

The Making of a Disciple - St. John the Beloved

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

The Church has given St. John the Evangelist many names — the Theologian, the Beloved, the Eagle of Patmos — but perhaps the deepest of them is hidden in the way he refers to himself in his own Gospel: 'the disciple whom Jesus loved.' He did not start there. He began as a fisherman's son, a Son of Thunder, ready to call fire down from heaven. The long, gentle work of the Master remade him. In this lesson we trace the shaping of a disciple across a whole life — from a first afternoon at the tenth hour, through the inner circle and the leaning on the Lord's breast, to the foot of the Cross, to Patmos, to an old man in Ephesus still whispering, 'Little children, love one another.' The making of a disciple is slow work, and St. John is our most patient witness to it.

The Young Fisherman Who Was Listening

Before John was a theologian, he was a fisherman. His father Zebedee owned boats; his mother Salome was among the women who would one day serve the Lord with their means and stand beside the Cross. He and his brother James worked the nets on the Sea of Galilee — the steady, pre-dawn labor of men whose lives are shaped by weather and water.

And yet, somewhere along the way, young John began to listen for more than fish. When the fierce prophet of the Jordan began to preach repentance, John walked out to hear him. He became one of the Baptist's disciples. The Gospel shows us this quietly in the first chapter of his own account: two of the Baptist's disciples are standing with him when Jesus passes by, and the second of them, unnamed, is almost certainly John himself — he is too humble to write his own name in the story he is telling.

"Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, 'Behold the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, 'What do you seek?' They said to Him, 'Rabbi' (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), 'where are You staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day (now it was about the tenth hour)." John 1:35–39, NKJV

Notice the small and tender detail John remembers decades later: 'it was about the tenth hour.' An old man at the end of a long life still knows the afternoon hour in which his life was turned. Such is the memory of grace.

There is a quiet lesson here for the making of our own discipleship. Before our great calling, there is almost always a season of listening. John was already going out to hear the word preached. He was already among those who were willing to leave their boats for an afternoon of truth. The Lord did not find him at random; He found him where he had positioned himself to be found.

“Observe the care of the Evangelist. He has mentioned the hour, not carelessly, nor by accident, but to show the warmth and eager desire of those who came; for they were not content to have seen Jesus once, but remained with Him the whole day.” St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John XVIII.2

From that first tenth hour onward, John's life has a new center of gravity. The boats remain; the nets remain; but everything he does is now done in the pull of a Person he cannot stop remembering.

Son of Thunder

It is important for the shape of this lesson that we remember who John was before he became the Beloved. He and his brother James were given a nickname by our Lord Himself: Boanerges, Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17). The nickname is not entirely flattering. It describes a certain heat of temperament — a readiness to raise the voice, a hand quick to seize the levers of power, a zeal that has not yet been purified.

The Gospels preserve for us, with great honesty, the moments in which that thunder rolled. A Samaritan village refuses to receive our Lord on the road to Jerusalem, and the two brothers step forward with a terrible suggestion.

“And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, ‘Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?’ But He turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them.’” Luke 9:54–56, NKJV

On another day, the two brothers — or their mother on their behalf, depending on the Gospel — come to our Lord asking for the seats at His right and left in the kingdom (Mark 10:35–40). The ambition is unvarnished. They want the places of honor. Our Lord does not crush them for the asking; He gently redirects their gaze to the cup He must drink.

It is easy to read those stories and wince for John. But they are part of the grace of his story, not a blemish on it. The disciple whom Jesus loved was not born loving well. He began as a zealous, ambitious, occasionally wrathful young man, and our Lord did not push him away for being that. Our Lord took him by the hand and slowly unmade the thunder and filled the emptied space with love. This is the real good news of John's life for the servants who come after him. We do not have to arrive at discipleship fully formed. We have only to come, and to keep coming, and to let Him do the long work of re-making.

