Beyond Solidarity?
Responding to the Call of Discipleship in the Present Age

I. Discerning the Script of Discipleship.

Bonhoeffer’s classic work *The Cost of Discipleship*, written eight decades ago, has left an indelible mark upon Christian theology, especially in the (post)Christendom contexts of Europe and the United States. It also has left its mark on me, as a white-privileged, cisgendered male, (now post-)evangelical Christian, person. I still remember the moment thirteen years ago, while reading Bonhoeffer’s *Cost* for the first time, when I realized that the Sermon on the Mount was not hyperbolic rhetoric, but a manifesto for a Christian ethic that insisted upon real-world actualization. Despite having been a lifelong Christian, it was as if scales had fallen from my eyes. For me at least, this was the beginning of my journey away from the spiritualized, pietistic, and self-obsessive notions of faith that I had inherited (a journey that I remain on today).

Since then, my conception of “discipleship” has been shaped perhaps most dramatically, beyond my own experiences, by the stories and living examples of disciples throughout the centuries. Back in seminary, I became particularly affected by the life and writings of John M. Perkins. For research for a class I was afforded the distinct honor of meeting him briefly, and receiving an inside glimpse into his living legacy in Pasadena, CA, at Harambee Christian Family Center. I soaked up his autobiographical writings, his harrowing account of his own near-lynching at the hands of Mississippi police in the early 1960s, his resilience and commitment to a holistic gospel that saw no tension between living in a “new life in Christ” and working for justice and for non-superficial racial reconciliation. This was a disciple, I thought, if I had ever seen one.

The fact is, “discipleship” cannot be defined apart from narrative. The term itself invokes a certain fidelity to the gospel-narratives, and to the lived experiences of the original followers of Jesus of Nazareth, the itinerant rabbi. Their discipleship was, in fact, ontologically prior to all christological and theological assumptions. The Synoptic gospel accounts can thus be viewed as pedagogical narratives, that not only offer explicit teachings like the Sermon on the Mount, but

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2 It is important, I believe, despite the awkwardness of this phrasing, to not omit the implied “person” when offering our self-descriptions of hybridized identity-belongings. Among many benefits, it serves as a reminder that at the root of our hybridity is a common identity-as-person, that is at once universal and immanent.
3 See n.22 below.
also interpret the discipling-community’s actions and practices which embody those teachings, in such a way that readers of the authors’ day might imagine themselves to be following Jesus as well.

If there is an implicit discipleship “script” here, i.e., a normative narratival structure in some sense, Brueggemann’s rooting of discipleship in the perpetual narratival dynamic of the God / Jesus who both “calls” and “sends” perhaps serves as an apt summary. Jesus calls disciples to participate, and then Jesus sends them, not only at the point of the “great commission” (Matt. 28:18-19), but also in the midst of Jesus’ earthly ministry (Matt. 4:18-24; Matt. 10:5-15; Lk. 9:1-10:24).

But a discipleship-script, even more specifically, refers to pedagogy. Indeed it refers to a particular kind of pedagogical relationship, between “disciple” and rabbi. After being (literally) called, the original disciples (literally) “followed” Jesus from the Galilean countryside and throughout Judea. The discipling-community is a dramatically peripatetic community, which follows a Jesus who takes to the streets and visits others’ homes to share “gospelizing practices,” and takes his community with him (followed by periods of reflection and interpretation). As Tilley emphasizes, these practices not only include verbal proclamation of a new ethic according to the Fellowship (or Reign) of God—but also healings and exorcisms, table fellowship with people at every societal level, and the practice of forgiveness. Together these constitute the missio inter gentes: the healing and proclaiming work of the rabbi Jesus among the people, that is inherently relational and face-to-face, and brings about the restoration of people. Disciples first accompanied (i.e., “followed”) Jesus, and then were “sent” to practice this way of being themselves (and then later returned to reflect upon the experience with their rabbi). Paying attention to the pedagogy at work, one could even say that the discipling-community is

