



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

2537 Lee Road
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118-4136
Telephone: 216-321-8880
Website: www.COTSumc.org

“Growing Deeper in Faith”

May 14, 2023

John 15:1-8

Rev. Amanda Moseng, Pastor of Discipleship

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes^[a] to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed^[b] by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become^[c] my disciples.

Church of the Saviour is a Christian community committed to growing deeper in faith and pursuing God's hope for every life.

Today we are continuing in our sermon series “Re:Vision,” where we are exploring the new vision statement for Church of the Saviour. Last week Rev. Call gave us an overview of how we got to this point and challenged us to step out of our comfort zones as we embark on a new path. Will we follow God and go the places God is calling us to go? For the rest of the Sundays in our series we will explore specific portions of the vision statement and what they mean for us. As a reminder, our vision is: *Church of the Saviour is a Christian community committed to growing deeper in faith and pursuing God's hope for every life.* Today we are going to explore what “growing deeper in faith” means for us. I think we can all appreciate the merits of why we want to grow deeper in faith, so I want to focus on the how. How do we grow deeper in faith?

There is excitement around having a new vision. It gives us a picture of where we hope to go and of what we aspire to be. Our new vision is actionable, meaning it gives us direction for the things we want to do. Doing things for God is important, even better to do them with God. But I want us to be mindful. Our vision does have a “doing” component, but it needs to be rooted first in “being” with God. We get caught up in this in our everyday lives. Our schedules are full. Our lives are busy. We are being pulled in multiple directions. We have so many different things vying for our attention and energy. I feel it. Churches do it. Our schedules are filled with programs, events, and activities. There are so many ministry opportunities, so many needs to be met.

There is always something we can do, particularly in ministry. There is always work to be done. However, we run the risk of doing things for God and in the process, neglecting the necessary time spent in God's presence (the “being” part). We cannot effectively live out our vision without first centering ourselves in God. More specifically, abiding with God.

Our scripture passage for today starts with Jesus describing himself as the true vine and his Father as the vinegrower. Every branch in Jesus that does not bear fruit is removed and the branches that do bear fruit are pruned so that they can bear even more fruit. Jesus continues by saying to his disciples that they have already been pruned (or cleansed, as in our translation today- pruned and cleansed have the same root in Greek) by the word that he has spoken to them. That refers to all of the teachings that Jesus has already

shared with the disciples and therefore, us. We cannot escape the pruning process and it should not be seen as something negative. That does not mean it is an easy process, but it is a process that makes us more fruitful.

But how exactly do we bear fruit in the first place? By abiding in Christ. Jesus said, “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” Let’s unpack these couple of verses, particularly in light of our vision.

When Jesus said, “abide in me,” this was not a casual suggestion. In fact, it was a command. The Greek word here for abide is μένω (menō), which also means remain, continue, stay, or dwell. More specifically, it is to be in a state that continues and may or may not stop. It is a continual action. Jesus uses the analogy of a vine and branches to support his point. The vine is important for the health and wellbeing of the branches. By default, the branches are connected to the vine. Branches cannot bear fruit unless they are connected to the vine, and neither can we. We will not bear the fruit God desires for us unless we remain connected and abide with Jesus.

In thinking about our vision, it has an active component. We aspire to pursue God’s hope for every life. But we cannot know God’s hopes and dreams for every life unless we first spend time abiding with God. We cannot live this vision out on our own, or maybe I should say we cannot effectively live out this vision on our own. The branches are not their own source of nutrients, energy, and strength. The vine is. Likewise, we are not our own source for discerning God’s hopes, of where God is calling us to participate and co-labor with God in God’s mission for the world. We cannot figure all of that out on our own. I appreciate the sincere desire to do something, but it needs to be balanced with being in God’s presence, abiding in Christ.

Jesus made a statement that feels really harsh: “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” We can read that through an eschatological lens, considering what this means in terms of judgment and the end of times, but I invite us to receive it as a warning of what can happen if we get so caught up in doing that we neglect to spend the crucial time abiding with God. We can burn out if we do not continually return to our source of life and renewal. We can lose direction if we do not keep coming to God seeking our next faithful step. We wither when we disconnect ourselves from God, and from one another, for that matter. Abiding in Christ is crucial to our spiritual health and growth. What does that look like for us?

How many of you are tea drinkers? When I was attending and serving at Oxford UMC, I was part of a women’s small group that met on Thursday evenings. The woman who hosted the gathering always had a wonderful selection of tea, and I’m talking about the good, expensive brands. She nurtured my love of licorice root tea, with the perfect amount of natural sweetness. Licorice root plus mint is the perfect tea combination for me. But anyways, we would all make a cup of tea before getting into our study for the evening. Now, there are many ways to make tea, some probably better than others. One way is dipping the tea bag into the cup of water. You dip it in the water for a bit, then take it out. The process repeats until the tea is at your desired strength. Others will take the tea bag and let it steep for an extended period of time.

