

“Equip One Another in Discipleship”
Sermon Series on the Big 3 at First Pres
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
September
(Eph. 4:7,11-16)

Introduction.

Every single waking moment of every single day you and I are being formed spiritually whether we’re aware of it or not. The spiritual formation of our souls is taking place all the time, and that’s a fact. But the truth of the matter is that it isn’t a given that the spiritual formation we’re experiencing is shaping us to become more like Christ every day. In fact, the opposite is true.

The Bible says that the world is trying to squeeze us into its mold, and unless you and I are intentional in regard to our spiritual formation, unless we’re deliberate in cultivating a fruitful life in Christ, the siren voices of the world will take over and lead us down a path that will stunt our spiritual growth and even lead to our destruction if we’re not careful. Just as a garden has to be tended and watered, and weeds have to be pulled so it can flourish, so you and I need to tend to our souls every single day so we can experience the flourishing life for which God created us.

You will recall that last week I introduced a new sermon series on the 3 E’s of our church’s new vision, and I talked about the first invitation we want to extend to every covenant partner at First Pres – Encounter God through Worship. Today I want to talk about the second invitation, which is Equip One Another in Discipleship.

Read Scripture Passage

I. Equip.

First, let's start with the word equip. Equip is an interesting word. Basically it means to "supply the necessary items for a particular purpose," or "to prepare someone for a particular situation or task." I played football in high school, and when I hear the word "equip" my mind naturally goes to the equipment manager of the team. He was the guy who gave us all the pads and protective gear like a helmet we would wear to equip us to play the game and keep us from getting hurt by all the contact of the sport.

In the book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul talks about this idea of equipping when he writes, "*But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.... It was Jesus who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, in order to equip God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith...*" (Eph. 4:11-13).

The word that is translated "equip" in this passage is the same word that is used in Mark 1 to describe the disciples' mending their nets. It's also a medical word for putting a broken bone back into place. The gifts of the Holy Spirit which Paul mentions here that God has given us in the Body of Christ are intended to restore, mend, equip, and prepare broken people so we can join together and impact the world for Christ.

In addition, the "works of service" Paul writes about aren't the prerogative of just an elite group of spiritual people. Instead, it's the calling of every follower of Jesus. Too many of us have the idea that ministry and mission is what is done by

the pastors and the staff of a church, and perhaps by its elders and deacons. They look at it like a football game where we're all sitting up in the stands watching the team work itself to the point of exhaustion out on the field wearing all the equipment, and we celebrate vicariously when they score a touchdown. But that's a wrong-headed understanding of what the church is supposed to be.

The truth of the matter is that the game is open to every single one of us, and each of us needs to get out on the field. Everyone is supposed to be part of the action, a part of the mission. Paul says that the role of the leaders of a church is to equip everyone for the work of mission. Instead of monopolizing the ministry, the leaders of the church are supposed to multiply it.

Equipping one another is the key. And that leads to the second thing I want to talk about this morning – one another.

II. One Another.

In an age when it feels like you and I are pretty insignificant, it is a vital part of the good news of Jesus Christ that every single person matters to God. It's equally important to remember that Jesus calls individuals, not to stay in isolation, but to join the new community of God's people. We live in a time of personal insignificance and great loneliness, and more than ever the church needs to capture the priority of building community in Christian discipleship.

There are no Lone Ranger Christians, and each of us is invited to become part of the family of God when we give our lives to Christ. The earliest disciples didn't have a "me-and-Jesus" mentality when it came to a life of faith. Instead, they thought in terms of community from the very beginning. They had an "us-and-Jesus" understanding of what it meant to be a

follower of Christ. The reason for this is because you'll recall that the Bible says that when Jesus began His ministry, He called twelve particular disciples to be with Him, and over a period of three years He invested in these individuals, and He poured His life in to them so they could understand what it meant to be a disciple.

Their fellowship back then was no more perfect than our church community is today, and the first disciples constantly jockeyed for position and tried to elbow their way up the pecking order. They struggled with ambition and jealousy, just like we are today, and they were willful and headstrong. And very often they got the whole thing about the Christian life all wrong. On one occasion Jesus actually said to Peter, "*Get behind Me, Satan!*" Peter was that far off in his understanding of what Jesus being the Messiah was all about.