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5 For Tilley (The Disciples’ Jesus, 73) the gospels are scripts that structure performances of discipleship, and aid the development of a repertoire of practices pertaining to discipleship.
7 I first heard the word “peripatetic” to describe disciples by William Willimon, at a series of talks at Baylor University’s Truett Seminary, ca. 2010-2011.
8 As Tilley says, "the early communities remembered the disciples as doing three crucial things: they exorcised, they healed, and they preached—just as Jesus famously was remembered as doing and empowered them to do.” … “These are not, of course, the only practices [of the community], but they are a place to begin seeing what it means to have, in practice, the imaginative, faithful phronēsis that characterizes discipleship." Tilley, The Disciples’ Jesus, 136.
9 Credited to William Burrows, Latin for the “mission among the people,” this phrase invokes and expands upon the term missio ad gentes, which refers to one of the most seminal decrees from the Second Vatican Council, Ad Gentes. See Tilley, The Disciples’ Jesus, 187; 256. [Per Tilley (256 n.35), Burrows coins the term in “A Response to Michael Amaladoss,” Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America 56 (2001): 15-20.]
10 These two sides were co-dependent with each other: Jesus’ preaching about God’s Reign provided interpretive guidelines for his healing work, which in turn actualized and made manifest that Reign.
narratively presented as a “community of practice” (Wenger and Lave), where disciples are
guided from more to less peripheral forms of participation in a community.¹²

Discipleship, then, is at once pedagogical and missional, and these qualities are
inseparable from each other in the narrative script of being called-following-being sent. The
“following” connotes not just a split-second decision, but an ongoing process that involves both
learning and doing—and especially learning by doing. The disciples still have much to learn
about Jesus’ mission,¹³ and yet they are asked to participate in it; while there is a pedagogical
accommodation of observed learning, they are not afforded the option of a sequestered learning-
space, sheltered from Judea’s pain and suffering. Discipleship is learned by going, experiencing,
seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, experiencing.¹⁴

Perkins himself exemplifies this. After having long resisted faith while growing up, as an
adult in California he began to listen to something stirring within him, something that he began
to pursue. But as this pursuit evolved into faith, it soon became clear to him that this faith would
not allow him to remain where he was, in relative safety. It in fact compelled him to move his
family back to Mississippi, the home that he had escaped, the land where he watched his older
brother murdered by police, now a community energized with hatred in the wake of Brown v.
Board. Now bringing his faith back with him, he successfully sought to form a community of
loving resistance against the political and psychosocial metanarratives of racism, thus becoming
one of the U.S.’s many heroes during the Civil Rights era.

Neither Perkins’ story, nor anyone else’s, need be perfectly conformed to the precise
pattern found in the gospel-narratives. Generally applying this “script,” however, suggests that
for the disciple there is an encountering of God (a being-called) that impels the encountering of
real people and communities (a being-sent)—but both encounters are inherently relational and
missional. “In the other, there is a real presence of God” (Levinas);¹⁵ to hear and respond to God
is thus to hear and respond to others. Yet real relationship takes time, and takes a commitment to be with others and to learn from them, which requires more than a fleeting “encounter.”
“Following” thus reminds us of this processual and pedagogical quality to discipleship. Jesus’
message regarding the “reign of God” moreover reminds us that following is also distinctly

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¹² Wenger and Lave speak of social learning in terms of “legitimate peripheral participation,” referring to the ways
that new members can gradually develop their mastery of a community’s engagements and a fluency in its shared
repertoire. New members learn by doing, through intermediate activities that approximate some form of full
membership, until that full membership is attained or granted. See Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, Situated

¹³ The narrative of Luke, according to Tannehill, makes clear the fact that the disciples continued to demonstrate
many deficiencies in their understanding; see e.g. Tannehill, The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts, 253-274.

¹⁴ Tilley in reference to Walter Ong mentions that “catholic” (katholikos) is better understood as “through and
through” rather than “everywhere”; the truly catholic church therefore is the “‘leaven in the lump’” that dies if it is
never fully kneaded into the dough of the world (Tilley, The Disciples’ Jesus, 186).

¹⁵ As quoted in Terry A. Veling, Practical Theology: “On Earth as It Is in Heaven” (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), 118.
political. But if this is a political contrast-community, it is one that operates precisely by locating its primary identity in being in relationship with and seeking the fullness of life for others, and not by consolidating its own power or by neatly defining its own identity-markers.

