

## “FRUITFUL: Intentional Faith Development”

Deuteronomy 6:1-13 • Matthew 28:16-20

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Church attendance in the United States peaked in 1965. Participation in churches has declined nearly every year since then. What happened? I think it's safe to say the world today is very different than it was 60 years ago. It's different than it was 20 years ago or even 2 years ago. And yet the church hasn't really changed all that much. I don't just mean our church. The way we think about church and the mission of the church is pretty much the same as it was in 1965. I'm not talking about the order of our worship service or the music we sing. I'm talking about what the church is supposed to be about. What's our purpose in the world?

There is a great book by the historian Stephen Ambrose called *Undaunted Courage*. It's about Meriwether Lewis and the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the Louisiana Purchase. When Tod Bolsinger, who is a professor at Fuller Seminary in California and a Presbyterian minister, read *Undaunted Courage*, he noticed that the situation of Christianity in the United States is very similar to what Lewis and Clark faced. In his book, *Canoeing the Mountains*, Bolsinger points out that Lewis and Clark had assembled the best canoeing team in the world. They had paddled all the way to the headwaters of the Missouri river. All the best scientific information at the time told them that they would need to carry their canoes over a short distance and they would find the beginning of the Columbia River that would take them to the Pacific Ocean. Instead, what they found was the Rocky Mountains. Miles and miles of mountain peaks in all directions. Bolsinger says at that moment the question that Lewis and Clark had to answer was, “how do you canoe over mountains?” The answer, of course, is that you can't. They had to adapt and find new ways of doing things.

You could say the Church in North America is in the same boat. The world we find ourselves in is radically different than the one we've been in

for the past sixteen hundred years. The Church is no longer the center of our culture.

You may have heard that I recently finished my Doctor of Ministry degree. This is what I was studying. The official name of my cohort was called *Leadership in a Changing Church Context*. The question we sought to answer was how we lead the church to carry out its mission in the world we live in today.

So what *is* the mission of the church? I'm glad you asked. In Matthew 28, Jesus is about to ascend to heaven. It's been over a month since his Resurrection and hundreds of people who had seen him crucified and buried have now seen him alive again. His disciples have had several encounters with him during that time. Now he meets his disciples in Galilee, back where they started three years earlier, and he gives them his final instructions. He's telling them what they are to do while he's gone. This is their mission. It's the mission of the Church. He says, “your job is to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

That's the timeless mission of the church – to make disciples of Jesus. What's a disciple? The world disciple simply means student. Dallas Willard paraphrased Jesus' instructions like this: “As you go throughout the world, make apprentices to me from all kinds of people, immerse them in Trinitarian reality, and teach them to do everything I have commanded you.” Our job is to make apprentices of Jesus. While a student learns information *from* a teacher, an apprentice learns *to be like* the teacher.

Last week we started a new sermon series called, *Fruitful*, looking at five practices of fruitful congregations. A “fruitful” congregation would be one that is carrying out the mission God has given it of helping people follow Jesus and become like him. These five practices are

radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. Hopefully you remember from last week that radical hospitality is the sacred process of welcoming strangers into our lives and changing them from strangers to guests and from guests into family. We do it so they can see Jesus up close. The old saying really is true. You may be the only Bible someone reads this week.

This week we are looking at intentional faith development. Another word for faith development is *discipleship*. Disciples don't just learn facts, they put their knowledge into action. When we look at what the Bible says Jesus expects of his disciples a couple of things stand out. First, being a disciple of Jesus involves personal sacrifice. In Luke 14:27 Jesus says, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." He goes on to give an analogy of counting the cost before building a tower or going to war against an enemy. In the same way Jesus warns us to count the cost of following him. In Luke 14:33 he adds, "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

The second thing that becomes apparent from studying what Jesus expects from his disciples is that we are to live a noticeably different kind of life. This is summed up in John 15:8-10 where Jesus says, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." Jesus expects his disciples to "bear fruit." What kind of fruit? Love is the big one. In John 13:35 Jesus says, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The fruit that Jesus expects, growing out of love, is for his disciples—that would be YOU—to make more disciples through relationships.

So Jesus expects all of his followers to grow in their faith, becoming more like him. He expects each of us to grow in our knowledge of the Bible. And he expects the Church to be involved in our faith development. That's where the "intentional" part comes in. Anybody ever accidentally get married? Or accidentally go to college? No. You have to do those on purpose. It's the same with your faith development. You will never "accidentally" become more like Jesus. The way of Jesus is almost always radically different than the way of the world. You don't accidentally consider others more important than yourself. You didn't accidentally bring a box or two of diapers for the diaper drive. To be a disciple—an apprentice—of Jesus takes work and it takes planning. You have to make the decision that you are going to grow in your faith and the church must have a plan to help you grow.

When you look at how Jesus taught his disciples, it was by spending lots of time with them, teaching them along the way. Sometimes he taught them with words, but more often they learned by watching how Jesus lived and how he interacted with other people. A great way to think about this is the difference between a travel agent and a tour guide. Travel agents will help you book a trip but they don't go with you and may never have been to your destination at all. A tour guide, on the other hand, is someone who has been where you are going and knows the way. Tour guides say, "come with me. I'll show you." That's how discipleship is supposed to work. Every one of us is supposed to be growing in faith and every one of us is supposed to be helping others grow. So how do we do that?

As I said, the first step is that you have to *want* to grow. You must make the decision to be an apprentice of Jesus, to learn to do what he tells us to do. Once you have made that decision the second step is to gather with a group of others who also want to become more like Jesus and together start learning from Him. Several of you participated in my doctoral

project, which was to participate in what we called “microgroups.” These are groups of three or four people who commit to spending 15 minutes every day reading a section of Scripture, thinking about what it means and how it applies to their life and writing it down in their journal, and praying. The groups then met about once a week to build relationships and discuss where they saw God at work in their lives.

This isn't the only way of discipleship but it seems to be a pretty good way. You could also

participate in Sunday School or in a larger small group Bible study. The important thing is to be intentional about doing something and sticking with it and for us as a church to be intentional about meeting people where they are and having a plan to help them become more like Jesus in all areas of their life. Because if we all will make the commitment to intentionally be apprentices of Jesus, our church will in fact be a fruitful congregation.

*Amen.*