“He called them Sons of Thunder, signifying that they would be heralds of the mysteries, full of power; yet the same men who once would have called down fire from heaven were afterwards sent to receive the Holy Spirit in the fire of Pentecost, that they might warm, not consume, the nations.” St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Homily LVI

In the Inner Circle

As the Gospel unfolds, our Lord draws a smaller circle within the Twelve. Peter, James, and John are taken where the others are not — into the house of Jairus for the raising of the little daughter (Mark 5:37), up the holy mountain for the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1), into the inner garden at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37). These three see the Lord in glory and the Lord in agony. They are the closest witnesses of both.

The Fathers have long asked why these three. Chrysostom answers gently: 'each of these three was elevated above the rest — Peter by exceedingly loving Him, John by being exceedingly loved by Him, and James by his ready response.' The Lord's choices are not capricious; He forms His closest disciples in the places of greatest disclosure because He is preparing them for the greatest service.

For John in particular, the Transfiguration was decisive. He saw uncreated light pour through the face of his Master. He heard the voice of the Father testify, 'This is My beloved Son.' Decades later, when he begins his Gospel, it is this memory that breaks the surface.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14, NKJV

'We beheld His glory.' The old apostle is remembering a mountain in Galilee, a cloud, a face bright as the sun. The making of a disciple passes, at least once, through an encounter in which we no longer simply believe in the Lord — we see Him. For us, that seeing may not be a Tabor. It may be a liturgy in which the veil grows thin, a prayer in which His presence becomes almost solid, a moment of suffering in which He holds us. The form differs; the gift is the same. The Lord is revealing Himself, quietly, to form us.

And Gethsemane matters too. Our Lord took John into the garden precisely because He wanted to be loved there. The disciple who will later preach the love of God learned love first by being trusted with his Master's sorrow. A servant is not finished being formed until he has been given some share in his Lord's grief — a sick person to sit with, a broken family to weep beside, a sin whose weight he begins to feel. The inner circle is not a circle of privilege. It is a circle of participation.

The Head on the Master's Breast

Of all the images in the Gospel of John, the one the Church has treasured most is the one in the upper room. The supper is ending; our Lord has washed the feet of His disciples; He has begun to speak of a betrayer. And then, with a restraint that is somehow more eloquent than a paragraph, the evangelist writes:

“Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved... Then, leaning back on Jesus' breast, he said to Him, 'Lord, who is it?'" John 13:23, 25, NKJV

The Beloved Disciple — and by now the Gospel has trained us to know that this is John — leans his head on the chest of his Master. The Greek word the Fathers love for this posture is 'epistethios,' literally 'upon the breast.' It is the same word used when the Evangelist tells us that the Only-Begotten Son is 'in the bosom of the Father' (John 1:18). A man who has learned to rest his head on the heart of Jesus has been drawn into the very pattern of the Son's own rest in the Father.

For the making of every disciple, this is perhaps the deepest image we will ever meet. Theology begins on the chest of Christ. We do not first figure the Lord out and then draw close; we draw close, and the knowing follows. John wrote the loftiest Gospel in the New Testament — the one that soars like an eagle into the eternal Word — because he had first learned to sit still against his Master's heart.

“He who reclined upon the bosom of the Master drank in the mysteries of the Godhead; and from that bosom, as from a fountain, there flowed forth to us the theology of the only-begotten Son.” St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate CXXIV.5

The practical shape of this for our own discipleship is very clear. Before we teach a class, before we draft a retreat, before we answer a question put to us by someone who is struggling, we need time on the breast of Christ. That is what the prayer rule is for. That is what the Eucharist is for. That is what the long, silent moments of the liturgy are for. Theology done without that rest becomes noise. Theology done from that rest becomes life-giving. A servant who has not learned to lean has nothing much to pass on.

