



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for September 5, 2021
“unhurried: Abide in Christ”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Matthew 16:24-26; John 15:1-8

A Tough Word about Following Christ

When it comes to discipleship Jesus puts it quite simply. He doesn't mince any words. He offers quite a bit of challenge.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” (Matthew 16:24-26)

That was a tough word when he spoke it. It is a tough word today. It is not easy giving up the right to ourselves.

Denying Self

“Whoever want to be my disciple must deny themselves,” says Jesus. So, what does that mean for you and me? What's that going to look like? What is that God wants me to do? We'll never be able to answer that if we are not well-connected.

“Denying” ourselves puts the spotlight on Christ and what he wants and moves it away from ourselves and what we want. Instead of our agenda, our interest becomes God's agenda. *“Denying”* ourselves has everything to do with total commitment. We are either committed to Christ or committed to the world and what it has to offer.

“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world and forfeit their soul?” says Jesus. And yet we are faced with that dilemma all the time. It's not easy keeping our focus where it needs to be. The draw of the world is awfully strong.

Taking Up Our Cross

Following Jesus is not just a matter of getting out of the way, but actively seeking to do as he did. Christ's life always pointed to the cross. His life was headed that way all along. The cross represents a huge sacrifice and leads us to consider the sort of sacrifices we need to make.

When it comes to *“cross bearing”* Jesus leads the way. *“Cross bearing”* is often understood as something laid on us—like some illness or unforeseen calamity. It's thought that we have very little to say in the matter.

I have always understood *“cross bearing”* as a matter of choice. We take up the mantle of the cross, just like Jesus did, as a matter of free will.

Cross bearing is never easy. It does though go a long way toward fulfilling God's plan for our lives. It keeps our gaze on God, which is never a bad thing.

And Following Him

"Cross bearing" also furthers our resolve to *"follow Christ."* Those who take up their cross are sold out to Jesus and ready to go where he leads.

In Christ's estimation, denying self, taking up one's cross, and *following* him is what it means to be a disciple. Following Jesus has everything to do with aligning ourselves with him in every way. Jesus calls this *"abiding"* in him.

Abiding in Him

In talking about *"abiding,"* Jesus uses the image of a vine and its branches. He does that in John 15:1-8. Hear what he has to say about such things.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." John 15:1-8

When it comes to a vine and its branches, all the branch needs to do is to make sure it is well-positioned in the vine. Life comes from the vine and moves through the branch to the end that fruit is borne.

Created to Be Fruitful

You and I were created to be fruitful. *"This is to my Father's glory,"* says Jesus, *"that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."* John 15:8

Such fruitfulness ought to come naturally, or shall I say, supernaturally. If God created us to be fruitful, he is the one who will make it happen, that is, if we let him. God's command to *"be fruitful and multiply"* has been a consistent refrain since the beginnings of creation. There is a rhythm at play here: Abiding leads to fruitfulness. We can't bear fruit if we don't spend time abiding.

How do grapes come to be? I understand that grape vines take three years to really begin to bear fruit. They are cut back one year and then cut back again the next. Every time they are cut back their roots are strengthened. If left to itself a grape vine will grow, but its branches will only decrease in strength and be unable to bear the fruit they were intended to bear.

Regular pruning not only promotes growth, but fruit bearing. We have an apple tree just outside our Educational Wing facing Highway 42 that is pretty much a mess. I think it was planted when I was here some twenty-five years ago.

As you can see it hasn't gotten much attention. There are dead spots and branches that are weighed down with apples that are too heavy for the branches to rightly hold. If you look closely at the apples, they are not very big and, quite honestly, don't look all that great. I understand the Preschool picks some of the apples every year and bakes a pie. I going to look to get in on that action this year.

Louis Fowler and I have already talked about getting after that tree and doing some pruning with an interest of not only shaping up the tree but helping it along toward bearing more apples. I will give you a report on how that turns out.

The Master Pruner

Unlike Louis and I, God knows what he is doing when it comes to pruning. While pruning is never easy, it leads us to abide even more, which in turn leads us to be even more fruitful than before.

Presently, you may feel as though you are in a season of pruning in your own life. You may be feeling the strain of the Pandemic rearing its head again. You may be suffering some loss whether it has to do with a loved one, a friend, or even your work.

- I pray that that pruning leads you to abide even more in your Heavenly Father.
- I pray that you begin to sense your spiritual life growing in a big way.
- I pray that you begin to see fruit borne for God's Kingdom as God works through your life.

The pruning we're talking about here is not that far removed from the "*denying of self*" and the "*taking up of our cross*" we talked about a few minutes ago. All these things lead us to abide even more in the One who wants nothing more than for us to rest in him.

Resting in Him

As we have gone along in this series, many of you have commented about the relationship between making disciples and being "*unhurried*." You seem to have been refreshed by that. Being "*unhurried*" when it comes to disciple making has everything to do with "*abiding*."

When we are held in the warm embrace of God, we are more patient, more at peace, and even more committed to the very things God wants us to be about. When "*unhurried*" we are better able to put first things first. We will be more apt to "*deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him*."

We will find ourselves growing more than we ever have and bearing the sort of fruit that is befitting those who call themselves disciples. So then let's abide in him. Let's even submit ourselves to God's occasional pruning, all to the end that we find ourselves growing spiritually and bearing good fruit for his Kingdom.

Three Years

A few minutes ago, we talked about three years being the amount of time needed to rightly bear fruit when it comes to grape vines.

That brings to mind the three years of Christ's earthly ministry, a ministry that led to his eventual death and resurrection, and the good fruit those two things continue to bear to this day.

So, as we drink from the cup let's remember all that Christ has done on our behalf as we seek to abide in him and bear good fruit for his Kingdom, as we seek to be his disciples.