Towson Presbyterian Church

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Rev. Joel Strom

“What Disciples Do: *Disciples Take Faith Home”*

***Luke 17:1-6*** *Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! 2It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. 3Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 4And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, “I repent”, you must forgive.’5 The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ 6The Lord replied, ‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea”, and it would obey you.*

Discipleship is challenging and demanding, and Jesus sure has a way of using images to make a point, doesn’t he? For Jesus, how we love others, and care for others, is of the utmost of importance. If that’s not our highest priority, he says, well, you might as well go drown yourself in the sea. That would be the better option for us, than not loving and caring for others well. That’s quite the visceral image from Jesus.

TPC, as we work our way into this sermon series called *What Disciples Do*, which will take us through October. it’s helpful to pause for a moment and acknowledge that following Jesus and striving to live a particular way in the world is very challenging, and very demanding. Discipleship is meant to be hard and will most of the time make us a little uncomfortable.

In our reading, Jesus next dives into forgiveness, and says that our desire to forgive should be central to living the life of discipleship. I’m speaking for myself here, but sometimes a one-time action of forgiveness I find to be incredibly challenging. Forgiveness is not easy. And yet Jesus says, if someone returns to you 7 times in a single day asking for forgiveness, you should forgive them. Disciples, it seems, should draw from a bottomless well when it comes to forgiveness.

As we begin this Sermon Series on discipleship, the actions of love, and mercy, and compassion, and seeking justice, and offering forgiveness – these actions of discipleship – they ask something of us, don’t they? To follow Jesus is to not always have our own needs, wants, power, and privilege be front and center. There is a certain humility that walks alongside you when you strive to follow the way of Jesus.

And the disciples’ response to Jesus is not really that surprising, and I absolutely join them in their response, and I bet you do too. “Well, if this is what discipleship asks of us then, Lord, increase our faith! Increase our faith because we can’t do this on our own!”

I have tried to do it on my own and if left to only my own will power, I often have a hard time getting there.

How do we, on our own, and by our own willpower, love enemies as Jesus also calls us to do? How do we forgive for the 5th, and 6th, and 7th time as Jesus calls us to do today?! I can’t do that on my own. When we offer compassion to someone and come alongside them, and not try and fix their problem but just sit with them, and join them in their pain, that asks a lot of us. I struggle to do that solely by my own will power.

Church, when we get to the depth of what Jesus is inviting us into there’s a pretty good chance that we will eventually find ourselves responding just as the disciples did: *“Increase our faith, Lord!* We can’t do this on our own. And if we can get to that place where we can acknowledge how challenging and demanding discipleship can be, and that we can’t do it on our own, that our own willpower will only get us so far, and that we also need to draw from a Source that is greater than ourselves…well, that’s a fantastic place to find ourselves.

So, what do disciples do? Disciples take faith home, and they draw upon a Source that is greater than themselves. And one way we can do that is through a spiritual practice.

Here at TPC we’ve been using the phrase “spiritual practice” more and more over the last couple of years. I’ve seen it used across other Christian traditions; I’ve seen it used within other religions; and I’ve even seen it within non-religious settings. And *spiritual practice* is a good and helpful term because it gets at a longing to not just believe in God or believe things about God, but to be with God. It’s a desire to experience God *more* and to become more aware of God’s presence in our life. And spiritual practice can help us to find that needed balance between doing and being.

It’s not called a spiritual practice in the Bible, but when Jesus gets up early in the morning and leaves everyone and goes out to a deserted place to be by himself, in silence, and to pray, he’s taking on a spiritual practice. He’s taking on an action that is helping open himself up to God.

And spiritual practice can be defined in many ways, but for me and for us this morning, let’s say this: a spiritual practice helps open ourselves up to God, who longs to be with us. It helps to make us more aware of the God who is always present.

We could say that a spiritual practice helps us to not know more about God but instead helps us to know God and be in relationship with God.

Beliefs about God are important. Absolutely. Push other religions aside for a second and just look at Christianity. Just within Christianity there are countless differing beliefs and understandings about who God is, and some of those beliefs can be downright toxic and describe a God who we just do not believe in. Which means, who we believe and trust God to be is incredibly important. But if we are going to strive to live the way of Jesus, if we are going to lean into the challenging and demanding invitation of discipleship, we need to make sure God is not just found in our heads but also in our hearts. And it’s in our hearts where we are invited to not know more about God, but to know God. And a spiritual practice can open up a space for us where we can become more aware of God’s presence in our life.

