and distinguish between two kinds of trees.” A good answer, but not the right one. A second student said, “When we look into the distance and can distinguish a white thread from a black one.” A good answer, but not the right one. And after a few more attempts, the students gave up. The rabbi then answered his own question, “We know that the night has ended and the day has begun when we can look at each person we meet, no matter who they are, and see them as our brother and sister.”

Let us reflect today on how we divide the world into the “us”es and “thems”, to the somebodies and the nobodies, and then let us follow the call of our Lord Jesus to reach out to the other, to encounter the other in a concrete manner, to come to know the other in a personal and intimate way!

For we will only enter into the Kingdom of God when we learn to notice the other, to disciple the other, to treat the other - the nobodies of the world - as precious children of God!