

Why Are We Here? To Make Disciples!

January 15, 2023

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Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage of scripture from the book of Acts, chapter 2, beginning with verse 42. This is one of my favorite passages of Scripture in all the Bible. It is the first passage I shared with you as your pastor. God willing and the creek don't rise, this will be the last one as well (but not today!)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as they had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

May God bless the reading of His Word.

A long, long time ago in a land far, far away, in a lot more ways than time and distance, I encountered a group of people. Let's say they had some unique beliefs. This is how it occurred: I was a sophomore in high school. I have been employed since I was 12 in some fashion or another, and when I was a sophomore in high school, I had a job that was three to six hours a day, seven days a week, for a good portion of the year. And I also on the weekends worked at a peach orchard. And yes, during the winter there's work at a peach orchard. And this particular time it was during Christmas break, and just before Christmas we had completed all the work we could in the orchard until February. So, I had some time on my hands. There was a gentleman in our church who was planting trees in the hill country of Alabama. And I said, "Hey, I've got some time. I can help you." And so I started helping him plant loblolly pines in the hill country of Alabama. Now, don't think of hills like we have hills in the West. They were not very high, but they were very steep, and they couldn't use regular planting machinery, so we had to do it by hand. This particular area was between two little communities, very isolated communities, up in the hill country of Alabama. They were connected by a little dirt road, and we were planting right along this little dirt road. And the first morning I heard a sound that I did not recognize, a clickety-clackety, rickety-rackety sound, coming down the road. And around the corner came a teenager about my age, driving a mule and wagon. I had never seen that before. And he stopped and he wanted to know who we were, what we were doing, and how long we were going to be around. We told him and he went on about his business. Well, that happened several times that morning. And when lunchtime came, we asked our boss, "Look, what's going on here?" He said, "Well, these two little communities have intentionally isolated themselves. They practice a lot of the old ways. They are very, very suspicious of modern society. They have some very unique beliefs. So, listen very carefully, ask questions if you must, and keep your opinions to yourself." That we did. And it was a very educational ten to fourteen days. They had, as I said, some very unique beliefs. This little community still believed, for instance, that the earth was flat. I'm serious! They believed the earth was flat. They believed that the gravitation of what we experience when you hit the edge would just send you around the circle, and it gave the illusion that it was round. Now, to support that, they also believed that humanity had not gone into space. They believed that that

was a Hollywood trick meant to support the Round Earth Theory. As I said, it was educational. One day, while we were having lunch, one of their ministers joined us. He was a delightful man, very, very committed, very knowledgeable of scripture, and very, very jubilant. And he was quoting scriptures, just one right after another, after another, after another, and I almost got in trouble. This is what I did: I quoted a scripture myself. And his demeanor changed, and his countenance changed. And he turned to me, and he said, "Young man, what version of the Bible did you just quote?" I said, "Well, it's the American Standard Version, sir." And he said, "Son, in these parts, we only acknowledge the Authorized Version of the scripture, the King James Version, because if it was good enough for Jesus and the disciples, it's good enough for us!"

Now, let's fast-forward about 45 years to Tri-Cities, Washington, and the World Wide Web. Could you agree with the statement that there are some unusual things on the Web? Could you agree with the statement that if someone is in isolation and taking things from the internet, they can develop some very strange beliefs? Could you agree with that? This is just another reason why intentional discipleship is so vital for the individual and for the congregation. As we are beginning this new year, we are in a five-part series. Two weeks ago, I talked to you about radical hospitality: how we are to welcome the people that Jesus welcomes, that we should welcome with enthusiasm the stranger, just as much as we welcome one another. I talked with you last week about passionate worship: coming here expecting God to show up and show out, expecting God to touch us with the Holy Spirit, expecting lives to be changed as we worship together. Today I want to talk with you about intentional faith development, intentional discipleship. In the Great Commission, Jesus said, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." He did not say, "Go and make believers of all nations." He said, "Go and make disciples of all nations." Now, all disciples are believers, but not all believers are disciples. There is a difference. The extreme example of that is that Satan is a believer, but he's certainly not a disciple. A disciple is going on to Christlikeness intentionally. When we accept Christ as our Savior, that is the beginning of our journey toward Christlikeness, not the end. My opinion, my opinion, my opinion is that many times churches miss the point. We want to get people saved, and we should want that. Salvation is of eternal value. But that is the beginning of the journey. That's where our responsibility begins, not where it ends. Jesus said, "Go make of all disciples," not just believers. If we profess the name, if we claim the name of Christian, if we have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, there should be a family resemblance. That comes through intentional discipleship. Now sometimes churches make disciples, what I call by accident, but it happens much more often if we make disciples intentionally, and if we as individual Christians commit ourselves to intentional discipleship.

