

A Disciple Must Grow

Scripture

Colossians 1:9-10

⁹For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

2 Peter 3:17-18

¹⁷You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. ¹⁸But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.

Sermon

Today I am preaching the fifth sermon in a six-part sermon series which is based on Varnell UMC's new vision which was adopted last year. Let's say the vision again together:

“We will be an anchor in the community that finds great joy in inviting everyone to be disciples of Jesus Christ with us.”

So far, I have preached about why we need a vision, how we are to “be an anchor in the community,” and finding “great joy in inviting everyone to be disciples of Jesus Christ with us.” Last week, I preached about an activity that is to be a part of our lives if we are trying to “be disciples of Jesus Christ,” which was that we must worship. If you missed any of those sermons, I would suggest you go to our church's website. On the website you have the option of watching the sermon or you can download the manuscript and read it.

Today I am going to talk about another activity I believe is vital if people are going to call themselves disciples of Christ.

But before I go into the activity I am going to focus on today, like last week, I need to state, first and foremost, being a disciple of Jesus Christ means you have accepted Jesus as your Lord and savior and are making the decision to now live your life for God. You have seen this wonderful act of love that God has done for us, you have repented of your sins and have accepted the sacrifice Christ made for those sins on the cross. And you have allowed the Holy Spirit to come into your life to begin to transform you and make you into the person God created us all to be, which in reality is a lifelong process.

Once you have accepted the salvation God has freely offered you, being disciples of Jesus Christ means you want to learn from Jesus and find ways to stay close to him. These two imperatives are the very core of true discipleship. These two requirements were essential for Christ's disciples while he was alive and are also necessary for followers of Christ today. The area I talked about last week, the one I am going to address today, and the final one next week are areas or activities in which we can do just this: learn from Jesus and find ways to stay close to him.

The second area I want to talk about is that a true disciple takes the initiative to grow.

[Read 1 Colossians 1:9-10 and 2 Peter 3:17-18]

How many of you love babies? They are small and cuddly. They make cute noises and just seem in awe of the world, don't they? I mean there is nothing that will make you feel more warm and cuddly inside like as a baby's talking, is there? Most people love babies, but we do not want them to remain that way. If a person was to remain like a baby for 5, 10, or 20 years, it would get very old. It would not be normal. It would be disappointing, and they would eventually lose their cuteness. While there is no one who physically remains a baby for 5, 10, or 20 years, there are some people who have that mental capacity due to disease or a birth defect. But, I do not believe there is one person in this world that would desire that state for anyone. When a baby is born, it is expected that they will grow and experience life. We count on them to learn and become mature human beings.

The same must be said for those who become Christians too. When someone turns to Christ, they must not remain spiritual infants for their entire lives. We Methodists believe that we are not made fully like Christ the instant we ask God to forgive us of our sins and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Instead, following Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "You must be born anew" (John 3:7 RSV), we speak of this conversion as rebirth, new life in Christ, or regeneration. We become like children to enter the Kingdom of God, just as Jesus told us we had to do. But we must understand conversion is really just the beginning of our new life of wholeness, our new relationship with God.

We must not remain like babies, like children in our faith. That would be just as sad as a person remaining like a baby for their whole life. We must do what our scriptures from the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter tell us: we must "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," we must become "filled with the knowledge of God's will." This means we must become more like Christ, we must "go on to perfection," what we Methodists call sanctification.

John Wesley the founder of the Methodist Church, asserted that we Christians are to press on, with God's help, in the path of sanctification, going towards the gift of Christian perfection. The goal of this new life in Christ is for us to be perfected in love, to experience the pure love of God and others, to produce a holiness of heart and life, and to bring about total death to sin in our lives. And we do this by growing: growing in our knowledge of God, growing in our understanding of ourselves, growing in our insights of the world around us, and growing through our experiences while living our Christian lives in the world.

One of the big struggles for us in our world today is coming to the realization that growing in Christ is a life-long practice. There is no quick fix for this. In our world where we have become so accustomed to getting instant gratification for almost anything we want, we sometimes struggle with the fact that growing in grace and knowledge of Christ takes time, most the time a lifetime.

The problem is we want to be like the character Neo in the movie The Matrix. How many of you have ever watched that movie? There is a scene in the movie which plays right into what our desire would be for how we would like to learn or experience things.

For those of you that have never seen the movie, it was a movie set in the future. I will not go into a lot of detail about the movie, but in the movie artificial intelligence basically took over the world and humanity is basically used and controlled by machines and artificial intelligence. In order to communicate with the human brain, these machines had put in a port in the back of the head of each human they controlled where they could make humans see and feel and believe things that were not really happening. It was kind of like all the humans were living in virtual reality. Some humans who had escaped the control of these machines had learned how to use this port to their advantage. They figured out how to upload information almost instantly into the brain. They had something like disks they had created with certain information on them, such as information about operational procedures or science facts or how to do things like fly a helicopter and combat training. All they needed to do was connect a computer to the port in the neck, pop the particular disk needed into the computer, and push a button to almost instantly upload the information on the disk. If you have seen the movie, the one scene I am talking about

is where Neo has been “learning” for a while, and after a final upload, he comes out of something like REM sleep and says, “I know Kung Foo.”

