

Growing . . . through Learning

September 8, 2002

Background Study

This is the fifth week in the eight-week sermon series exploring our vision for St. Andrew, which is that we are “to invite people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving.” So far we’ve examined the invitation God extends to us all, the nature of our relationship with God as fully revealed in Jesus Christ, and our relationships with others in the community of faith. Last week we looked at our growth through worship. This week, we’ll turn to learning as a vital part of our lives as God’s people and as a means for our own growth.

Key Scripture Passage – Matthew 28:19-20 [Jesus’ great commission to his disciples at the end of Matthew’s gospel.]

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Learning and Discipleship

In obedience to Jesus’ commission to his disciples, The United Methodist Church affirms that “the mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.” Further, we Methodists assert that “Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.”¹ At St. Andrew, our revised and renewed vision statement expresses how we will go about carrying out the church’s mission to make disciples of Jesus. We invite all people to become disciples and to grow without ceasing – through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving.

In the New Testament, the word “disciple” appears more than 250 times, usually when referring to Jesus’ followers, and translates the Greek word *mathetes*. It is a word based on the idea of learning, of being a pupil, apprentice, or student. Often, *mathetes* connotes a master and pupil relationship. In the New Testament, discipleship begins with a call from Jesus to follow him. This was different from typical Judaism of Jesus’ day, in which the burden was on the student to find a teacher. Furthermore, disciples of Jesus were called by him to be committed to him. For example, Peter had probably heard about Jesus before being confronted by him (Matthew 4:18-22), but it is the impact of Jesus himself that makes Peter into a disciple.² Similarly, we are confronted by the reality of the living Jesus and called to be his disciples, to be his students, and to begin a life-long process of learning what this really means.

Our Heritage of Respect for Learning

The people of God have always had a deep and abiding respect for learning. Psalm 119, the longest of all the Psalms, is an extended meditation on the joy of God’s law. We usually think of God’s Old Testament law as an extended and burdensome list of detailed rules. However, “instruction” is a better way to think of God’s law, for the Law told the Israelites how they were to live in relationship with God – what a wondrous thing to be told! So, we shouldn’t be surprised when the Psalmist says, “I told you my plans, and you answered. Now teach me your principles. Help me understand the meaning of your commandments, and I will meditate on your wonderful miracles” (Psalm 119:26-27 NLT). The book of Proverbs is, in essence, the lived experience

¹ From the UMC 2000 *Book of Discipline*, our church’s book of law and covenant.

² From Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (abridged by G. Bromily)

of the Jewish community of learning to walk in God's ways. The Jews understood that they had to teach their children the story of Israel and its God. What does it mean to be Israel? Why do we live the way we live and do what we do?³ Given their heritage of devotion to God's word and the importance of learning, it is not surprising that the study of Torah replaced the temple as the center of Jewish religious practices after the destruction of the temple in 70AD.

The apostles and early Christians were no less committed to learning and study. Timothy was told to "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ" (2 Tim 3:14-15). Peter urged that Christians "long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation" (1 Pet 2:2).

In John 8, Jesus tells believers, "If you truly continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (v.31-32). What does Jesus mean by "continue?" It might be translated "stay in" or "dwell." Dallas Willard writes that continuing/dwelling in Jesus' word means focusing on the good news of God's kingdom and devoting ourselves to Jesus' teaching through both private study and public instruction. This is not occasional dabbling in God's word, but dwelling there, being thoughtfully serious, devoting regular time and effort, and asking God to open our heart and mind to his word.⁴

Learning in the Community of Faith

There are many ways to teach and many ways to learn. Some are verbal, others are non-verbal. Sometimes we learn by example, other times we learn through practice and repetition. Jesus taught his disciples using sermons (Matthew 5-7), stories and parables, answering questions with questions, and by his actions. All this is needed to make disciples for Christ. We learn from role models in our church, we learn in a Sunday School class, we learn from our own experience and reflection, we learn in Bible studies, and we learn when we volunteer for Vacation Bible School. The Holy Spirit uses all of these to help us grow into the disciples God expects us to become.

At St. Andrew, we have emphasized learning for discipleship through programs such as the Bible Academy. In the Bible Academy, we offer a variety of classes ranging from small covenant-group classes to larger, more lecture-oriented classes. We know that Biblical illiteracy is a problem in the United Methodist Church and we are striving to help all of us to become more knowledgeable and confident in our understanding and use of the Bible. This is crucial because "United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine."⁵ Though a well-educated Oxford man, John Wesley considered himself to be a "man of one book," the Bible. We are called to be a people of that book. In its pages, we learn of God's hopes for us and expectations of us. In its pages, we confront the living Lord and learn of his love for us. In its pages, we learn how to live the sort of life that God intended for us. Indeed, William Willimon reminds us that "a congregation is Christian to the degree that it is confronted by and attempts to form its life in response to the Word of God."⁶

³ from Brueggeman, Walter. "Passion and Perspective: Two dimensions of education in the Bible." *Theology Today*, 1985

⁴ from Dallas Willard's, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our hidden life in God*. 1998. San Francisco: HarperCollins

⁵ from the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2000

⁶ from William Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible*. 1990. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Psalm 119:1-24 The beginning of a meditation on God's law</p>	<p>Day 2 Psalm 119:169-176 Praising God for the gift of his law and teachings</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 2:41-52 Jesus, the boy, at the temple</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 5:1-16 Jesus teaches his disciples.</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Timothy 2 & 3:14-17 Paul instructs Timothy on the importance of staying true to what he has learned.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Christians and Christian denominations have started countless schools, colleges, and universities – for explicitly Christian reasons. What might those reasons be? Why have most Christians always been so committed to education and learning?
2. Methodists have always been committed to living a faith that embraces our heads, our hearts, and our hands. Our learning must reach our whole person, just as must our love for God and our neighbor. What sorts of learning have been most helpful to you in your Christian growth? Which have been least helpful? What can the church do to help all our members grow in their discipleship?
3. In recent decades, Methodist congregations have become increasingly Biblically illiterate. Why do you think this is so? What barriers to learning exist in our congregations? How might we go about increasing the commitment to learning in our congregations? In ourselves?
4. In the UMC, there is a General Board of Discipleship whose “primary purpose [is] to assist annual conferences, districts, and local churches of all membership sizes in their efforts to win persons to Jesus Christ as his disciples and to help these persons to grow in their understanding of God that they may respond in faith and love, to the end that they may know who they are and what their human situation means, increasingly identifying themselves as children of God and members of the Christian community, to live in the Spirit of God in every relationship, to fulfill their common discipleship in the world, and to abide in the Christian hope.” There is a lot packed into this statement! Were you aware that such a group existed in the UMC? If you were in charge of this Board, how would you go about helping local congregations in the task of disciple-making? You can check out their website at www.gbod.org.