

Calvary United Methodist Church
April 7, 2019

INTENTIONAL DISCIPLESCHIP

Rev. Dr. A. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

John 15:1-17

I'll ask our kids to come forward. How are you girls today? Well, I'm glad. And how are you this morning? Come in a little closer.

So, I have a cluster of grapes here. Made sure to wash them. There goes one right now. Come in a little closer, you might get a grape. Do you want a grape? They good? Take one. There you go. Now, just taste it, see what it's like. Is it nice and sweet? Are there seeds in it? What color is it? Grapes are amazing and God has made so many varieties, red and purple and green and some are almost blue. They pretty good? Want another one? Have another one.

Now, you know, a really productive grape vine can have a cluster like this with like seventy-five grapes on them and there is a lot you can really...when you pay attention you learn a lot from these things, right? Grapes have to grow on a (Tree.) A tree? Close. We call it a vine. It's the same principle, but they grow on a vine and the vine has a root and it sends out these branches all over the place and it has to be trained. You have to train a grapevine or it just grows wild, just like when you go to school, they are training. So you discipline yourself and all that and the vine master, the person who takes care of the vine, the vine keeper, he does all the training. Want some more? They are pretty good, right?

And the next thing that happens too is that they have to have a balance between sunlight and the leaves for photosynthesis, which is a fancy term, but that's how they get all their energy from the water in the ground and the sunlight and the air and can't have too many leaves, can't have too few. If you have too many you won't grow grapes you'll grow leaves. If you have too few, you won't grow grapes or leaves, but a really productive vine just is luxurious.

I remember sitting under the vine of one of my friends when I was about your age and we were eating these wonderful Concord grapes. I think I must have eaten like about six clusters like that one day. We just went crazy. His father didn't really like that because we ate all the grapes he was making wine out of, but that's another story.

Now, if you notice that you have to stay connected, but once that's not connected, like that one, what happens? Well, that one has your name on it, so now you have to eat it. So, it has to stay connected to the vine. If you cut it off before they are ripe, then it just doesn't do anything, does it? No, it doesn't. But if it stays connected to the vine (For longer it tastes better.) Well, try it and what do you think? Does it taste pretty good? These stayed just the right amount of time, right? And they taste pretty good. (And if they didn't stay on the vine as long as they should be they wouldn't be as juicy.) They have to be on there just the right amount of time,

that's right.

Now, in the Bible, Jesus talks about this. He says: I'm the vine, you are the branches and if you stay close to me, you will bear much fruit.

He also says that the Father trims the vine and that means sometimes tying the vine up the trellis so that it goes the right way and sometimes it prunes things off that you just don't need. But you do that. Does your mommy cut your fingernails? You don't need them to grow out like that. That would be kind of weird, right? Yeah. So, I mean, that's just the normal part of life. There are some things that serve their usefulness and so with grapes it is the same way.

Now, the neat thing that goes on here is that Jesus wants us to stay connected to the vine so that we get everything we need from him and as we do, he just grows, so it's not like the grape has to say: I'm going to say connected to the vine. It's the vine who says: I want you connected to me until everything is ready and you find your purpose.

Want another one? Have another one. They are pretty good. So, we are part of God's vineyard. Want some more? I bought a lot of grapes to make sure we had enough. And I did wash them, just if you want to know. You want some more? (I can see the water.) Yeah.

So, you stay close to God, you learn from Him. He will nourish you and you will be luxurious on God's vine.

Let's pray: So, thank you, Lord, for our kids and thanks for lessons in life and things like grapes, which we all love. Bless our kids that they may grow and be fruitful in you. Amen.

Now, you can have some fruit snacks too. Unless you want more grapes. Here, wait a second. Your sister didn't get any. You'd better give some to her.

Message

Would you join me in a word of prayer? So, Gracious Lord, help us to hear from you today. These texts are so critical to who we are as we grow in you. So I ask for your blessing and I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts may be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Well, some years ago Shirley and I had a week off. We were going to go down to Bethany Beach and I had a Saturday wedding, so we were going to leave on Sunday. I figured that we could stop and go to a church along the way and I checked out a United Methodist church, but they were meeting at 11 and I wanted to get down the road so I chose a Lutheran church. And that was okay and, you know, it was a full house in that Lutheran church. They were typically Lutheran, not that...I have wonderful Lutheran friends and you know we have full

communion, it would not be difficult to be a Lutheran. Actually it would be kind of a vacation, but anyway, that's another story.