The early church was the same. It's easy for us to assume that the community life of the earliest followers of Christ was ideal, that they had no problems and there was no conflict. Many people suppose that church life in the 1st Century AD was a more pure reflection of the community Jesus intended. However, in the book of Acts we read about Ananias and Sapphira who were struck down by God for their life of deception, and in the letters of Paul we read time and again of divisions, dissension, petty jealousies, and arguments. They had just as many problems back then as we do now! Maybe even more!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a wonderful book I read many years ago that has profoundly influenced my ideas about community in the church. It is entitled *Life Together*. The book grew out of his own experience of community in an "underground" seminary established by the Confessing Church in Germany during Hitler's reign of terror. He writes:

“Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream....But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams....He who loves his dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intensions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial....Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we must participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.”¹

What Bonhoeffer was saying is that community in the church will always be flawed in some measure, because we’re a fellowship that is made up of sinners saved by grace. We are a spiritual hospital for people trying to get well, not a museum for saints who have it all together. As a result, we will always struggle in building community to some extent. However, the amazing miracle in all this is that by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, the Lord can take our feeble attempts to be the people of God and transform our little fellowship into a small expression of the kingdom of God right here on earth. Taking people for who they are and accepting the church for what it is, warts and all, is the first step in seeing this transformation.

God calls us to community, to a mutually supportive, empowering, and accountable life together. I believe there is a yearning in each one of us for this very thing. We long to be known and we long to know others. But we’re so fearful, aren’t we? We are afraid that if people really knew who we are, if they knew what we’ve done in the past, they wouldn’t like us, or they would reject us. So we hide behind our masks, hoping that no one discovers that we’re really a fraud. However, to live like this is so wearying. It drains us to prop up the house of

cards. I believe God invites us to take a risk and explore community in His koinonia. It will never be perfect, but it can be life-changing.

As I look back over my life, I can see the way in which my walk with Christ has been most profoundly shaped by relationships with people who disciplined me – both formally and informally. Sometimes the discipleship was intentional, and other times they had no idea of the profound impact they were making on my life. Who and what I am today as a follower of Jesus and a minister of the gospel has been shaped in untold ways by the profound influence of others on my life, and I will be forever grateful to God for each one of them.

First Pres seeks to offer a place of belonging for people who are lonely. It wants to be a refuge to those who are torn by the storms of life. Our desire is to create, albeit in an imperfect way, a fellowship which can provide a safe haven to those who are tired of running. In our common life of discipleship, we seek to foster a community that is centered on Jesus and provide a ministry of grace and love that is rooted in His love for each person.

III. Discipleship.²

There is one last word I want to discuss this morning in the second of the 3 E's of First Pres, and it's the word "discipleship." In Matthew 28 and in Acts 1 Jesus said that the primary task of His followers was two-fold – they were to be His witnesses, and to make disciples. And the early church made evangelism and discipleship a cornerstone of their common life. We would do well to emulate their example.

The concept of discipleship was by no means new when Jesus called men and women to follow Him 2000 years ago. Therefore, it's not surprising to learn that all together the verb

“disciple” (*manthano*) and the noun “disciple” (*mathetes*) appear no less than 289 times in the NT. In secular Greek the word “disciple” meant an apprentice in a trade, a student of a subject, or the pupil of a teacher.

The basic idea of discipleship was widely accepted when Jesus began His ministry. But at the same time, when Christ took the initiative in calling people to follow Him, He created a new pattern of discipleship. In rabbinic circles at the time of Christ, typically a disciple would choose his own master and voluntarily join the rabbi’s school. However, we read in the NT where Jesus took the initiative, and He personally invited Peter and Andrew, James and John, Matthew, Philip, and the others to be His disciples. Even when the rich young ruler ran up to Jesus and asked Him a leading question, Jesus spelled out the costly demands of discipleship, and then He added, “Come and follow Me.”

In the life of the apostle Paul we see the same methodology and the same goal in his ministry which Jesus modeled. Following Christ’s example, Paul invested in a few individuals to make disciples, and he told his young protégé Timothy, “*What you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well*” (2 Tim. 2:2). Paul envisioned an intergenerational chain of discipleship linked together by personal investment. Paul lived out this admonition, and his letters are filled with the names of people he had personally discipled – people like Timothy, Titus, Silas, Euodia, Syntyche, Epaphroditus, Priscilla and Aquila.

