

## June 11th, 2017: Catch the Excitement



I love this time of year in the life of the church – it's the time we celebrate all the wonderful things we as a church community have been doing – some of the ministries that make us who we are. Between May and June, we celebrate our graduating youth, our United Methodist Women's ministry, our confirmands, all our Sunday school children, and our scholarship recipients. What a wonderfully full time in the life of our church! This Sunday, as we celebrate our Sunday school year coming to a close, we remember once again the importance of Christian education, not only in the life of our children and youth, but in each of our faith journeys, no matter our age or stage of life.

Our gospel reading this morning comes to us from the very last chapter of the book of Matthew. In this final, sending message – Jesus gives his followers a task, he commissions them to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow everything he has commanded.” GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES! Could the lectionary have chosen a better text for us today? Christian education is all about discipleship – growing people of faith into the best disciple they can be. But before we can go any further, we need to pause for a moment and ask a pretty basic question... What is a disciple?

A disciple is not simply a “follower” someone tagging along behind, going with the motions simply because it's what everyone else is doing, or what they're expected to do. No, a disciple is someone who's life has been transformed, changed in some way, so that everything they do, all of who they are is aligned with a way of life. The decisions they make, their relationships with others, how they spend their resources of time, energy, and money – all of these things are impacted by their faith and belief system. And in the sending message from Matthew's gospel, this disciple making is what we are called to do.

Three years ago, a study of churches of various backgrounds discovered that, of all the areas of congregational life studied, an effective “Christian Education program has the strongest tie to a person's growth in faith... which is as true for adults as it is for adolescents.” You can attend worship and listen to sermons until you're blue in the face, but until you sit in a small group environment and talk it out, wrestling with what a faith concept or scripture means in your life and in the lives of others, we struggle to really integrate faith and life. Christian education enables our faith to mature, leading us to a stronger level of belief, a deeper sense of peace, a desire to share our faith journey with others, rather than go it alone. Through study and growth, we are transformed, not only in our hearts, but in our world-view, holding life-affirming values, such as equality and diversity, advocating social justice, and serving consistently and passionately through acts of love and justice.

I don't know about you, but that list describing a mature faith is something I strive towards – to be more loving, to have my faith impact my everyday life more, to live every moment from these values of equality, diversity, social justice and love! Growing

in our faith is something that God helps us do, but we must do our part. Keep on practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study and participation in the worship life of our church. Joining prayer and education groups with others can help a lot. Each of these things give God an opportunity to get through to us. They help us to keep on interpreting the meaning of our daily life experiences in the light of our Christian faith. Keep on asking what God is trying to show us, what is God doing in our lives and in the world around us, and how can we become active participants in what God is doing all around us. According to this study though, the number one thing we can do to help grow in faith is participate in a Christian Education class. In other words, if we are serious about discipleship, about growing in our faith, there is NOTHING that can do the job better than being a part of a class.

Christian education can help us internalize our faith and make it a part of who we are, not just on Sunday mornings, but every day – not just in the church building, but everywhere. If a true heart and life transformation happens when we grow as disciples, then that’s not something we can simply turn on and off depending on the day of week or the location we find ourselves. This week, I asked for some feedback through Facebook regarding what it means and looks like to be a disciple. In one response, this whole life transformation was mentioned as the person reflected on conversations he had years ago on how it was “easy to be a Christian on Sunday morning but harder the rest of the week.” But he argued that, “one cannot split their lives and only be Christian for half a day. If it does not go with you, one has to question the depth of the commitment. We need to be nourishing each other to deepen our faith and live it out day to day - teaching kids, feeding the hungry, fighting for structural change in systems that imprison or discriminate, being an example of treating people with respect.... Faith is what you organize your life around - not just what you believe.”

Our scripture today reminds us that it is not only about us and the strength of our discipleship, but about disciple making – about continuing to extend the invitation to know and love God revealed through Jesus. We do this as a church by offering new and varying Christian education opportunities, engaging youth programs where teens feel comfortable inviting their friends to join them, and a vibrant and inviting Vacation Bible School. But even more, we do this as individuals as we live our daily Monday-Saturday lives – what we do beyond the walls of the church – living God’s love and justice in the world each day. We are ALL, as individuals and a church body, invited into this disciple making – and it starts through open invitations, easy conversations, and simply living out God’s love and enabling other to witness it. May we all continue to open our hearts to the opportunity to grow stronger and deeper in our faith, fueling us as we live it out each day, and may we be courageous enough to share the love of God with others we meet. It may be through our words and actions that they experience God’s love and hear Christ’s invitation. Thanks be to God. Amen.