They are not like overly warm. Methodists are a lot warmer. Lutherans are kind of reserved, they have that German thing going on, you know. It was a full house, 300 people or so in the pews. And that church, I found out, was led by co-pastors who had been there a long time and it was an especially good service. I was taken by the way they did a service of anointing and prayer and I thought a few people might go up. But actually half the congregation went up, people carrying their children, old people, young people, teens. I was really impressed.

So when I left there and we headed down the road to Bethany, I thought: I'd like to study that congregation. I found that their co-pastors had been there about 33 years at that time, knew their people, knew their community really well. They had survived a fire that destroyed their building and they led the rebuilding. They seemed to just do everything well. I'd go and visit during the week when I had a little chance and just talk to people.

Two years after my first visit there, the two co-pastors retired. But I continued to study the church. And each time I visited, especially because it took them about two and a half years to replace the pastors, the church was still full. They had two different interims over the course of their two and a half years, but there was no appreciable loss of members or any decline in attendance. Now they did struggle quite a bit to try to find a new pastor, but they maintained their strength and finally they called a pastor whom I know, is a friend of mine, and he is still their pastor. And I was just like really interested in what their secret is of getting through all those kinds of things.

Simply put, after 35 years of a co-pastorate and they've continued today, what they did was they built a very strong Christian Education program. They taught each new member what it means to be a Christian within their tradition. They taught intentional Christian discipleship. They encouraged participation in the weekly Bible studies through the weeknights, at homes and in Sunday School as well. And they trained new leaders very intentionally and very regularly and they had a strong in-reach in their church families and especially to their children. Vacation Bible School people were climbing all over each other to get in and try to help in some way. And there was no appreciable loss in attendance through a time of crisis because they understood the importance of their Christian discipleship.

They had a deep commitment to learning scripture. They knew why they were Christian within their tradition and what that meant for them and my take away was that a stronger church is a church that has a strong program of intentional Christian discipleship.

Now, our founder, John Wesley, he was an Oxford scholar, professor, a very learned person, but he understood the importance of discipleship education, not just knowledge, but discipleship education, that following Jesus is important in that you learn the scriptures. That is a key to spiritual transformation because it's not just about assembling knowledge, it's about

coming to know Jesus personally and going in more depth there.

Wesley, early in his ministry, had a lot of failures. He got thrown out of a lot of Anglican churches. He began preaching in the fields and the roadsides to anybody he could. He got up early in the morning, go visit the coal miners on their way to work. He'd take five minutes and he's talk to them and no one ever did that. He would talk to people out on farms. Sometimes when he would be preaching in the fields, they would let a bull out to chase him away. He had to talk about that and he wrote a lot about that, but many people heard him gladly, these who are our Methodist forbearers. And he began to organize them. He had classes that met for new Christians on Wednesday night. On Thursday nights they had prayer bands. Those were people who are now admitted into the society, they were not a denomination but a society, and they were, as they said, going on to perfection. And Wesley termed perfection as learning to love God and neighbor and yourself the way God created you to do.

Now, at that point in the early industrial revolution, most people were illiterate. If you didn't afford school, you didn't go to school. But Wesley found people to teach reading. He began to found schools for children and children who otherwise would never have had the opportunity to go to school and read or write. He began to organize and it turned out to be a very powerful social force that changed the face of England, but also changed the face of America and many other places. And this emphasis on intentional study for Christian discipleship holds the key, it makes a strong and steady church.

There was an author named Neil Cole who put it this way. Ultimately each church will be evaluated by one thing: its disciples. A church is only as good as its disciples. It doesn't matter how good the praise, the preaching, the programs, the property. If the disciples are passive, needy, consumerists, not moving in the direction of radical obedience to Jesus, church is not a faithful church. That's quite a mouthful, isn't it? But I think that that's a metric by which we can gage ourselves.

I don't need to sell you on the value of Bible study. You are already there. I don't have to sell you on the value of growth groups or Sunday School classes. A better question actually is this: why do we say we have this value but we don't have a strong program for discipleship that leads to real spiritual transformation? There was a day that actually more people went to Sunday School than to worship.

Reams of research confirm that in many ways the lives of most professing Christians aren't very different from their nonbelieving neighbors. Sort of like ancient Israel where they kind of mouthed the words, but they didn't really do it. They just adopted the beliefs and the values, the behaviors of the surrounding culture to the degree that you really couldn't tell the difference between them. And if that is true in our town, I had to sit down. I said: what accounts for that? Well, one reason I think, and I feel very strongly, I know that Pastor Jeff does too, that if the core mission of a church is not kept before the congregation, they don't

know who they are and they don't know what they are about.