As much as we would like to, we cannot just download the information we need into our brains in a few seconds and know it all. We cannot do it in a week or month or even a year. It takes time to grow. It really is a lifetime of learning, and we can struggle with that because we have so grown accustomed to our instant gratification.

Another thing we have to understand is that no one can just give us the information either. No one can “spoon feed” us this knowledge. I cannot tell you how many times I have seen people come to me or the church and want to be given all the knowledge they need in order to be the best Christian they can be as quickly as possible. And most of the time, they do not want to have to do anything in order to gain the knowledge or they want to do as little as possible. It is like they want to go from being a small baby to a grown, mature adult in an instant. They want someone to give them that perfect sermon or point them to the ultimate scripture or show them that all-inspiring book, other than the Bible, that will instantly open their minds and lives to Christian perfection.

What I usually try and explain to them is in order to learn, we have to put some effort into it. Yes, people can guide us. People can teach us information we need to know. They can share their own personal experiences with us, they can share their knowledge, but ultimately for us to grow, we have to spend time reading, praying, meditating, reflecting. Most of the time we have to experience for ourselves what we have learned. All this takes effort and time on our part.

The problem is we are not really growing or studying if we just come and listen to someone talk about or explain a subject. We might comprehend what is being said. We might remember exactly what is said. But we really have not studied until we put some effort into looking further into what is being taught ourselves. In order to do that, we have to immerse ourselves in the thing we are studying, sometimes physically. Our minds are conformed to what we are studying when we concentrate on the subject, when we perceive what is going on, when we actually participate in something, and when we repeatedly think about it all.

One of the most important things we can do to help us grow in “the knowledge of God’s will” and “of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” is to study God’s Word. In the Gospel of John, Jesus told his disciples and us “If you continue in my word,” or in other words if you study my scriptures, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32). Having good feelings will not free us. Creating and having ecstatic experiences will not free us. Finding a way to pour out our emotions will not free us. Without a knowledge of the truth, without really studying God’s Word and ways of living like Christ, we will never be free. This is true of every area of our human life like school, marriage, human relationships, and especially our spiritual life.

I think one of the biggest problems amongst those who call themselves Christian in our society today is Biblical illiteracy. We Methodists claim to believe the Bible is God’s Word, that it is God’s divinely inspired message to us. Yet research has shown that Christians are not studying it, let alone reading it. A recent research study found only 45 percent of those who regularly attend church read the Bible more than once a week. Over 40 percent of the people attending

read their Bible occasionally, maybe once or twice a month. Almost 20 percent or 1 in 5 churchgoers say they never read the Bible and that number is essentially the same number who read it every day. It is kind of sad that even though people have more access to the Bible today than probably at any other time in Christian history, most know far less about it.

I think that is very sad. We can spend hours upon hours reading posts on Facebook or Twitter or some blog, watching television and movies and internet videos, reading novels or magazines, or just surfing the web each day, but we cannot spend time in God's Word? How are we to know the will of God if we do not know what His Word tells us? We will not and because of this we can be easily misled!

One of the things both Peter and Paul were addressing when they wrote their two letters to those who read them were that they needed to know the scriptures. And not just part of them, but they needed to have a basic understanding of how all the scriptures fit together. They needed this because there were people coming into those early churches, those communities of faith, and they were trying to teach these new Christians false doctrines and beliefs. These false teachers were using scriptures to make their points, but they were also leaving huge portions of those scriptures out, either because they did not know them, or they were trying to teach them something different. They were doing what we call proof texting.

One of my favorite scriptures I like to use when discussing this is Judges 14:2b. The New King James Version translates the scripture in the most interesting way. It says, "Get her for me, for she pleases me well." That is actual scripture. If you have not studied the Bible, you might take what I have quoted one way. But if you have read the entire book of Judges, you might recall that the book tells the stories of some Israelites who kind of acted like kings for Israel, but were not kings. You might recall that chapter 14 is over halfway through the book of Judges and might induce that the scripture is talking about Samson. And if you recall that story, you may recall at some point Samson goes to his parents and asks them to get him a wife. If you have studied the Bible you would understand that was a normal practice of that time period; parents would arrange marriages for their children. That is what this particular scripture is about.

If you just hear the one verse, you come up with one understanding. But if you know the whole story, if you know the context and the reason the scripture was originally used, you get a complete other understanding. And you can only gain that knowledge through studying the whole of Bible, just not parts of it.

