

Proverbs 18:20-21; 25:11-13

<sup>20</sup> From the fruit of the mouth one's stomach is satisfied; the yield of the lips brings satisfaction.

<sup>21</sup> Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.

<sup>11</sup> A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.

<sup>12</sup> Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise rebuke to a listening ear.

<sup>13</sup> Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest are faithful messengers to those who send them; they refresh the spirit of their masters.

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### **“Raising Up Workers” video**

**“Who am I going to leave?”** I want to leave a generation of disciples who will make disciples better than I did. That way, we will have a great movement of God that will never end.” Isn't that a great vision? If someone asked you about the vision for your life, is that similar to the answer you would give?

Even more than our recent topic of evangelism, this morning's topic of discipleship has really challenged me this week. I can do evangelism with relative ease. Because faith is so central to who I am and what I do, it's easy for me to end up in conversations about God and about the good news of God's love and salvation through Jesus.

But, discipleship is different. Discipleship is deeper. Discipleship requires more of me... more investment, more commitment, more ownership, more love. And, as it turns out, I'm much more accountable to God for my discipleship. Why? Because Jesus said that, if we love him, we will follow his commands. And, do you remember **what Jesus commanded and commissioned us to do?** Love one another. That's first in proving we are Jesus' disciples. And then second, Jesus said, go and make disciples.

My friends, I think this congregation earns high marks in the disciplines of love and fellowship and community. But, this morning, I think we need to carefully consider our grade point average when it comes to discipleship. And that certainly includes my own efforts to make disciples, too.

Consider this statement from our brothers and sisters at discipleship.org. **They recently wrote**, “We know this one fact: the most effective and lasting discipling is that which is done by parents in the home. Statistically, nothing comes close.” [Citing a 2015 study by the National Association of Evangelicals, they continue,] “Sociologists call it the 4-14 window: the majority of people (63%) who become Christians do so between four and fourteen years of age. The study told us another 34% do so between 15-29. Let us state it this way: a church can get an A+ for discipling adults, but if it does not get parents to disciple their children, that church (not the Director of Family Ministry, the CHURCH) will get a failing grade.”

We’ll come back to that topic here in a bit, because I want to be clear about what this means for East Woods and what it doesn’t mean. But, for clarity’s sake, let’s define some terms here first.

What are we talking about when we talk about discipleship? **In the Greek** portions of our Bible, the word translated as disciple is the word ‘mathetes.’ A mathetes is a student or learner or follower. So, discipleship is the condition of learning from or following someone. Jesus wasn’t the only person in the biblical world with disciples. The Bible refers to the disciples of Moses and the disciples of John the Baptist, too. It was really common in the 1<sup>st</sup> century for Hebrew teachers or rabbis to have disciples, and typically those disciples would voluntarily join a rabbinic school or seek out a master rabbi with the hope of someday becoming rabbis themselves.

Each rabbi had a body of teachings and wisdom sayings that was referred to as that rabbi’s yoke. So, in the same way that an ox would carry the yoke of its master, the disciple of a particular rabbi would commit to putting on and carrying forward the yoke of that master rabbi – putting it into practice in his own life and then passing along that teaching to others as a way of preserving the legacy of his master rabbi’s wisdom.

So, to say that we are Christian disciples means that we are committed to the yoke of our master rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. And, our rabbi’s yoke was incredibly unique. It was unique in one way because, **as Jesus said in Matthew 23**, his disciples would not become rabbis or instructors but would always instead be students of the Christ or Messiah, our lifelong master rabbi. Second, Jesus was **clear in Matthew 11** that his yoke – his body of teaching and wisdom – was different from the difficult and burdensome yokes of other rabbis.

Instead, Jesus called to him those who were carrying heavy burdens and said that his yoke was easy and his burden light. And then, he went on to summarize his yoke with one very simple but very powerful law – the law of love. That’s the essence of the yoke we commit to carrying and passing on to others as disciples of Jesus.

Now, love may be an easy summary. But, as we all know, living it out was costly for Jesus, and it is costly for Jesus’ disciples, ourselves included.

**The realities of true discipleship are described well, I think, in the 2019 book *Reframation*** by authors Alan Hirsch and Mark Nelson. They wrote, “The safe, secure and prosperous life is not the life followers of Jesus have been given and are called to participate in. The overwhelming testimony of the Bible is that people who come into contact with God will be swept up into a whirlwind of action, excitement, and adventure as well as the pain, struggle and suffering that is inevitably part of what it means to follow Jesus. This is known in the New Testament as “abiding in Christ,” being filled with the Holy Spirit, and discipleship.”

As I mentioned last week, **Jesus was radically inclusive** in the way he invited people to experience the kingdom of God. But, he was also really honest and really clear with potential disciples that there would be sacrifices and costs to all those who accepted the invitation to follow him. As the gospels tell us, some would-be followers heard what Jesus said, considered the costs and conditions, and decided they had other priorities to attend to.

What becomes clear is that discipleship is about more than just believing in Jesus. Even the demons believed Jesus was the Son of God. Right? But, they sure weren’t his committed followers. In fact, knowing who Jesus was caused them to flee rather than follow. Again, discipleship is about deciding to follow Jesus through the whirlwind of action, excitement, and adventure as well as pain, struggle and suffering.

To put this in the context of **our sermon series**, we’re talking during this Lenten season about how we live out our Christian calling in community. And, Pastor Rick Warren, who wrote our devotional book for this season, related the topic of discipleship in Christian community to the experience of growing together.

Many of you have likely had in your homes **a door frame or chart somewhere** to track the growth of kids in your family. Maybe you've put tick marks on a wall somewhere and written in the name and date and height of a child to show how much growth has happened. And, if you've had more than one kid to track, you've had the chance to compare the growth and progress of different kids along the way.