You may have seen on Facebook that roughly once a month I offer a short video called *“Practice a Spiritual Practice.”* For 10-15 minutes, I usually lead a guided prayer, that helps us open ourselves up to God, and invite a Voice besides our own to speak to us. But a little over a year ago, I decided to try something different. I wanted to interview my friend, Greg Cochran, due to a conversation I had recently had with him.

Greg is a pastor and the Executive Director at *Well for the Journey*, that’s now in Lutherville. *Well for the Journey* offers fantastic programs, and one day Greg and I were discussing spiritual practices and I was describing to him one that I try and take on, which involves a form of silent prayer - sitting in a chair in the morning for a set period of time, not saying many words, and slowly becoming more aware of God’s presence. And after hearing me explain my practice, Greg quickly said, “Oh, I can’t do that. I can’t sit still for 20 minutes, or 10 minutes. 5 minutes I find to be challenging. For my spiritual practice, he said, I take a walk.”

“Really,” I responded. “You take a walk. Tell me more about that.”

Greg needs to move. Sitting is just not his thing, so he gets outside, and he walks. If he can find the time, he gets out into nature he goes on a hike. But sometimes, he says, it’s taking a walk in the neighborhood where he lives, or where he works. And sometimes it’s even just getting out into his backyard and moving a little bit. But wherever he is walking, he has a very specific intention to his walk: he uses it as an opportunity to open himself up to God, so he can be more aware of “the God who is always moving towards us.” I love that. Spiritual practice for Greg is an opportunity to slowly become more aware of God’s presence in our lives, so we can slowly start to become more aware of how God is moving in our lives.

And Greg’s practice of walking also tells us something really important about spiritual practices.

There’s not one way to do it.

There are numerous ways to open ourselves to God. There’s no one way that will work for all of us. We will often be drawn to different kinds of practices. We all might have different ways that naturally help us to open ourselves up to God and become more aware of God’s presence. For me, it’s sitting in a chair in the morning amidst silence. For Greg, he gets out of the house, and he moves. Both of those might sound appealing to you.

For some of you, I wonder if it might be music. Music might be a way that you are able to be more present with God. I love music but it doesn’t naturally help make me become more aware of God’s presence. For some of you, it might do exactly that. For others, it might be creating some kind of art that has a way of helping you recognize God’s presence with you. For others, getting out into the natural world might be a way of opening yourself up to God. The key for any spiritual practice is to use it as an opportunity to help us become more aware of the God that is present with us, always.

So when we’re taking on a spiritual practice…

We’re not just taking a walk; we are remembering God’s presence, who is always moving towards us.

When we’re taking on a spiritual practice…

We’re not just listening to music; we are opening our heart up to God.

When we’re taking on a spiritual practice…

We’re not just sitting in silence; we’re resting with the One who simply longs to be with us.

Now please hear me when I say this - a spiritual practice is a practice, which means there’s often going to be struggle, and it’s going to feel like the last thing we want to do some days. Some days I finish my spiritual practice and it was meaningful and I’m grateful, and other days it ends, and I say to myself, “Well, that didn’t feel very meaningful. I did not become more aware of God’s presence just now.” But I did it. And there’s something to that.”

That’s why it’s a practice, we keep doing it because a spiritual practice has a profound way of helping us to slowly…*slowly*… not know more about God but move towards knowing God. Over time, a spiritual practice can slowly help to open ourselves up to God, it helps open us up to that Love that we call God so that love can flow through us and out into the world.

And so, TPC, as we begin this Sermon Series, *What Disciples Do*, and slowly begin to explore numerous ways we are invited to live the way of Jesus in the world, let us begin with this: we can’t do it in our own. We’re not supposed to do it on our own. We are invited to draw upon a much larger Source than ourselves.

And a question we might ask ourselves this week is…

What is, or what might be, a spiritual practice for me?

Or how might I open myself up to God in-between Sundays?

What’s my way of being present with God?

Spiritual practice has a powerful way of shaping us. It offers up a space where we can be with God, and it has a profound way of *slowly* forming us into the kind of people that can then go out and love and serve and heal the world.

Disciples.

Thanks be to God.