Spiritual formation and discipleship is a life-long process for a person to become more like Jesus. It’s the way a follower of Christ seeks to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the forming and re-forming the inner life of the human self in such a way that it becomes more and more aligned with and reflective of

the inner life of Jesus Himself. The transformation of the inner self is the primary focus, and when that happens, the fruit of righteousness in how we live eternally will become a natural by-product when one learns to walk “in the Spirit.” Becoming like Jesus involves more than human effort. While human effort is certainly indispensable – God can’t steer a parked car – Christlikeness deep in one’s soul isn’t human attainment. It’s a gift of grace, just like salvation.

The tools for spiritual formation and discipleship which have proven to be effective over the centuries involve the spiritual disciplines of prayer, study, Christian meditation, acts of service, and a host of other practices. Together they help us become transformed by the renewing of our minds and hearts. These practices inform and impact what we know, what we believe, what we become, with whom we belong, and how we behave. And they are key to living the flourishing life God intends for every single person.

As we seek to become the church God wants us to be, equipping one another in discipleship will remain a high priority in our church’s ministry. That’s because this is the way of Jesus, and it was the way of the early church, too. It is only by imitating Christ and following the example and teaching of the apostles that you and I will be brought more into conformity with the life of discipleship Jesus desires.

Discipleship takes time, and there are no shortcuts to maturity in Christ. In a lighthearted essay in *Time* magazine, Sarah Vowell said that one day she signed up for a 3-hour, \$59 course called "Instant Piano for Hopelessly Busy People." Regretting that she didn't stick with piano lessons as a child, she made it her goal to learn to play one piece by memory. What she found was that even this seemingly simple task required many hours of practice. There is no such thing as "instant"

piano, and there are no shortcuts to learning to make music. But as she continued to practice, a recognizable melody began to emerge from her fingers.

Her experience is a good reminder that though we often desire immediate results in our walk of faith, this too is a matter of patient practice. The writer of the book of Hebrews encouraged Christians to be spiritually diligent throughout their lives. He urged them not to become sluggish but to *"imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises"* (Hebrews 6:12).³ Put in the time and make the effort to be a disciple of Christ. You'll be amazed at the results

Conclusion.

My friend Jerry Sittser has written⁴ that many questions are swirling in our minds today about the future of the church as we envision the possibility of a post-COVID world. Rather than anxiously attempting to predict the future, Jerry suggests that we should look to the past for guidance.

In the year 536 AD, a series of massive volcanic eruptions in Iceland spewed tons of ash into the sky. The same thing happened south of the Equator, and a cloud of darkness encircled and suffocated the globe. The darkness persisted for 18 months, and it accelerated Europe's descent into what is now known as the Dark Ages. Wintry conditions persisted for an entire summer, and food production fell precipitously. This further weakened an already unhealthy population and only made it all the more vulnerable to a new wave of the plague that ravaged Asia and Europe in 540 AD. It decimated the population of the world.

The physical suffering was severe, but so was the psychological impact. Instability, uncertainty, and terror drove people into dark places. The world became violent, chaotic,

and unpredictable. Every attempt to rebuild society ended in failure, which gave way to even more ruin. Sound familiar?

In the midst of this turbulent time, one Christian visionary stood out. At the very moment when it would have been easy to see nothing but doom and decline, he saw an opportunity, and he founded an institution that has endured to this day. In the midst of the chaos, Benedict of Nursia (480-547) founded what we now know as The Rule of St. Benedict. This Rule has endured for 1500 years, planted churches, and cared for the poor in untold ways. And much of what we treasure today – books and libraries, education and scholarship, hospitality and medical care, agricultural production and technological innovation – became the domain of monasteries.

You and I can't return to the past, and I am not suggesting we even try. The monastery of 1500 years ago is no longer relevant to modern day life, at least not in its original form. But it does serve as an example of how equipping one another in discipleship can help us not only keep body and soul together during this trying time but even change the world in the future. There is an opportunity before us, friends. How will you be involved in equipping one another in discipleship in this next season of our church's ministry and mission? The future of our church and the future of WS may well depend on it.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 26-30.

² Some of the ideas on discipleship I present here have been adapted from Greg Ogden's *Discipleship Essentials*, pp. 20-21 and David Watson's *Called and Committed*, pp. 5-7.

³ *Our Daily Bread*, November 2, 2001.

⁴ Jerry Sittser, newsletter from OCE at Whitworth University, May 7, 2021.