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Purposeful proximity—Jesus' model of mentoring

Purposeful Proximity

First there was Sister Kach. She played the accordion, walked slightly slower than the speed of light, and cried whenever she mentioned the nations. Jesus had without invitation interrupted my adamantly Atheistic worldview three weeks prior to connecting me with Sister Kach. She immediately invited me to Thursday evening prayer meetings in her home. A piano, an accordion, hand-typed song sheets, many prayers in many tongues, parting hugs, and then came the moments that I hungered for. Sister Kach would sit with me at her table, Bible open, and invite me and my questions to a feast in God's Word. She prayed me through college and into God's purposes on her knees.

Then there was Donna. Donna was gifted in wisdom, a scholar, and the Chi Alpha campus minister who weekly met with me throughout my four years at the University of Texas in Austin. God used Donna to anchor the incredible supernatural introduction to His existence that I had experienced with sound, systematic, substantial study of the scriptures.

I remember the day as a two year old follower of Jesus when Donna entrusted me with my first discipleship group: *"Donna, are you worried? I mean, giving me a group of my own to disciple when I have so much to learn?"*

"Worried? Alicia, I am petrified. But I am also quite certain that discipleship is Biblical and that is where my hope is."

Fifteen years and dozens of mentoring relationships later, I am equally confident that shoulder to shoulder qualitative investment is our key to fulfilling Christ's commission.

Jesus' Model

When God was strategizing to reveal Himself as Savior to the planet, He did not consult 21st century marketing experts. They would have, no doubt, confidently advised God to establish a cutting edge web site, rent an enormous coliseum and arrange a live global satellite broadcast in all languages, or at the very least write a best selling scroll.

God knew what the experts would advice. He ignored all their marketing instincts. In His infinite insight, He selected as His strategy for reaching the world ***a life***.

A finite life.

A life that played with our children and walked with us in the marketplace.

A life that mourned with us at our funerals and rejoiced with us at our weddings.

A life that fished with us and paid taxes with us.

A life that lived with us and died for us.

A single, solitary life that altered the course of history.

Emmanuel, God with us, selected as His strategy for global evangelization ***purposeful proximity***. Jesus ministered to the multitudes and counseled the questioning. But He concentrated His life in twelve rather rough individuals and gave them as their first job description simply to be with Him: "He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with Him" Mk 3.14. In this

shoulder to shoulder position of saturated with-ship, Christ's disciples discovered the authority to preach, to deliver, and to heal.

“And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” 2 Tim 2.2. Somewhere between Paul's instructions to Timothy and a generation that can download spiritual guidance on-line, purposeful proximity was knocked off stage by a more flashy, predictable player—program. Program was safer, more controllable and reproducible, less risky, less messy, less intrusive. It just seemed easier to give someone an outline than an hour, a well-worn book than a window into our humanity. How easy it is to substitute informing people for investing in people, to confuse organizing people with actually discipling people.

Life is not the offspring of program or paper. Life is the offspring of life. Jesus prioritized shoulder to shoulder mentoring because His prize was much larger than information, it was integration. After three years of concentrated relational discipling, independent, immature, and ambitious men became Spirit-led, strategic apostles. That kind of change is not by chance, it is by choice: the choice to make disciples the Jesus style, “life on life”¹.

Then

Our generation is experiencing a renaissance of relationship. “Mentoring” has become a trendy word in both the world and the church. Though I am fascinated by the multitude of mentoring models and methods present today, the primary point of reference in our search to be disciplemakers must be Jesus' model and Jesus' method. He commissioned His followers to go and “make disciples”: what did that mean to them then?

Moses and Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, and Gehazi, Eli and Samuel, Ruth and Naomi. Learning relationships are prevalent throughout the Bible. In Jesus' day, the formalized version of a master-disciple learning relationship had been in existence for over four hundred years in both Greek and Jewish cultures². To be a “disciple”, *mathetes*, literally meant to be a learner. Disciples were those who

- ◆ directed their minds to something
- ◆ were engaged in learning
- ◆ were attached to a person
- ◆ who answered a call to partnership in service³.

When Jesus called the twelve to Himself, they culturally comprehended that Jesus was not inviting them to either a conference or an occasional coffee. Jesus was inviting them to purposeful proximity, to be taught in the context of relationship⁴. He adopted a familiar model but took it to an entirely new level that altered the word and the world forever. Others offered their hypotheses and answers, Jesus offered Himself as The Answer. A non-negotiable, critically core component of Jesus' model of discipling was customized with-ship, shoulder to shoulder personal investment.

