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Discipleship and Narrative Metaphor

Abstract

"If the Bible is the guiding rule of faith for God's people, then narrative metaphors for discipleship should be those which have some substantial root in Scripture and the story of God's people."

Posting about the role of story in Christian discipleship from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Donald Roth

Have you ever felt that you really understood something yet lacked the words to express that understanding? Sometimes, I can almost tangibly feel the contours of an idea in my head, but it seems impossible to move that multifaceted thing from my mental space through my mouth and out into the world without doing violence to that understanding. This is because, as I described in my [previous piece](#), the language of thought is not made up of words but of imagery, especially metaphors. Our entire understanding is a tapestry of metaphors and associations woven together into new forms.

In other words, it's not only possible but natural to be able to *feel* the definition of something, especially if the concept is important to us, even if we can't *express* everything that feeling entails. This series is trying to unpack the concept of discipleship, with "discipline" as a root word in that concept. The last article explored the phenomenon of self-discipline, but I want to reframe our inquiry today by unpacking some contours that make up the concept of discipleship itself; then, in the next piece, we'll tie these concepts together.

We are Living Stories

In thinking about which dimensions of meaning are most compelling to us, those that have a sense of causation, purpose, or direction take center stage. According to Steven Pinker, causation and intent are fundamental ways that we see the world.¹ Clinical psychologist Jonathan Adler takes this further by [saying](#) "the default mode of human cognition is a narrative mode." As a simple illustration, think of a character on a TV show asking, "Could this day get any worse?" What comes next? Cue the thunder and sudden downpour.

Our brain's amazing ability to generate abstract understanding by weaving together metaphor and inference means that we're always looking for connections between things. We naturally sense that our lives have some purpose, some meaning, so it's natural that we would fill the content of our self-concept with metaphor which carries with it a sense of purpose, some way of fitting into the bigger picture. This is especially true when it comes to aspects of ourselves that have a natural cosmic dimension, like our religious beliefs.

As essayist Joan Didion [says](#), "[w]e tell ourselves stories in order to live." Unfortunately, the concept of being a disciple has a necessarily abstract dimension (since we cannot literally sit ourselves at the feet of Jesus). In other words, while discipleship is essential to how we think of ourselves as Christians, thinking of what it means to *be* a disciple requires drawing on metaphors which carry inferences of feeling that we can weave together into something more concrete. So, what stories do we tell ourselves in order to live as disciples?

We imagine Discipleship through Narrative Metaphor

If you're having trouble buying what I'm getting at so far, just look at how Jesus communicated during His ministry. Rather than making theological treatises on what His disciples were to do, He spoke in metaphor. He began countless parables and other explanations with the familiar phrase "the kingdom of God is like..." and His disciples carried on that tradition as apostles. We probably don't even think of the powerful associational and definitional effect of calling ourselves brothers and sisters or naming God our Father, but for those who lack those categories or who have strained relationships with their fathers, these connections can fall flat or even impede understanding.

Among all of these metaphors, however, I think there are certain concepts that strike more closely at how we define the concept of discipleship, concepts which carry the felt inferences needed to give concrete weight to the term. I call these *narrative metaphors*.

As a general matter, narrative metaphors are mental images which have a tangible basis in our contemporary experience, contain an element of human agency, and which are sufficiently prevalent to make up a piece of the imaginative schema of the culture we inhabit. In other words, if we were told to improvise a character in a play, narrative metaphors represent the roles we could act out after a one-word prompt.

When it comes to discipleship, we can narrow down the scope of the major narrative metaphors based on the factors I just outlined. While there's great value in thinking of ourselves as [sheep](#) or [trees](#), few of us have significant contact with sheep, and neither option involves a human actor. Returning to the improv analogy, you might be able to do a sheep impression (as I regularly do while reading to my children), but how does a sheep raise his kids? When presented with a conflict between friendship and ethics, what does a sheep do? Such metaphors are valuable, but limited.

At the same time, we don't have an entirely open universe of metaphors out there. If the Bible is the guiding rule of faith for God's people, then narrative metaphors for discipleship should be those which have some substantial root in Scripture and the story of God's people. If the Bible is the story of God's people, then it also presumably provides a strong guide to what sorts of roles those people play when they have to do the day-to-day improvisation of acting out love for God and neighbor.

In studying this subject over the past few years, I've come to theorize that there are in fact about eight major narrative metaphors when it comes to discipleship:

1. Exiles – Associated strongly with Judah in Babylonian Exile.
2. Pilgrims – Associated with the yearning for and journey to Zion, ideas which are particularly prominent in the Psalms.
3. Messengers – Associated with the prophets who spoke of God's expectations and judgment.
4. Harvesters – Associated with imagery such as “fishers of men.”
5. Ambassadors – Emphasis on believers as representatives of the Kingdom of God.
6. Slaves – Emphasis on believers in submission to the Kingdom of God.
7. Soldiers – Emphasis on believers in war against the enemies of the Kingdom of God.
8. Builders – Emphasis on believers as agents building up the Kingdom of God.

Again, these are not the only metaphors out there, but these roles are frequently either cited or alluded to by people talking about discipleship, and I believe that this list comprehensively straddles a number of important tensions that exist in our faith. For instance, in delineating the important relation of faith and deeds in the Christian's life, the first four major metaphors tend to emphasize the role of the Word (especially when preached), while the second four emphasize some sort of action.

We'll unpack this more in my next piece as we think about how we can integrate the concept of narrative metaphor into the concept of how we operate to think about living as disciples in our modern context; but, for now, I invite you to reflect on these specific metaphors. Which ones resonate more or less strongly for you? Are there important ones which seem to be missing? How would your preferences for one of these metaphors shape how you think of discipleship? Please share your thoughts.

Footnotes

1. [The Stuff of Thought](#) at 26. ←