II. The Double Bind of Discipleship-as-Solidarity for the Privileged.

If we consider Perkins to be instructive to the present-age, particularly in the context of the United States, we should consider his own explanation of the goals of discipleship, according to what he calls his “three R’s” of community development: Relocation, Redistribution, and Reconciliation. A holistic approach to the gospel in this approach involves: a “living involvement” that “turns poor people from statistics into our friends” (relocation), working together with the poor in order to create greater sociopolitical and economic equality for them (redistribution), and directly yet lovingly confronting the barriers to justice in order to seek greater mutual awareness of and respect for our common human interconnectivity, including but not limited to repentance and forgiveness (reconciliation). These three principles have guided Perkins’ work with the Christian Community Development Association, and indeed his entire life. They certainly concur with the notions of “following” and “being sent,” suggested by the discipleship-script.

Here the real “cost of discipleship” emerges, especially in regards to the (post)Christendom U.S. context from which I write. The renewed focus upon discipleship post-Bonhoeffer generally corresponded with theology’s turn to the subject, its renewed emphasis on the ethics and practices of faith, and the asserting of the “response-ability” (a la Levinas) of the Christian faith community to be in solidarity with those on the margins of society. Yet even now, eight decades after Bonhoeffer, these communities themselves continue to embody these theological developments inconsistently, to say the least. Embodying the character of the peripatetic community of disciples—that follows Jesus into the crowds and into homes, that relocates itself in concrete ways, etc.—will invariably require a different modus operandi than most communities currently possess. Per Perkins himself, “if the gospel of reconciliation is going to interrupt the brokenness in our society, our churches are going to have to rethink their vocation.”

Institutional churches, whether evangelical, mainline, or Catholic, do substantial good in the world—although much of it goes underreported. Many in fact actively pursue solidarity, a term used to describe the proper response of all Christians towards the poor and oppressed.

17 E.g. see Bruggemann et al., Word that Redescribes, 94.
20 As quoted by Marsh, The Beloved Community, 108.
Formal definitions aside, pending on the specific context and who is speaking, the term in the U.S. is often used to frame varying forms of engagement, from communal prayer, to awareness-building, to making proclamations or public denunciations of oppression, to a community’s informal or formal participation in acts of protest and/or civil disobedience.

As with the early sixties when Perkins answered the call to discipleship, we in the U.S. currently live under a political climate that has rendered it impossible for churches to circumvent the question of whether or not it will be a church of solidarity. Even in considering the ways we must continue to grow, I do believe that recent examples, displayed from Ferguson, Missouri to Charlottesville, Virginia, exemplify an increasing momentum among faith communities and leaders to “follow” God’s call beyond the (relative) safety of the church’s walls. Churches that have made progress, and have taken concrete steps to increase their sense of solidarity with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed, should indeed be commended. Admittedly, no “script” or threefold model can overcome the fact that societal change is messy, hardly straightforward, and never complete. And personally I am exceedingly proud that my journey of discipleship has led me, following my ordained spouse, to claim a tradition, the United Church of Christ, one that on the whole has sought to confront headlong the monster of racism (as well as that of sexism, economic disparity, colonialism, heteronormativity, ecological devastation, etc.)

But from my own limited perspective, both Perkins’ life of discipleship and model for ministry have nevertheless continued to challenge me. It is a challenge that I for one cannot simply resolve by the word “solidarity” (or at least a reduced notion of it), or even with the wonderful and necessary actions of solidarity that my denomination, and many other traditions, are enthusiastically taking. This challenge when unrecognized can be experienced as a “double bind,” to borrow a term from psychology. In its original context, a double bind promotes inertia, fear of change, unwillingness to “stir the pot,” and/or immersing oneself in distractions. These qualities might well describe many a faith community today.\(^{21}\)