A parallel can be made between making tea and our spiritual lives. Yes, I said what I said. Sometimes we are “dippers.” We dip in and out of prayer. We dip in and out of attending a small group. We dip in and out of attending worship. We dip in and out of reading scripture. We all have various reasons for doing this, none of which are necessarily bad, but it is an honest expression of our spirituality. I know I am guilty of it. The problem with “dipper” spirituality is that the work of transformation is happening on our terms, not God’s.

And I recognize that there are seasons of our lives where this is the best we can do. There is no shame in that. This is true particularly around times of transitions and change. But if we are a serial “dipper” and this is our only mode of operation, I believe we are missing out on the abundance of life that Christ offers to us. We are missing the opportunity and invitation to go deeper in faith. To grow in faith. We cannot go very deep in our faith if we only stay at the surface. We cannot experience the fullness of the transformation and life God hopes for us if we are not consistent.

Rather than “dippers,” we should be “dwellers.” This is where the whole concept of abiding with God comes into play. And this is not about perfection but developing the rhythm and habit of spending time with God, of keeping a continual connection to God as we go throughout our day. We have the example of Christ, who continually withdrew and went to places so that he could pray. He remained connected to his Father, to God, all throughout his ministry. We, too, must remain connected to Jesus. This means we arrange our lives in such a way that we do not forget about God, so that God does not become an afterthought but is the very first thought.

Abiding with God is an intentional decision we must make every day. We know that there are plenty of other things that grab for our attention, so we have to consciously decide to abide with God. I am going to share some ideas for how we can develop this rhythm of abiding with God, but I do not want you to see it as a checklist of things for you to do. This is not about doing but being connected with God. In addition, we are all wired differently. Some of these suggestions might resonate with you while others will not. I encourage you to give them a try and see if they help you build that connection with God.

First is praying right when you wake up and right before you go to bed. A lot of us will check our phones right when we wake up or right before we go to bed. If you want to check your phone before you get out of bed in the morning, more power to you. However, before you do that, try praying a brief prayer that centers you in God’s presence and offers your day to God. For me it is as simple as “God, thank you for a new day. Help me to love and serve you today.” Right before bed is a great time to reflect on the day, asking for forgiveness and a fresh start the next day. Nighttime prayers can also be as simple as “God, help me to fall asleep and rest in your presence.” Bookending our days with these little centering prayers helps us stay connected.

Another prayer practice is “praying without ceasing.” This comes from 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and it might seem really extreme. Pray without ceasing? How is that possible? Think of it as keeping open lines of communication. Talk with God as you go throughout your day. Whether in your head or out loud is up to you. Offer God thanks for the cool breeze and the sunshine. Thank God for the opportunity to meet up with a friend. If you are facing a decision or something you are uncertain about, tell God about it. There is nothing too small or insignificant for God. Tell God about your day and be sure to listen for God’s response. These open lines of communication keep us connected to God throughout our day.

Jesus desired for his words to abide in his disciples. He indicated that his word had a cleansing or pruning effect on his disciples. We benefit from knowing the word of God. We grow deeper in faith when we spend time reading scripture. Scripture is a way God speaks to us. If you come across a verse that really resonates with you, write it down and post it in a place you will see it. Borrowing from Colossians 3:16, by reading and meditating on scripture the word of Christ will dwell richly in our hearts. It becomes part of us.

The final suggestion is making space for silence. Silence is hard because our minds tend to race and fill the quiet space. Start small. Set a timer on your phone for 3 minutes and you can build from there if you desire. Do not worry about losing focus or your mind wandering. Every time your mind wanders is an

opportunity to return to God. Silence is not transactional. It is not about what we gain but is purely about communion with God. It is simply being in God's presence for the joy of being in God's presence.

These practices root us in being in God, abiding with God, before we aim to do anything. They give us direction, wisdom, and discernment. They help us to know God's heart and mind. By default, we will grow deeper in faith. All of the time that we spend with God will cause us to grow. Growing deeper in faith does not require elaborate, lengthy practices. It is the little things we do every day to stay connected to God. There are many good ways to grow deeper in faith, including being part of a small group. I encourage you to find the rhythms that nurture your spiritual life and help you grow deeper in faith. And we barely touched on the process of pruning, which is another way in which we grow. I speak to that in the Rooted devotional that goes to your inbox and the COTS Facebook page every Sunday at 12:15pm. Check it out to see how the process of God pruning us allows us to grow deeper in faith.

We are at an exciting time in the life of Church of the Saviour. We have discerned and discovered our new vision, which feels like a huge step forward as we navigate the post-pandemic world. There is much work to be done as we pursue God's hope for every life. There are countless ways for us to put our faith in action and show God's love to our neighbors. But before we do all that, let's start by abiding with God. Let's root ourselves in God's presence and dwell with God. Not so that we delay in taking action or figure out all the steps beforehand. Let's start with growing in our knowledge and love of God by being with God so that we can more fully know God's hope. Let's not lean on our own understanding but keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. How about we grow together so that we can more effectively go together. Let's grow deeper in faith so that we can pursue God's hope for every life. Thanks be to God. Amen.