

Chan Willis – F.P.C.-L.C.
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“We’re Better Together: Growing”

1 Corinthians 13:4-6 (NIV); Matthew 7:2-5; 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NRSV)

In this season of Lent we **prepare** ourselves to more fully appreciate and experience what is to come in the Holy Week of Easter... that time in which the **power** and **passion** (suffering) of Jesus Christ was revealed in ways like no other. As his **purpose** for coming to earth was made clear at that culmination of human history, it is during this Lenten time of preparation that we too are considering just what OUR purpose is as His followers. To answer the question posed by our 5-part study, *“What on earth am I here for?”* And in particular, we are considering that purpose within the larger context of the BODY of believers, the church. That as we consider our ‘reason for being,’ we must always remember that in fulfilling God’s purposes for our lives, **we are better together.**

We first considered how we are ‘better together’ when we are **reaching out.** That we are to ‘make the most of every opportunity’ to share the Good News of Jesus with others... that **BOTH actions, AND words,** are indeed necessary. Last week we talked about the importance of **belonging** to a community of faith. That before we try to ‘reach out’ as the ‘hands and feet of Christ,’ we should first make sure we’re ‘reaching in’ to one another with the love of Jesus... Forming that ‘cord of three strands that is not easily broken.’

Today we shift our focus to a different ‘axis’ of our relationships. As opposed to the ways in which we engage those who are on our ‘horizontal plane’ ... ones who either inside or outside our community of faith... we will focus more on our ‘vertical’ relationship directly with God. How we are **growing** in our faith in Jesus Christ... growing as one who is called to be His **disciple.**

I think that it is no mere coincidence that this issue of discipleship is in the ‘middle,’ the CENTER, of our 5 vital elements of being a Christian community... i.e., the **church.** For it is our identity as Jesus’ **disciple** that lies at the very CORE of our purpose on this earth. That who Jesus is to us should be at the very **heart** of who we see ourselves to be.

Now when we use that word “disciple,” what does that mean? A disciple is, of course, a **follower,** a **pupil,** one adheres to the **teachings** of another. Webster’s ‘top shelf’ definition says that a disciple is *“one who **accepts** and **assists** in **spreading** the **doctrines** (principles) of another.”* To be a disciple involves **learning** about the One who being followed... and certainly we Presbyterians have always put a high premium on the value of ‘learning’... of education.

This being said, however, there is a lot more to 'learning' than exercises of the **mind**... more importantly, the lessons we are to learn must be of **heart**. To be a closer disciple of Jesus is not merely about how many Bible studies, seminars, or workshops one attends. But rather, in discerning how we are to live a more Godly, Christ-centered life that bears witness to others in how we treat them... that takes as its example the way that Jesus treated others. In the words of an old saying, "*Children learn more from what is caught than what is taught."* In the same way, Jesus' disciples learned as much from Him by what was 'caught' as what was 'taught.' And all of us... God's 'chirren' ☺ ... can also learn much from 'catching on' to the loving ways of Jesus.

One way that we can 'grow' as a disciple of Christ... in building up 'spiritual muscle'... is in the 'exercise' of **PATIENCE**. (*DANG IT, I sure get TIRED of hearing that word 'PATIENCE!' ☺*) In the first verse of today's passage... v. 4 of *1 Corinthians 13*, the 'LOVE' chapter... it begins with the statement, "***Love is patient.***" Paul would expand a bit on this concept in his letter to the Ephesians: "***Be humble and gentle in every way. Be patient with each other and lovingly accept each other.***" (*Eph. 4:2, GW*)

If there was anyone who embodies what it means to 'be patient' and 'lovingly accept each other,' it would be JESUS! One simple illustration of the Lord's **patience** also begins with the letter 'P' – **Peter**. While Peter was certainly a leader amongst the disciples, he was also singled out for having fallen asleep in the Garden... called 'Satan' by Jesus... at the time of Christ's arrest violently cut off an ear of one of the guards... and, of course, would deny even knowing Jesus 3 times in one day. And yet... Peter would yet be the first to confirm the event of the Resurrection, to see the Risen Lord, and was proclaimed to be 'the Rock on which the church would be built.' Most certainly one to whom Jesus would exhibit patience. A sometimes heroic, sometimes hapless, flawed disciple who gives HOPE to the rest of us followers that our Lord will be **patient** with us as well.