On the one hand, disciples follow and are sent, to offer works of generosity and compassion to the poor, as well as to take formal stands for justice—but also, to be in relationship with the poor. When encountered by the face of the other, that is only the beginning of a mutual journey. Perkins’ call for “relocation” and his call for “friendship” implies this: For a community to collectively display authentic concern for the poor and oppressed, this requires a genuine, sustained connection with the marginalized. Giving to causes that are on-the-ground, or participating in social media campaigns and economic boycotts, or calling representatives and picketing city halls, etc., are all necessary activities. But a vision for discipleship as the missio inter gentes implies that these activities can never replace the need for our relationship, our real human interconnection, with the poor. There is something deeply lacking in simply being struck

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\(^{21}\) Note that explaining some forms of church stagnation or paralysis, particularly in privileged contexts, in terms of a “double bind” is in no way intended to recuse such communities of their responsibility to oppression and suffering.
by the deontological imperative created by the encounter of the other, and then being dispassionately compelled by blind obligation. We must go, experience, see, hear, touch, taste, and experience our ontological oneness and interdependence with the poor. And like the original disciples, we can only learn by doing, and so we cannot simply wait until we deemed ourselves “ready” to venture forth.

And yet, there are problems with naïve notions of being “sent,” as well. There is the obvious practical issue with taking Perkins’ practice of “relocating” to the mission field of his home state, and trying to apply it in some literal way to every Christian with varying degrees of privilege. Not everyone will relocate permanently, even if only to the less economically-advantaged areas of our present towns and cities (although perhaps a more radical, grassroots strategy of widespread “relocation” and “redistribution” together, might be a worthy endeavor). But even beyond this, there are additional difficulties. Christian history contains far too many examples of “sentness” serving as a divine cover for neocolonial behavior. And as liberation theologians such as Cone have shown, white- and otherwise-privileged persons, even if they are well-intentioned, might engage and seek “reconciliation” with the other, but often do so on their own terms and in accordance with their own agendas. It cannot be underemphasized that any requirement imposed upon people or communities that have been historically marginalized to build relationship, to forgive or to reconcile, or to accept “help” in whatever form on the terms of the privileged—is itself yet another form of marginalizing privilege. Even progressive Christians who fancy themselves to be “enlightened” can still be guilty of this—if they lose sight of the relational and dialogical character of discipleship, that is.

III. Communities of Solicitude: A Tentative Way Forward.

This essay is ultimately one that seeks to raise questions, more so than it does to answer them. A discipleship-oriented perspective returns Christian identity back to the ground from whence it came, to the level of concrete experience with God and others, specifically the marginalized. Yet a true missio inter gentes must somehow be with others, including the poor, in non-superficial, yet also non-controlling ways. Relationship—specifically a dialogical relationship in which the dangerous stories (Metz) of both marginalization and of bystanding and/or oppression can be told—is the means by which this tension is navigated. It is not any kind of relationship either; in my own research on the subject, I have taken to calling it a “narratival” relationship, or a “story-exchange.” Paul Ricoeur’s narrative ethical philosophy has played a prominent role in shaping this perspective for me. For Ricoeur, the ethical aim of the “good life, with and for others, in just institutions,” is pursued via in environments characterized by what he calls solicitude—a “narratival solidarity,” perhaps. This is solidarity that recognizes and illuminates the narratival and cumulatively-transformative character of human relationality. The “supreme test” of

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22 James Cone, God of the Oppressed (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), 207.
23 Paul Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, trans Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University Press, 1992), 172, emphasis in text.
solicitude is the presence of moments of “authentic reciprocity of exchange which, in the hour of agony, finds refuge in the shared whisper of voices or the feeble embrace of clasped hands.”

The reason solicitude is interesting to me is that it rings true of my own personal experiences of (what I believed to be) genuine mutuality. We experience solicitude, not only when we are encountered by the other, but also when we sustain or re-enter that reverence beyond a moment of initial encounter. In solicitude, empathy that is not (as) tainted by the condescending spirit of one’s privilege becomes possible. This is because it is an empathy that cannot be disengaged from the actual other-as-person. While one increasingly gains a “knowing” (in the relational sense) of the other’s story, one also gains an ever-increasing depth of awareness with regards to the other’s otherness, that cannot be overwhelmed by sameness or self-assurance of knowing. Our deepest relationships—our significant others, our families—testify to this possibility, that the more we know someone, the more we realize how little we know them, and that this precludes our capacity to “grasp” them or to violate the mystery of their personhood. Ricoeur expresses this as the “lack dwell[ing] at the heart of the most solid friendship.” This very lack, when acknowledged, precludes the possibility of any one ever truly possessing an other. When this impossibility itself becomes celebrated as a gift by all involved, you have solicitude.