If we are to know Christ, we are to make Christ known. But you can't make him known if you really don't know him, if you are not walking with him or you don't know what he's about.

We also lead very busy lives and that's true. People put the career phase of their life out there and then you find that you are stressed by all that stuff that fills your day. And then people retire. Some of you have told me this: I don't know how I had time to do anything when I was working. And adding just one more thing adds a lot more stress on a person. But you have to ask: are you busy doing the things that are best to do? Or are you doing things that really don't add up to much? I mean, really, the Facebook videos; are they really that exciting and central to your life? I watched them too. You see really stupid things. Sometimes you laugh. Silly cat videos, right? I have spent ten minutes at a clip watching silly cat videos. Could I have done something better? Uh, probably.

Well, to some degree, the church has also been influenced by the entertainment industry. We do like to sit back and be entertained. It's just a lot easier. Many people grew up in Sunday School, too, that only taught moral lessons and they dump loads of guilt on kids and youth and adults and they trained them that it's about morality, which means that I have to be better than other people and that's not the Bible. The Bible is not about moral lessons. It's about these encounters people who were complete screw ups had with God and found, just like us, God loves them. It's about the lavish grace of God that's showered upon us and especially upon our children, but I can tell you this...and you know it...moral lessons simply set us up for failure because we'll never be good enough. And the Bible never asks us to be good enough; it asks us to know that God is good enough, great enough, for us, even in our failure.

And then we often make Christian education complicated and too much like school. Now those of you who are school teachers, forgive me, but the vast majority of Sunday School teachers I know do have a great heart for children, for youth and adults. The overwhelming majority of teachers I've known have a deep commitment but we do make it a lot like school. It should be a whole lot more fun.

And leaders in church need to make Christian education a greater priority than even the church finances, and, yes, I just said that. The church finances take the priority and people worry and fret over all of that, but if you teach people what it means to be a disciple, I don't think you are going to have a problem with your finances.

Learning stories in the Bible should be about discovery, about being surprised by the freedom and the grace that God gives. In too many places it is just a chore for teachers and students alike. So you know there is a lot more room for fun in church and in our classes in Sunday School and should just go in there with great joy and really love one another.

I spent a little time with one of my friends and she had been my parishioner two churches ago. Her son, a little boy, was going to Hershey to have his tonsils out and I just stopped in to visit with her. We had a lot of fun talking. We reminisced. In her marriage she could not conceive and she came to a disciples group...how many of you have been in a disciple Bible study group. Those are great groups. And the people just loved her and they prayed for her to have a child. That was her heart's desire. They prayed I think two complete series, that's 18 months. And then all of a sudden she had twins. But there was so much joy in that room as they just surrounded her each week that God would give her the desire of her heart. She had those twins and then she called me up a year and a half later and she said: Pastor Bob, I'm pregnant. How did that happen? Well, I think the usual way, but there's a lot more room for fun, you know?

Mia Angelo who many of you might remember had shared a story of how a person came to her and they announced that they are now a Christian. And she said: Already? I thought that took a lifetime. She has something there. There is a difference between a Christian believer and a Christian disciple. A believer may or may not attend church; they believe God loves them, that's true. They believe in God, do their best, but the process of transformation really isn't happening because you have to encounter this crazy book that we call the Bible. And that transformation has to happen in the way to help people to love God, to love their neighbor, to love themselves. A Christian disciple is one who arranges their life by their commitment to follow Jesus. They don't claim perfection but they do study to understand what it means to follow Jesus in daily living. They are learners, constant, consistent learners.

I don't have to sell you on this. You know all this stuff. But if you want to be a fruitful Christian, if you want to have a fruitful church, then you have to be more than just a believer, you are going to have to be a disciple and you are going to have to join a class, start a class, study together with a small group, open the Bible. Get some...I've seen folks just opening the Bible in fellowship hall and I think that is just awesome and it is great, just do it. Get talking. And as a congregation, make the discipleship education program a priority, even more than the finance committee. Fund it lavishly; invest in it; volunteer for it; be a cheerleader for it. That's what we have to do.

So, I found out this week that Ruth Bell Graham, Billy Graham's wife, wanted on her headstone this saying, you can see it there. It says: End of construction. Thank you for your patience. What a great image of the Christian life. Under construction. All the way on this life journey until you go home to be with Christ and it's a reminder to us that our journey of transformation is one that is fitting us for God's kingdom. So when we arrive, we are ready for the next step in live. Amen.