

Designed for Discipleship

In the sermon series I began three weeks ago, we have so far discovered two purposes for our lives: God has wired us for worship, and formed us for fellowship.

The third purpose for our lives is that we have been created to become more and more like Jesus. The apostle Paul makes this purpose very clear for all believers when he says in Romans 8:29: *“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”* Or, we could put it this way: **God has designed us for discipleship.** We can put it that way because that’s what discipleship means; Christian discipleship is the process of being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

But the question is how: How can that transformation take place in us? In our Scripture lesson from Ephesians 4, Paul gives us three ways to grow in Christ. Ephesians 4:11-13 say, *“So Christ Himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip His people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”*

Now this is very important. The first way we grow to become more like Jesus is through ministry. When we minister to others we grow in our relationship with God. You may think that the chief way we grow is through participating in worship services and studying the Bible and praying together in small groups. But, as helpful and as necessary as these things are, they can only take us so far and not far enough, not if we are going to become like Jesus. In Matthew 20:28, Jesus said, *“ . . . the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”* If we are going to become like Jesus we will have to learn to minister to and serve others.

This doesn’t need to be complicated. To minister is simply to reach out and help and serve people at the point of their needs, whatever those needs may be. It means feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, providing shelter for the homeless, and freedom for those who are oppressed. It means coming against the forces that hurt people, things like loneliness, rejection, fear, discouragement, shame, hopelessness,

and aimlessness. It means working to improve the wellbeing of other persons or families. It means proclaiming and demonstrating the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Each of us can and need to be involved in these ministries. None of us needs to do everything, but all of us need to do something. **When we minister to others in Jesus’ name, we will grow to become more and more, like Him.**

The first thing we discover in our Scripture passage this morning is that we grow to become more like Jesus as we minister to others. This is a main artery on the way of discipleship. A second way we grow to become like Jesus is discovered in Ephesians 4:15, Paul says, *“ . . . speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”* Let us notice here that this verse is a promise. The promise is that if we speak the truth in love to one another and to those around us, *“we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”*

Paul tells us that members of God’s family are intended to help each other grow up into Christ, by speaking the truth to one another in love. And, the word love here is paramount. Going around with a “holier than thou,” judgmental, attitude thumping people over the head with the truth about their sins, will not help them grow. In most cases it will just make them angry and defensive, or drag them down from where they are even further. But when we take the time and make the effort to build relationships of trust and love with each other, when others know that we genuinely care for them then they can receive the truth we have to offer them. **When love and trust is mutual among us we can help each other grow.**

We can help ourselves grow to be more and more like Jesus by ministering to others and by speaking the truth to one another in an atmosphere of love. A third avenue for spiritual growth in discipleship is found in Ephesians 4:22-24: Paul says: *“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

What we discover here is that if we are going to grow to become more and more like Christ we must be committed to being changed. If we keep doing what we’ve always been doing, we will keep getting what

we’ve always been getting. If we want to get something better we need to change what we’ve been doing; we need to submit to a process of repentance and transformation.

For some of us, however, the first thing we are going to need to do to obey this word of God, is to pray for an attitude adjustment. The truth be told, we don’t want to change. In this world, where everything around us is changing so fast, we don’t want more change. What we want, what I want, is permanence. We love the old hymn: “On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.” We like this one better than the one we sang earlier: “Change my heart Oh God.”

So, in order to grow in our discipleship, we need to acknowledge our natural resistance to change and ask the Holy Spirit to increase our spiritual hunger and thirst: Lord, You know how I fear and even loathe change, but I know I have to change if I’m ever to become like You. Lord, make me more hungry and more thirsty for You than I have ever been before. Give me a voracious appetite to become like You.

The truth is that when anyone comes to Christ that person comes to be made new in the attitude of her or his mind. That person comes to be changed. Every believer needs to remain open to that commitment throughout his or her lifetime. Discipleship is a life-long journey of becoming more and more like the Master, becoming more and more like Jesus. **Change is a necessary component of discipleship. God designed us for discipleship.**

Still, change is often difficult, and—in some cases—hard to accept. At our Church Council meeting on February 11th, I announced to Council that I will be retiring from being your pastor at the end of April, 2018. Though this change may seem sudden to you, I can assure you that it’s something that I have been struggling with for many months.

