

“The Walk: Grow”

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Psalm 119:97, 103-105 (NRSV)

⁹⁷ Oh, how I love your law!

It is my meditation all day long.

¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

¹⁰⁴ Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.

¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

Colossians 3:16-17 (CEB)

¹⁶ The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ Whatever you do, whether in speech or action, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus and give thanks to God the Father through him.

During this series, we are focused on the Five Essential Practices of Discipleship, a process we refer to as “The Walk.” It is my hope that if you are part of the congregation of Church of the Saviour, you will know these five essential practices well and live them.

Why do we refer to these practices as essential? Jesus didn’t call us to *admire* him, but to *follow* him. I don’t want us to settle for *admiration* and miss out on *transformation*. It’s fine to be a *fan* of Jesus, but it’s even better to be a *disciple* of Jesus. A disciple is a student who learns from the teacher and imitates their life. Author Rob Bell quotes a blessing from Second Temple Judaism: “May you be covered with the dust of your rabbi.” Which is to say, *follow your teacher so closely that you gather the dust that rises from their sandals as they walk*. As we are learning to become better disciples of Jesus, we want to follow him closely, not be satisfied to watch from a distance. We want to be covered with the dust of our rabbi.

Why do we call these five things practices? When it comes to faith, what we *believe* is important. But believing isn't enough. The Letter of James teaches us that faith without *action* is insufficient; even *demons* believe. What really matters is what we *do* with what we believe. We need to put our faith into practice, to do what Jesus did and what he taught us to do.

Why these five? I've worked with our leadership over the years to identify and refine the things that are most consistent with Jesus's life and his teaching. We've studied the scriptures and the traditions of the church, tested those against personal experience, and shape the way we name and define these five essential practices: *worship, grow, serve, give, and invite*. We'll explore each of them in detail throughout this series. Today, I'm focusing on the second: *grow*.

When Jenn and I had been married just over a year, we signed up for *Disciple* Bible Study at our church together. I was familiar with *Disciple* because my parents had taught it several times in churches my dad served while I was growing up, though I myself had not taken it. Jenn was immersed in biblical teaching in the church where she grew up, but she had never taken a Bible Study class. We both wanted to grow in our knowledge of scripture and in our relationship, and we thought that would be a good way to do both. It certainly was. *Disciple I* covers the arc of scripture from Genesis through Revelation, looking at the Bible as a continuous narrative about who God is, who we are as humans, and our relationship with God. We came out of the class with a deeper understanding of our place in God's story, but we also formed lasting friendships with the other people in our cohort. There were two other couples around our age, three couples a generation or more older than us, a few wise saints who knew far more about the Bible and about life than we did, and an amazing pastor who led us. Our classmates were more than just fellow learners; discovering God's hope for us, sharing our

perspectives, and praying for each other weekly formed deep bonds. When Jenn and I suffered a miscarriage that fall, our *Disciple* cohort was who we told first, and they were the first to come by our apartment with dinner and hugs and tears shed along with us. When Scott and Susan decided after months of fertility treatments to adopt three siblings from California, we surrounded them with prayers and support, as well as clothes and gift cards. When Bill and Jan had to relocate to Georgia after Bill's job in Cleveland ended, we showered them with love and cards and a gift basket waiting for them at their new home when they arrived. We learned to trust each other with our hopes and fears, our successes and our failures, our half-baked notions about God and insights confirmed by collective discernment.

We emphasize faith development through small groups so strongly at Church of the Saviour because I know first-hand that it works. No way is more effective for growing in discipleship than being part of a small group. It doesn't have to be a 34-week class – small groups can be short term or long term, focused on study or support or accountability. They can meet weekly or bi-weekly or monthly. The important thing is having a circle of people who help each other grow in faith and support one another along the way.

According to the gospel writers, when Jesus began his ministry, he didn't set out on his own. He formed a small group, twelve companions who shared in his ministry, learning and praying and serving together. Each of Paul's letters contain greetings to small group leaders in the churches he founded and visited. John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the Methodist movement, emphasized small groups where people would learn together, serve together, support each other, and hold one another accountable for growing in their faith and living it. In fact, that's how they came to be called *Methodists*, because of the methodical way they

approached their faith. *This idea of small groups for discipleship formation didn't originate with us.* But it has been the lifeblood of Church of the Saviour for decades, long before church growth strategists made it trendy. Small groups became a particular focus in the 1980s with the ministry of Rev. Dave Wilkinson, the architect of intentional small group ministry that remains part of our DNA today. Dave will be back with us via Zoom webinar as part of our COTS Conversation series on February 6, and he'll share some of his experience with small group discipleship throughout his ministry here and in churches he served in Wisconsin.