Another character trait of a 'Jesus follower' is found in verse 6 of *1 Corinthians*: "***Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the TRUTH.***" (*1 Cor. 13:6*) Jesus is well-identified with this valuable trait of **truthfulness**. Two of his more well-known associations with 'truth' are found in John's Gospel: "***You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.***" (*John 8:32*) And when he was being interrogated by Pilate, Jesus told him that "***... the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.***" (*John 18:37*) (After which Pilate asks that insightful question: "***Truth? What IS truth?***")

Perhaps the most well-known verse relative to 'truth' is found in *Ephesians*:

“... Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.” (Ephesians 4:15) ‘SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE.’ How many of you think that to ‘speak the truth in love’ is EASY? I sure don’t. I think that for many of us, especially in our polite Southern ‘steel magnolia’ society, we can be very reluctant to speak what we believe to be true because we might offend, or cause conflict, or hurt another’s feelings, or create an awkward, tense situation. Such reluctance can, however, be detrimental to the true, long-term health of the other person, OR to our own.

That is NOT to say that we shouldn’t choose our words carefully. We must ‘know the truth’ of Solomon’s wisdom in Proverbs: **“Thoughtless words can wound as deeply as any sword, but wisely spoken words can heal.”** (Prov. 12:18, TEV) And what other secular ‘proverb’ does this fly in the face of? **“Sticks and stones...”** ☺ As I’ve said before, a lie from the pit of hell. Thoughtless words can indeed hurt deeply... while wise ones can bring great healing.

The importance of truthfulness is well-put in another quote from Proverbs: **“An honest answer is a sign of a true friendship.”** (Prov. 24:26, TEV) That word ‘friend’ is one that can be thrown around rather loosely. But as we look at it from a Christian standpoint... a **‘friend that sticks closer than a brother (or sister)’**... We should know that a TRUE friend is one who can offer honest answers without fear of hurting their relationship... but indeed, to build it up! Truly, ‘wisely spoken words can heal.’ And as we continue in **“Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”** (Ephesians 4:15)

And finally, to grow as a disciple of ‘the head of the body,’ Christ, we must continue to practice **FORGIVENESS**. I firmly believe that there is no principle, no **practice**, that is more central to our Christian faith than that of **forgiveness**. In Paul’s defining statements on LOVE, he says that love **“does not dishonor others... is not self-seeking... is not easily angered... and keeps no record of wrongs.”** (1 Corinthians 13:6) ALL of these are involved with the notion of ‘forgiveness.’ So, in your ‘shopping list’ of Christian virtues, how did y’all do on THESE this week? Now I readily recognize that there are deep hurts that we have endured at the hands... or tongues... of others that have hurt us deeply. And that some wounds take a long time to heal. But we also have opportunities to exercise forgiveness on a more routine, daily basis. And, I must admit that I had an experience just this week that really tested my resolve to ‘not dishonor others’... to ‘not be self-seeking’... to not be ‘easily angered’... or to ‘keep no record of wrongs.’

For some time at our home in BR we have had a water-logged area between the sidewalk and the street, along the side toward the back of the house. In recent weeks it has gotten much worse, with an oily residue on top... a regular 'boggy creek!' We've had a couple of visits from the wastewater dept., who finally said that it wasn't an issue with *their* service, and to contact the Drainage dept. OK... And so, in one day's time, I called a number that they gave me that was "disconnected and no longer in service," got another number to call who gave me another one, which linked me back to the automated screening number I had originally called, interspersed with several responses that all began with, 'you need a work order number.' No DUH...

FINALLY, I was connected with the supervisor of the overall DPW Call Center. As I struggled to take a deep breath before spitting nails at 'Ms. Barbara,' I realized that what I needed here was a little 'forgiveness.' That if I wanted her to see past the 'specks' in her own eye in order to better see things from my perspective, I was going to have to get rid of the 'log' of frustration in my own eye. That if I was going to be seen as a disciple of Christ, I'd better bear in mind the forgiveness that he stood for. In the words of Colossians, ***"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."*** (Col. 3:13, NIV) I think that in ANY disagreement that we may have... from the smallest 'speck' to the biggest 'log'... It is ALWAYS good to heed the 'wise counsel' of God's Word: ***"Forgive as the Lord forgave you."***

And so, as you and I seek to GROW as disciples of Jesus Christ... through the daily, mundane, 'boggy creeks' of life, may we be, as Mr. Webster said, ***"One who **accepts** and **assists** in spreading (His) doctrines."*** Not theological doctrines like 'the sovereignty of God,' 'the authority of Scriptures,' or 'salvation by grace through faith.' But rather, the 'teachings' of Jesus that He lived out every day before His disciples... ones that you and I can 'accept and assist in spreading' EVERY DAY! Spiritual 'disciplines' like **patience... truth... forgiveness.** As we exhibit these types of character traits... ones Paul so eloquently described in his 'love letter' to the Corinthians... We will not only identify with the great Apostle, but with the great Teacher, the ***"Rabboni"*** Jesus: ***"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you LOVE one another."*** (John 13:35) Or, perhaps in the words of 4 other 'gospel writers'... John, Paul, George, and Ringo: 'All you need is LOVE, love'...

In the name of the One who showed such Amazing love for us, Jesus Christ, all God's children said, 'AMEN!'