For the most part I love what I do here and I certainly love you. We’ve become family and, on the one hand, for me to change my role in this family, feels like I’m abandoning you. My greatest fear has been that you would take it that way and hate me as one who has betrayed your trust.

But, on the other hand, I’ve slowly but persistently come to the conclusion that my retirement is in the long-term best interest of our

congregation, and if I wasn't so resistant to change, I probably should have done so sooner. The evidence for this is statistical, visual, and spiritual.

First the evidence is statistical. The last time we showed yearly growth in Sunday morning worship attendance was twelve years ago. We've been going down hill more or less steadily since 2006. Which means that every year for the last twelve years, filling out the statistical report for Conference has been a depressing exercise.

I've tried a number of things to stem the tide. I tried to reinvent myself by going back to school. I changed some of the things we do in the worship service. I tried to keep up with the new technologies and newer worship songs. I promoted the hiring of Leann, who is doing a wonderful job for us in ways beyond my expectations. Nevertheless, we continue to lose ground in attendance, and if that continues much longer, the church will not be able to survive.

President Harry Truman kept a sign on his desk in the Oval Office at the White House. The sign said, "The Buck Stops Here." I finally came to the conclusion that you need a fresh leader in the pulpit. The statistics demand it.

Second, the evidence for why I need to retire is visual. Last Saturday Betty Jane and I were coming home from visiting her mother in Florida. We came part way and then stayed in a motel south of Savannah, Georgia. Then, wanting to get home Sunday night, we didn't go to a church Sunday morning. But, to keep from feeling totally guilty, I turned on the television to find at least part of a service there.

Charles Stanley is a good preacher and he was preaching a fine sermon to a packed house, but I saw something interesting. I saw that Charles Stanley is looking pretty old and grey, and when the television camera panned over the congregation, guess what I saw? The preacher was preaching to a matched congregation; that is, they looked a lot like him, old and grey.

Of course, in a church that size I'm sure they have multiple staff and multiple services. I'm sure that there is a place somewhere there for the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of the people who attend the televised service. At least there better be. Otherwise, that

church will be extinct in 20 years or less. When Betty Jane and I first came to Fourth Street we were still in our 30's, with young children. We attracted couples and families that were close to us in age and the church grew. That season in our ministry is long past. Now we too are old and grey.

There is an evaluation tool that our Conference makes available to Church Councils to help them assess the state of their ministries. One of the questions on the evaluation form is this: "Is your current pastor the pastor to lead your church into the future?" When I ask that question of myself, I have to answer "no." We need and you deserve something more. Young families are key to the future and for that I clearly see that it is time for me to go or to at least move over. It's time for a change.

Finally, and perhaps most crucial of all, the evidence is spiritual. It's been a long time since we've seen souls saved at this altar and new members have been too few. I can't blame this on you, for you are a warm and welcoming congregation. You know how to love people and make them feel at home, but the anointing of your leader is lacking. With little fire in the pulpit, our ability to bake fresh bread for the world is sorely diminished. It's not that I have been knowingly unfaithful, or that God has forsaken me; it's just another way He is letting me know it's time for a change. **It is time for a change.**

So the question remaining is this: What are we supposed to do now? Four things. 1) Let us pray like crazy for our next pastor. 2) Let us trust God to provide the right person to lead us into the future. 3) Let us keep on gathering together to love and encourage one another. And, 4) whatever we do, let us not give up on the ministry of this church.

Though I will be stepping down from my role as your pastor at the end of April, I plan to remain your friend and brother in the Lord. We have no plans to move from the area or to quit this church in which we are members. Though we will have to go away for a little while to allow your next pastor to get established, we plan to be back to worship and serve with you in days to come. For now we are excited to see what God is going to do among us and through us. I'll bet it's more than we can begin to think or imagine because God is good all the time, and all the time God is good!

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Ephesians 4:11-24

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