Now, I need to apologize to the engineers out there. And there are a lot of you! Discipleship is not linear. It's full of ups and downs, and twists and turns, and stops and starts. It's not continual, but it is perpetual. We make disciples, we become disciples, because we are not, I repeat, we are not born into the family of God full grown. In my last church, just as COVID started, we had one of the ladies in our church who gave birth, and when she gave birth, she gave birth to a 16-pound baby. I didn't see this kid until after COVID, which was about a year and a half, and the kid was already shaving! That's a little bit of exaggeration, but not much! But when we are born into the family of God, we are born just like a child, and we must develop; we must grow. That happens more often when we do so intentionally. As a church and as an individual, we must perpetually be asking ourself: What have I done, what have I not done, and what do I

need to do to become more Christlike? Growing, vital Christians and churches offer and participate in intentional discipleship from the cradle to the grave and beyond. And I mean that quite literally. If you do not think that the cradle, the nursery, is important in making disciples of Jesus Christ, then you haven't had babies in a long time. Because when we are offering our discipleship classes at night, those young parents need somewhere to bring their children, and someone to watch over their babies and their kids, so that they can attend classes. And if you're going to offer classes for young adults, it is absolutely, positively, unequivocally vital that we offer that. And as long as I'm your pastor, we will.

Growing, vital churches offer intentional discipleship, and it continues perpetually. I mentioned the passage of scripture that I read a few moments ago was one of my favorites. In that passage, we find out the environment that God uses to grow Christians. We find out why the early church grew so rapidly and what they did. They were absolutely devoted to teaching. They were devoted to fellowship and to one another. They were devoted in holding one another accountable. That is all intentional discipleship. And when they did that, God added to the church daily those who were being saved. We become Christlike when we engage in intentional discipleship. And we do so in community, because it is in community that we are held responsible and held in check. Because you could say to me, "No, John, Jesus did not speak 16th-century English." You could say to me, "No, John, this is not correct." We hold one another accountable. We need each other. We need all walks of life. The new Christian needs the staid, stable Christian that can say to them, "Look, it's going to be all right. Take a chill pill!" And the mature Christian, who has been involved in the church for the last 75 years, needs the enthusiasm and the fire of a new Christian to light their fire again. We need one another. We develop as Christians in community. Learning in community keeps us in check. Learning in community is how Jesus developed His disciples. Learning in community we receive support, we receive encouragement, and we receive direction. It is also where we find out that our questions, our doubts, our temptations, and even our failings, are not weird, that other people experience the same things. This may just be me, but I find it strangely encouraging when I find out that you are not perfect. I find it encouraging because I know that I'm not Jesus yet. I know that I'm not perfect yet. And when I find out you're not perfect, I'm encouraged that I'm not weird. I'm part of you and you're a part of me. Community gives us support and encouragement. It also helps us to understand that we are human.

When we are intentional about discipleship, our lives are changed; our church is changed. And, as a result, we have the opportunity to change our community. The mission statement of the United Methodist Church is: "It is our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." It is my contention, and has been for years, that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. If you introduce people to Christ, and they have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and you teach them what Christ commanded, and you teach them how Christ lived, you cannot keep a disciple from trying to change the world. You make disciples, and the disciples change the world. So, intentional discipleship, individually and collectively, is absolutely vital to personal growth and the mission of this church.

We must maintain what we are doing now. And I'm very proud of the discipleship program of this church. And we must develop more diverse programming. That means more online stuff, more nontraditional stuff, more things at nontraditional times, more off-site programming, more community support groups, more short-term and long-term

programming. As we start this new year, I want to say to you not that God might be calling you; I want to say to you that God is calling you. God is calling you to participate in intentional discipleship. And God might be calling you to start an intentional discipleship group.

I think you can also agree with me that our community needs to change. Can you agree with that? And who's going to do that? If not us, then who? God is calling us. It is our job to transform lives. After all, remember that we are the church for "everybody else." If it's not being done, and there is a need for it to be done, maybe, just maybe, God is calling us to do it. And that means you, and that means me. That is intentional discipleship, and something we're going to talk about next week: risk-taking mission.

So, during this quiet time, I want you to think about: What is it, or where is it, that I need to grow? And what is it that God is calling me to help with, or to start? Let's pray.

Speak, Lord, for Your servants are listening. Show us where we individually need to grow. And show us how we can help our brothers and sisters in Christ and our community. In Christ's name, amen.