The twelve walked with Jesus as He taught, ate, dialogued with religious leaders, cast out demons, touched lepers, blessed children, prayed, wept, and was betrayed. As they shared life, Jesus spoke truth to them, revealed sin in them, modeled His Father's ways for them, and commissioned them to make disciples of all nations.

And Now

Jesus walked with His disciples for hours along dusty paths. Today, we anonymously drive by each other at about 65 mph on our way to the office! How do we practically begin to follow Jesus'

mentoring example in a culture where value and productivity are married, where the visible and measurable are applauded, and where many spend more quality time with their computer than with their life companion?

1. Start where Jesus started, alone in prayer: “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them . . . “ Luke 6.12-13. Carve out a silent space with Jesus and ask Him to show you whom to invest in life-on-life as a mentor.

an illustration:

This year, my heart was drawn in prayer to three young women, all of whom are preparing for or involved in ministry.

2. Commit with Jesus to become a faithful intercessor for these individuals.

an illustration:

I began to pray for them and ask God to guide us regarding our growing friendships.

3. If not already in place, initiate an opportunity to interact with these individuals on a regular basis for the purpose of growing together toward Jesus. Following Jesus’ model, the substance of these times must be shoulder to shoulder relational investment. The form can range from coffee downtown every Thursday morning to a structured small group. Be flexible with form and stubborn regarding substance. Have more confidence in His sovereignty than you have fear of your humanity. You are not making this offer because you are delusional about your state of perfection but because you are determined to follow Jesus’ model of multiplying the faithful.

an illustration:

“Sarah, you have mentioned before that you would love to meet with another woman in ministry. If you would like, I am open to meeting with you regularly to together press more deeply into Jesus.” All three young women were thrilled about the possibility, two immediately pursued the offer and we set up an every other week “one on one”.

4. Together identify areas of desired growth. With your motivation to nurture—never to control—begin to prayerfully focus on one or two of these areas.

an illustration:

“People always talk about ‘quiet times’. I know I am supposed to have them, but I just wind up sitting and feeling impatient.” I invited this young woman to join me in my devotions at a campus chapel once a week. Together we sang, prayed scripture, listened and waited, meditated on the Word, interceded, and thanked Jesus. To compliment our “practicum” she read The Hour That Changes the World, by Dick Eastman.

5. Assume a position of vulnerability.

an illustration:

“I give you the Superman/Clark Kent award.” The setting was 1987 at a final meeting of my first mentoring group. Betsy saw my expression so she explained: “Last year you were superwoman—Alicia the discipleship group leader, strong, stable, secure. I am not sure what happened to you over the summer, but when you came back you were more like Clark Kent—real, touchable, vulnerable.” Then Betsy added words that I will never forget, “I learned much more from Clark Kent than I ever did from Superman.”

6. See the diamond (even when they do not think it exists).

an illustration:

1991: I was praying over a list of young women who had signed up for a discipleship group. God drew my attention to Jenn—a quiet student who had just started attending our group: “She is a diamond, but she will not shine unless someone invests in her.” Jenn did not think of herself as a diamond, in fact she was unsure of her commitment to Christ at that time. Today, the diamond shines brightly—she is a missionary to Muslim women and children in the Middle East.

7. Nurture friendship long after any form of mentoring experiences closure. “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made know to you” John 15.15.

an illustration:

Jenn, Retts, Christine, Suzanne, Londie, Lisa . . . we no longer have small group together or regular one on ones. These forms of mentoring experienced closure through graduations, moves, and planned transitions. The substance of mentoring—relational investment—is still our treasure, even across oceans.

“But I do not have the time to mentor.”

Perhaps we do not have the time *not* to mentor. Did Jesus cultivate mentoring relationships because no one else was in need of healing? Did He carve out quality time with the twelve because the crowds had stopped gathering to hear Him preach? Jesus walked past need to prioritize purposeful proximity with His disciples. In His humanity, Jesus was finite. By concentrating His life in a few, He multiplied His life exponentially.

Jesus commissions us to follow His model (Mt. 28.19). That commission came without any exemption clauses: “if your temperament is so inclined . . . if you have multiple-staff . . . if it is in your gifting cluster . . . “ Jesus’ mentoring emphasis was not a function of His personality. Emmanuel, God with us, chose shoulder to shoulder, life-on-life, purposeful proximity as His strategy for the evangelization of the world!

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¹ “Disciplemaking—A Life on Life Approach”, Roger Fleming, *Discipleship Journal*, Issue Thirty, 1985.

² Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 552-562.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ “Discipleship is teaching in the context of relationship.” Howard Kenyon, 1988.