Several small groups meet regularly at Church of the Saviour or offsite in restaurants, coffee shops, in virtual spaces online, and people's homes. Many groups meet on Sunday mornings, but others meet during the week in the morning or the evening. You'll find a small group listing in your bulletin today. You can join one of them or start your own; we can help you get started. Several new, short-term groups will launch at the end of February as we begin the season of Lent. If you're not currently part of a small group, I encourage you to prayerfully consider making room in your life to engage this essential practice of discipleship.

With each of the practices, there are two components – one we do in community with others and one we do on our own as individuals. They are complementary of each other. Think of it this way: we have two hands. Each one works independently, but there's more strength when we bring the two together. Visually, bringing our hands together also takes on the posture of prayer.

You have five fingers on each hand. One simple way of remembering the individual component of each practice is that they come in groups of five. As Rev. Moseng shared last week, for *worship*, we encourage you to pray five times a day: when you wake up in the

morning, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and before you go to bed at night. You can pick other times if you want and you can pray more often, but that rhythm seems to work well for many of us. For *grow*, we encourage you to read five verses of scripture a day. That corresponds to the length of Bible passages in most daily devotions you can find in *The Upper Room, Our Daily Bread*, or online resources through the United Methodist Church or on the web (our scripture lesson today is six verses). You're certainly welcome to read *more* than five verses a day, just like you can pray more than five times a day, too. In truth, you won't go deep reading only five verses at a time. What we gain from that is a regular, daily practice of turning to scripture for guidance and formation, a centering moment in each day. As you read daily, you're likely to become curious about the stories that surround what you read or interested in reading further once you get started. I encourage you to make time at least occasionally to read larger passages of scripture – an entire psalm or a chapter or two of one of the Gospels, for instance – because we gain a better understanding of the meaning of scripture by taking the time to read larger chunks and reflect on them. But it's important to establish the practice of regular, daily reading of scripture, even a handful of verses. A pristine Bible on the shelf is not nearly as valuable as one that is worn and creased by regular reading.

Be warned: the Bible isn't always an easy read. It is a complex, sometimes baffling collection of writings. It is inspired by God but written by people – people not so different from us who did the best they could to understand God and their relationship with God. The Bible isn't made up of God's *words*, but it is God's *Word*, *capital W* – the sacred book of the church, containing the story of our relationship with God. It isn't always simple to make sense of the Bible, especially on our own. But we are helped when we read it in community.

This past Wednesday in our *Disciple Fast Track* Bible Study class, the question was raised, “Why did we just spend 12 weeks reading the Old Testament? I mean, I know it’s in the Bible and all, but with so many crooked characters and indecipherable symbols and distorted histories and all those laws no one follows anymore and depressing stories of how God’s people failed over and over, what’s the point? Why don’t we just start with Jesus and go from there?” Being the wise and learned guide that I am, I punted. “What do the rest of you think?” I asked. There were some head nods and knowing looks, and at least one or two expressions of solidarity. Then insight began to emerge from the group.

Well, I suppose by reading all the ways they were messed up, maybe it makes us feel a little better when we mess up.

These were the scriptures Jesus knew. We ought to read what he read.

It helps me to think of one continuous story of God’s relationship with us from the very beginning.

We can’t really understand a lot of what the New Testament talks about if we don’t know where that stuff came from.

Jesus said, “you have heard it said...but I say to you...” Without reading the Old Testament, we wouldn’t know what he was talking about.

The New Covenant Jesus gave us at the Last Supper is a fulfillment of the earlier covenants God made with Noah and Abraham and Moses and David. We need to know what they are.

When we’re going through a tough time, it’s good to know that other people have had it worse than us and made it through. It makes us more hopeful people.

Amazing what ideas emerge when we study the Bible together.

The Bible is a gift to us, the record of how people have experienced God over time. It is meant to instruct, to encourage, and to provide solidarity with other people of faith throughout history. It is not meant to oppress, marginalize, or deny anyone access to God, though certain passages can be construed in ways that can cause harm. Treat it with care. And remember that

God's ultimate act of self-revelation was not in written words, but in the flesh, in the person of Jesus – his life, his teaching, his healing, his suffering, his death, and his resurrection. Everything written in scripture points to Christ as the Living Word, the *Logos*. We should read and interpret all scripture in light of Christ, the definitive, unmitigated Word of God.

We do not come to faith fully formed with all the answers to who God is and what God hopes for us. And there is no moment of arrival when we have finally mastered everything there is to know about God and our relationship with God. That's why the second practice is so essential. We need to keep growing in our understanding of God and our relationship with God in order to become who God wants us to be.

One practice, two components. Grow in faith by studying scripture regularly and faithfully – a little every day, larger portions when you can. But growing in faith is not a solo act. Lean on the wisdom and the encouragement of others to help you grow, to discern God's path together, and to help one another on the way. As we grow in relationship, God becomes more present to us and we to God.

Let's all do our part to be not just *fans*, but *disciples* – followers of Jesus who are growing in faith as we journey together. *May you be covered with the dust of your rabbi.* Amen.