

Those of you that call this church your home have been through a lot these past weeks. Together right here in this room you celebrated the events of Holy Week. There was Maundy Thursday & Good Friday in those days leading up to Easter. As a worshipping family we remembered & celebrated the event our entire Christian faith is based on, Resurrection Day. It was glorious to remember that though Jesus had been laid in a tomb, in a tomb he did not remain!

The following week you received 19 young people as they confirmed, before family & friends, their faith in Jesus Christ & their commitment to the United Methodist Church. It was another day to celebrate! And among all this you also learned that both of your pastors will be leaving at the end of June. And all of these things happened in the midst of the 10,000 other things each of you have been dealing with in your personal, daily lives. Am I right to say it feels as though we've been riding a monster roller coaster?

Well, today I want to take you off that gut wrenching ride & to gently redirect you, to remind you & walk with you back toward our purpose for being here, here at this particular church, at this time, on this Sunday morning. Now, if I were to *ask* each of you why you were here today, what would your answer be? Think for a minute. Some would say because their mom, dad or spouse told them they had to be here. Others might say it's because it's just the thing you do every Sunday morning & it's been that way for most of your life. A few of you might say you come here to see your friends or because you agreed to serve God by taking up the offering or serving the coffee. And ultimately I hope the majority of you would say you're here because you want to grow in a relationship with God, with God's Son Jesus Christ, & with the Holy Spirit. Good answer!

But guess what? Every single one of those answers would be wrong answers. Every one of them!! While you know our mission statement says our mission is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world"; our PURPOSE statement, the reason this church exists, the purpose behind the United Methodist Church of Mt. Vernon, is \*\*\*"to lead all people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ." Period. This may come as news to you, but the reason you're actually here is to lead people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Now the first response I expect to hear from many of you is, "Wait! I don't even know how to **be** in a growing relationship with Jesus Christ! How can I lead someone else into that kind of relationship?" Now the only thing that says to me is that we, as a church, that we leaders, haven't been fulfilling our purpose. It says maybe we haven't been active disciples.

Typically when we hear the word "disciple" we think about the group of 12 men closest to Jesus, the ones we've read about; \*\*\*guys with sandals & dirty feet, James & John & Judas; the men who lived with Jesus, those that Jesus appeared to after they saw him killed & laying in a tomb, the men that gave up their familiar & comfortable lives to tell other people about God's Son, about God come to earth as man, the men who taught others what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. Those guys.

But the truth is, it's because "those guys" told others about their experiences with Jesus, & then those people told someone & those people . . . you know the progression. It's only because the original disciples went about influencing other people's lives faithfully & to the best of their ability, that every single one of us in this room have had the opportunity to hear about, know about or follow Jesus. And if you've decided you are a Christian

& you follow Jesus & claim him as your Savior, that makes you a disciple, too.

Now, a disciple, someone who follows Jesus, always has room to grow in their faith, but a disciple's main purpose in life should sound very familiar to you. To be a disciple means not only that you know Jesus as your Savior, but that you're leading other people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. That's ultimately what being a disciple is all about. And I believe that's what will make this church "the best of the best of the best" that Pastor Heecheon has prophesied over you.

When the measure of our success as a church stops being on how many new members we have, & instead *growing disciples* becomes our goal, that's when we will have fulfilled our purpose . . . & that is success in the only place that truly matters . . . in the eyes of God.

So what does it look like to help someone grow in a relationship with Jesus? If you've never before considered it, how can you become a discipler & how can we become a discipling church?

**\*\*The very first thing to do is to spend some time with the Lord. Ask the Lord to give you the heart of a disciple & if you don't already have it, the desire to be an influence in other people's lives.**

It's also important to be ready to meet people where they're at & recognize they may not be at the same place you are.

Author Jim Putman compares the various stages of a developing faith to that of our own human life growth stages, such as not yet born, infancy, childhood, teenage & young adult years, then parenthood & then ongoing adulthood.

You can see that pattern in this  
**\*\*\*illustration** that more closely follows our Wesleyan theology of grace. Right now every single one of us & every single person you know is someplace on this spectrum in their faith. There is no time limit for each area & there is nothing that

says you don't occasionally loop back. The reason I'm showing you this illustration is to remind you that no matter where you are on this journey, there is always someone that can learn from you & there is always someone that you can be learning from. It's what disciples do, they share their journey AND they grow along with others.

Willow Creek, an Evangelical Christian mega church in Barrington, Ill, conducted a survey about what people wanted & needed as they embarked on these different stages of faith formation & growth. The thing that stood out most for me when looking over their results was that in every stage, from searching for meaning, right on through being in a mature walk with Christ, the majority of people ranked as either the #1 thing or the #2 thing they wanted help with was "developing a personal relationship with Christ". Every single time.

I'm willing to bet that not a one of you here today grew to have a personal relationship with Christ all by yourself, did you? It wasn't from reading your Bible alone, praying alone, fasting alone, singing alone or fishing alone, that grew you toward Christ, was it? Those may have all played a part in your growth, but every one of us has grown in faith because *someone* encouraged us, taught us, went through rough times & happy times with us, & demonstrated to us what a life looks like as a faithful believer. That person, or more likely personS . . . they were disciplers. And if you haven't yet considered yourself to be a disciple maker, it's time you started! Here are some other things disciplers do to lead others in a growing relationship with Jesus.

**\*Disciplers affirm God's love for people.** Every human being deeply longs to be loved. Growing Christians need to know at the core of their being that God loves them & that they can love God back! Remind people of God's love for them!

Speak that truth into their lives at every opportunity.

**\*Disciplers encourage others to join them on God's mission.** The world is a hurting place. Invite someone to join you in preparing a meal for Mission of Hope, to unload food for the NE Linn food pantry or to come to your house & help cook a meal for someone who is hurting or sick. Invite participation.

**\*Disciplers teach people how to pray.** Short of feeling biblically illiterate, praying with people is the number one thing that strikes fear in people. So, seek out someone you know who is comfortable praying & ask them to teach you, then practice at home on your own. Write your prayers out on paper. Pray before meals. Practice! And if you're already comfortable praying, model how to pray by not just *saying* you'll pray for someone, but by stopping what you're doing & praying for them right there, out loud! And remember, parents who model praying with their children have children who are comfortable praying!

**\*Disciplers intentionally spend time with people** in order that they might grow in their faith. If you're in the beginning, growing or maturing phase of your faith, invite someone you think might be in the phase preceding yours to hang out with you!

Invite someone you don't know well or just met this morning to go to lunch with you after church. Stop by the work place of that young man or woman you know is has just started attending or visit with the person new to the local community & just ask how they're doing. Build relationships. Don't wait for your church to offer a Bible study, invite a couple neighbors to your house & do a simple study together. I can show you resources to use.

You don't have to know all the answers or have your life all together to do these things. You only have to trust the Holy Spirit of God that lives in you to work through you & believe that God wants to do for others everything God has done for you.

**\*Finally, disciplers realize that there is more to the journey** of faith than having their name in the membership book of a church, more than being connected with a particular denomination, more than just showing up for worship, & more than having a daily devotional time.

Disciplers know that in each of us there is a longing for a deeper relationship with Jesus, for a stronger sense of the presence of God & a growing desire to make a difference in the world.

And you, dear disciples of Jesus, realize that the best way to fulfill that longing in yourself is for you \*\*\*to help others fulfill that desire, too.