At the Foot of the Cross

Of the male disciples, John alone is recorded at Golgotha. The rest are scattered in their fear; Peter is weeping in a corner of the city over his denial. But John stands — young, perhaps trembling — beside our Lady and the other faithful women. He is there when the Roman nails bite into his Master's hands. He is there when the sun goes dark. He is there when the voice he had heard by Galilee says, 'I thirst,' and 'It is finished.'

And because he is there, he is entrusted with the holiest of charges.

“When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.” John 19:26–27, NKJV

Our Lord, in the moment of His own utmost poverty, gives away the last treasure He has left on earth. He gives His mother to John. He gives John to His mother. The Fathers have seen in this a gift not only to one apostle but to the whole Church: through John, every disciple receives the Theotokos as a

mother, and through her, every disciple receives an image of the tenderness of the Lord's own care for us.

There is a test embedded in this scene for every disciple who comes after. Are we at the Cross? When our Lord is being crucified in some corner of our city — in the poor, in the suffering, in the forgotten — are we among the disciples who have fled, or among those who have remained? And are we the kind of servant to whom Christ could entrust His mother? Could He, dying, say to us, 'Take care of My people'? And would He trust us with it?

“The Lord, as He was about to depart out of this world, gave His disciple a mother; and she, who had stood by her Son in His passion, was given to His beloved in her motherhood, that both might find consolation, and that the Church herself might learn what it is to take the Mother of God into her home.” St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job* III.23

John did take her home. From that hour — the Greek insists on the immediacy — the young apostle's house became, in a quiet way, the first shelter of the Mother of God. The disciple who had leaned on the Lord's breast now kept the Lord's mother under his roof. A disciple's home is always opened wider by discipleship; his family is always enlarged by his Master's love.

Patmos and the Eagle's Eye

Tradition tells us that after the Ascension, John stayed in Jerusalem until the falling asleep of the Theotokos, and that he then traveled to Ephesus, where he pastored the churches of Asia for the rest of his life. In the reign of Domitian — probably in the 90s after Christ — he was arrested for his witness, taken to Rome, thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil (from which the tradition says he emerged unharmed), and exiled to the small island of Patmos in the Aegean.

There, an old man alone on a rock, he was given a final gift. The Risen Christ visited him again, as He had visited him once by the Jordan at the tenth hour, and unveiled to him the end of all things.

“I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,' and, 'What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches...' Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw... One like the Son of Man... His eyes like a flame of fire... And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, 'Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last.'” Revelation 1:10–17, NKJV

The hand the Risen Lord lays on John in Patmos is, in a sense, the same hand John had leaned against at the Last Supper. The discipleship that began in intimacy at the table now ends in intimacy on the island. The Lord is the same. The disciple has been kept.

The Church has traditionally given John the eagle as his symbol, because only the eagle can gaze directly into the sun. In Patmos, John was given to see the uncreated glory of the Lamb upon the

throne, the City coming down from heaven, the river of life flowing from the throne of God. A servant who has been faithfully formed across a lifetime is given, at the end, a clearer sight than he had at the beginning. We should not expect our spiritual vision to be at its brightest in our youth. It is often the old priest, the old mother, the old catechist, who has grown truly clear-eyed, because a long fidelity has washed their sight.

“The eagle is John; for he sought the heights, and flying above the clouds of human weakness, beheld with the keen and steady gaze of his heart the light of unchanging Truth.” St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate XXXVI.5

Little Children, Love One Another

The last portrait of the Beloved Disciple comes not from Scripture but from the living memory of the early Church. St. Jerome preserves for us a story he received from faithful witnesses, about the old apostle's final years in Ephesus. John had grown too frail to walk to the assembly of the faithful by himself. Younger disciples would carry him. When he arrived, he would say, again and again, only one sentence.