Solicitude is the recognition that everyone has a story, that that story has not yet been finished, and that by engaging others in story-exchanges we are sharing sacred parts of ourselves. It is present where there is empathy but not presumption, vulnerability but not self-abnegation. It is what enables bystanders to begin to accept their personal and systemic complicities in unjust systems without ever succumbing to the illusion that they are “free from racism/etc.” It is the moment when the oppressed dares to risk to share from their own experiences of injustice, and claim their right and space to do so. It is the spirit of ubuntu (Tutu), the recognition that we belong to each other, that we are caught up in each other, even as we do not subsume each other.

Of course, this perspective is difficult to come by. This is where religious education comes in. But the nurturing of solicitude, as the journey of discipleship, takes time. It requires intensive self-reflection and willingness to confront one’s own darkness. Also, this kind of interaction faces the challenge of a globalist, virtual age, where in social media we engage otherness with breadth but with less depth, separated by the barriers of distance and with the “safety” of anonymity. Real listening and attending to each other—and for that matter, real sincerity and vulnerability in our self-disclosures—are muscles that U.S. adults need not exercise all that much, making the task of narratival religious education all the more daunting.

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24 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, 191.
25 Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, 187 (text in italics).
But in conclusion, I would tentatively suggest an intermediate step, not unlike that of the initial following of disciples that provided the necessary space for their learning and for mutual transformation: Creating alternative communal spaces that permit opportunities for new kinds of story-exchanges. This “strategy” can take myriad forms. Churches, or churches together with other faith communities, can gather together; a group from a church can have open picnics in the city park where anyone can participate; an intentional community or co-housing arrangement is formed; etc. etc. The group can simply be about the sharing at first, or it can take action together and then gather again to reflect together. The format of gatherings can be more formal (an invited speaker) or informal/casual; the stories shared can be oral, performed, re-enacted, artistically depicted, etc. (If food can be shared, this is always a plus.) Whatever the structure or method, the key is that new communities are formed in unlikely ways and in unlikely places, and that people of faith are encouraged to come and share their stories, and to receive the stories of others. Solicitude might take a long time to develop among the individuals in a community; yet community leaders, to paraphrase Parker Palmer, can still create spaces where reverence to people’s stories is practiced. In this participants begin to learn by doing. (Part of the belief here is that, following narrative psychologists as well as Ricoeur, engaging the narrative consciousness itself invokes a “detour” of the mind that can uniquely impel change and/or new ways of thinking.)

Again, this is a tentative, even if flexible, proposal. There are multiple aspects of such gatherings that must be dutifully considered, only some of which can be summarized here: The means by which such communities are created are critical to whether or not solicitude will be rightly encouraged. Whenever possible the initial formation should be a shared effort between leaders of involved communities, and the spirit of inclusion should always be one of invitation and openness. Despite the emphasis on equal respect, prejudices and biases must be appropriately confronted in such spaces. Conflict must not be encouraged but also not stifled, so long as people’s lives and stories continue to be upheld as sacred. Leaders themselves will likely need to possess certain skills in facilitating the transformative movements of the narratival consciousness in participants (which I attempt to explore in my forthcoming dissertation).

Despite the challenges, the modest suggestion here is that Christian religious educators find creative ways to forge new kinds of communities that facilitate compelling and relevant encounters across differences. In so doing, mutual learning occurs in the context of the formation of friendships, characterizes by a solicitude that refuses to subsume all difference under sameness. These communities and relationships can serve to accompany the various inspired works of solidarity already being conducted by our most active and vibrant faith communities, or it can serve to energize the life of communities whose collective sense of discipleship has largely

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atrophyed, and to spur concrete acts of solidarity. Either way, in the end human beings give ourselves to what they care about, and to those whom they care about. In the course of forming new friendships, new unforeseen kinds of relocation, redistribution, and/or reconciliation—i.e., solidarity—might be imagined, discovered, and practiced.

Bibliography/Consulted Works