I have always said that anyone can use scripture to make just about any point they would like to make, by using just portions of it. There are some very prominent people in our world, some of them who are pastors who have huge followings, who claim to be Christians, who utilize portions of scripture to prove what seems to be logical and reasonable argument, but are really misleading us from the whole truth found within the Old and New Testament scriptures.

The internet, unfortunately, has exponentially amplified this kind of practice. If I had a dollar for every "false teacher" or "false prophet" on the internet, I would be a rich man. But because these people can make their websites look professional and like it comes from a trusted source, people will believe them. And there are some people who actually think everything that can be found on the internet is true and reliable.

The danger always exists that we can lose our spiritual stability by being carried away by false doctrine and practices. We cannot take our spiritual stability for granted. We must grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, who is our Lord. And we must gain that knowledge from trusted and proven sources.

Now when it comes to the Bible, there is a vast difference between the study of Scripture and the devotional reading of Scripture. When we study Scripture, we place a high emphasis upon interpretation. This is when we try to understand who the original text was written to, the situation that was being addressed, and what the author was trying to teach or address. In the devotional reading of Scripture, a higher emphasis is placed upon application. Most of the time, when we read scripture, we try to jump to how we can use it in our lives before we understand what it actually means. When we really study a book of the Bible we should be seeking to be controlled by the intent of the author, not what we want him to say. When we do that, in the end, this process will transform our lives.

But we must not spend all our time just studying the Bible. When we study the nonverbal, we begin to observe the reality in things such as nature, events and actions. We do this by just beginning to pay attention to the things around us and figure out how it all works together. We can see how God works through nature, how He works through the relationships that go on between human beings, and we can even learn things about ourselves. We can study cultures, institutions, and even other religions to understand how we might witness to them. Through all this we learn to ask questions. One of the most important functions for us Christians today is to have the ability to perceive the consequences of various forces in our culture and to be able to make valuable judgments because of them.

I can promise you, growing does produce joy in our lives. Like anything else in our lives, when we begin, we may find it difficult work in the beginning. But the greater our proficiency, the greater our joy will become. Growing, especially by studying the Bible and our relationship with God, is well worth our most serious effort.

And being involved in small groups is where the best growth is accomplished. Worship is not the best place to experience growth, but that is where most people who come to church try to find this growth. Like I said last week, worship is not geared for growing disciples. Worship is supposed to be our response to all the love and grace God has shown and given us. It is about praising, thanking, and kneeling before our God. Small groups are where real growth occurs. For those of you who have grown in your knowledge and wisdom, think where you learned what you did. I can look back and see for me where it was in the youth ministry I grew up in, and the college ministry I attended, and the adult Bible studies I participated in. That was where I did most my growth as a Christian. In small groups you can talk with other Christians, ask questions, and work on things together.

Yes, like anything else, growing can be done individually, but being by yourself makes it much easier to get “of the right path” too. It is with other members of the Body of Christ where the best growth takes place.

We already offer a few ways we Christians can grow together at Varnell UMC, like Sunday School classes, and the men and women’s Bible studies and a couple of other Bible studies

throughout the week. We also have stuff for the children and youth. As we begin to live out this new vision God has for us here at Varnell UMC, we will hopefully be creating more opportunities for us to find ways where we can grow together. Hopefully, this will also include ways in which we can help the community around us grow as well. The idea is we can help engage people who do not actively come to this church. And I hope that each of you will find places you can grow in your faith and knowledge along with the rest of us.

No matter where we are in our spiritual journey, no matter how mature we may think we are, the sinful world will always challenge our faith. We have to understand we still have much room for growth no matter where we are in our spiritual journey. There will most likely never be a point in our life where we cannot use some more growth. If every day we find some way to draw closer to Christ, we will be prepared to stand for truth in any and all circumstances. What we must understand is that God wants us to continue growing in our understanding of Him, His Word, and our lives.

Objective of Sermon

To expand upon Varnell UMC's new vision statement. To discuss that a disciple of Jesus Christ continues growing in their understanding of God, His Word, and their lives.



Sermon Notes

Things I would like to remember from today's sermon:



Prayer Journal

Use this weekly prayer to help you begin your time with God each day:

Replace this text with short prayer to pray for the week.

My Prayers for this week:



Grow-Pray-Study

A Disciple Must Grow

Sermon Notes

Colossians 1:9-10, 2 Peter 3:17-18

I. Heading

- a. Replace with quote.
- b. Replace with quote.

II. Heading

- a. Replace with quote.
- b. Replace with quote.
 - 1. Replace with quote.
 - 2. Replace with quote.
- c. Replace with quote.

III. Heading

- a. Replace with quote.
- b. Replace with quote.

IV. Closing

- a. Replace with quote.
- b. Replace with quote.



Monday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.



Thursday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.



Tuesday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.



Friday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.



Wednesday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.



Saturday – Book C:V-V

Replace this text some short thoughts or questions focused on the daily reading, leaving space at the bottom for notes.

Sources Used

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