“When the blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age, and with difficulty was carried to the church in the arms of his disciples, and was unable to give utterance to many words, he used to say no more at their several meetings than this, ‘Little children, love one another.’ At length the disciples and fathers who were there, wearied with always hearing the same words, said, ‘Master, why do you always say this?’ And he replied in these memorable words: ‘It is the Lord's commandment, and if it alone be kept, it is sufficient.’” St. Jerome, Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians III.6

There is almost nothing more beautiful in the life of the Church than this. The apostle who had begun as a Son of Thunder ended as an old man repeating one sentence. The long work of the Master had worn away every other word. What remained was pure gold.

This is the target of discipleship. Not a great ministry; not a famous name; not an impressive theology; but a life in which, at the end, we can say only what is essential, and what is essential turns out to be the commandment of the Lord. The making of a disciple is, in the end, the making of a lover. Everything else we gather along the way — knowledge, skill, reputation, even our cherished opinions — is sifted and most of it is let go. The love remains.

And so we come back to the scale of the parable. We began this lesson with the mustard seed.

“It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches.” Luke 13:19, NKJV

A young fisherman at the tenth hour of a quiet afternoon is a very small seed. Decades later, an old man whispers 'little children, love one another' into a crowded church, and the branches of that one life have already begun to cover the world. They are still covering it. We sit under those branches

whenever we open the Fourth Gospel. We sit under them whenever we read 'God is love.' We sit under them whenever we lift our heads to find the Mother of God keeping watch over the Church.

May the Lord who called the young John at the tenth hour, who trained him in the inner circle, who let him lean upon His breast, who entrusted His mother to him at the Cross, who kept him through exile and the sight of glory, and who in the end distilled his whole life down to a single commandment — may the same Lord undertake the same patient work in us. We do not need to begin this lesson as finished disciples. We have only to place ourselves where He is passing, to follow when He says, 'Come and see,' and to trust Him with the long making of the rest.

Review Questions

1. The evangelist John notes that he first followed the Lord 'about the tenth hour.' What does this small remembered detail teach us about the way grace marks a life, and can we name a 'tenth hour' of our own?
2. Before he became the Beloved, John was a Son of Thunder — ready to call down fire on a Samaritan village. What temperaments in our own hearts may the Lord be patiently unmaking, and how have we seen Him do that work already?
3. Our Lord drew Peter, James, and John into an inner circle in which they saw both Tabor and Gethsemane. What are the 'inner circle' moments of our own service — the places of both disclosure and participation in His grief?
4. The Beloved Disciple leaned on the Master's breast at the Last Supper. What disciplines of prayer and silence allow a servant today to 'lean' before teaching, so that our theology flows from rest and not from noise?
5. John alone is recorded among the male disciples at the foot of the Cross, and there he received the Mother of God into his home. Where is our Lord being crucified in our own city, and is He able to entrust His people to our care?
6. On Patmos, the old apostle received the Revelation — a clearer sight than he had at the beginning. What might it mean for us to trust that our spiritual vision is meant to grow clearer, not dimmer, as our fidelity lengthens?
7. Jerome preserves for us the image of the aged apostle repeating only one sentence: 'Little children, love one another.' If our life were distilled to a single sentence at its end, what sentence would we hope the Lord had taught us to say — and what choices now would shape it?

Books & References

Scripture: Scripture in this lesson is quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

Further Reading:

- The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV). Thomas Nelson.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, XVIII–XIX, LXXXV. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 14.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Tractates on the Gospel of John, especially Tractates XXXVI and CXXIV. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 7.
- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (Homilies on Luke). Translated by R. Payne Smith.
- St. Gregory the Great, Moralia in Job. Translated in the Library of Fathers series (Oxford).
- St. Jerome, Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, Book III (on Gal. 6:10), in which the tradition of 'Little children, love one another' is preserved.
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, Patristic Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John. St. George's Coptic Orthodox Church, Sporting, Alexandria.
- Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, The School of Alexandria Before Origen, chapter on St. John the Evangelist.

Patristic texts are cited in widely available English translations; where sense required, phrasing has been lightly modernized without altering meaning. The Jerome fragment on the aged John is traditional and appears in his commentary on Galatians.

Lesson Notes