Well, if we were to try to track growth in the discipleship of our congregation over the years, how do you think we would do that? What do you think our growth chart might look like at this point, almost 21 years after East Woods became an official PCUSA congregation? More importantly, what are we going to do from today forward to follow Jesus in growing together as disciples of our Lord?

The definition of discipleship from our friends at discipleship.org offers us three really good, really practical steps for growing together. They say that **discipleship involves 1) Following Jesus, 2) Being transformed by Jesus, and 3) Committing to the mission of Jesus.** Following Jesus. Being transformed by Jesus. And, committing to Jesus. How do we live out those steps to grow together as the congregation of East Woods?

First, **we grow together by following Jesus.**

To put that another way, we become better followers of Jesus when we join together in doing what Jesus did. Various people who have studied the ways Jesus used his time in the Bible tell us that somewhere between 65-90% of his time was spent in discipleship. 65-90% of Jesus' waking life on earth was spent in loving relationship with people as he demonstrated the kingdom of God, taught people about the kingdom of heaven, and gathered people into kingdom community. It ought to challenge us a bit to realize that only a very small portion of Jesus' disciple-making work took place in the religious facilities of the day – the temples and synagogues around Galilee and Capernaum and Jerusalem.

Instead, Jesus' discipleship took place in homes, around tables, on walks, during everyday conversations, and in community gathering places. In other words, following Jesus wasn't just about going to church. It was about being the church – about being kingdom people – every moment of every day.

As the folks at Discipleship.org are fond of saying, **“Doing church doesn’t disciple people. People disciple people.”** And, following Jesus means being disciplined by people so that we can disciple people who will go on to disciple more people.

Because Jesus was guided by the Hebrew Scriptures, it shouldn’t surprise us that the way he disciplined people put into action the words of the Shema. The Shema is a portion of the Jewish Torah that is central to the heart of Hebrew teaching and life and understanding about God. It’s found in Deuteronomy Chapter 6, and it gives us not only the Great Commandment Jesus pointed to but also instructions for discipleship. **Verses 4-9 of Deuteronomy 6 read like this:**

**4** Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. **5** You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. **6** Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. **7** Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. **8** Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, **9** and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

God’s commands were not just to be on the hearts of parents; they were to impress them on their children. God and his commands were to be the topic of conversations around the house, when they got up, when they sat at home, when they traveled along the road, and when they would lie down together at night.

Since we don’t have gates to write God’s commands on, we just brought Gates on to the church staff, with God’s commands already written on Kevin’s heart. One of the many things I appreciate about Kevin and his work with our families is Kevin’s intentional work to provide resources for parents to be discipling our kids at home. He sends us craft kits and mid-week videos with discussion guides that relate to what we’re learning in our worship services. He’s busy working with our commissions to prepare Sunday school discipleship and family-friendly spaces on campus and summertime Vacation Bible School events. And, I want to make sure that we are giving Kevin and giving the parents of our younger disciples the support they need so that we’re all working together in raising these children in the knowledge and faith and love of Jesus.

God has given us the amazing privilege of partnering with the Stepaneks and the Grahams, the Rileys and the Roepers, the Paulats and Kennedys and Coats-Clemens so that our students and younger disciples know they are loved and surrounded by followers of Jesus who want to help them follow Jesus, too. The Sperry boys have an uphill battle with whatever their parents are doing at home. Prayers on the family's behalf, please.

I do believe that, if we want to follow Jesus in our discipleship and disciple-making, we need to be working together as a whole congregation to nurture the faith lives of the children God has added to our church family, not just on Sundays but all week long. As Jesus said, the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. We grow together first by following Jesus.

### **Second, we grow together by being transformed by Jesus.**

Springtime is such a wonderful season of transformation. We see things that look lifeless starting to burst with growth and color. Seeds turn into flowering plants and foods we can eat. We get all of these reminders of resurrection and growth and transformation. And, in the lives of people, Christ-centered discipleship is probably the greatest source of transformation we get to see and to participate in.

Last week, we looked at the fellowship of the early church as Luke described it in Acts 2. And, we say the transformation of the people who witnessed the events the Holy Spirit brought through the disciples at Pentecost.

The bystanders who heard Peter's testimony about Jesus were cut to the heart and asked the disciples, **"Brothers, what should we do?"** And, in response, Peter instructed them to take the steps of discipleship so that they could be transformed by Jesus in the context of Christ-centered community. **They repented and were baptized** in Jesus' name. They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. They spent time together and shared their resources with each other generously so that none were in need. And, as Luke reported, **day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.**

That's a lot of discipleship transformation in 10 short verses. But, that's what we see over and over again with sound discipleship. The presence of Jesus has remarkable transforming power.

For the thousands added to the faith in Acts 2, the presence of Jesus had the power to transform perplexed people into purposeful people, divided individuals into a devoted community, and lost sinners into saved and loving souls.

Since Jesus is no longer with us bodily, we who make up the body of Christ become the physical presence of the God who is still actively transforming people by the work of His Holy Spirit. And, I believe that, when the body of Christ functions in the way we were meant to function in relationship with God and with one another, spending time with one another can bring transformation that can't come from time alone or time with any other type of community. It's in this community that we can truly experience and live out the kind of loving, transforming discipleship Jesus invited us into. It's in community with one another that we experience the love and forgiveness and truth and grace of God.

Together, God transforms us by the renewing of our minds as we lovingly challenge each other, serve and worship and give together, speak the truth in love to each other, encourage and pray for one another, witness to the activity of God in our lives, confess sins to one another, and experience forgiveness together. Other communities may transform us into better athletes or scholars or socialites, but only the body of Christ can transform us to be better disciples and better disciple makers.

On this note, I was excited to see that one of the Top Ten Trends for Disciple-Making suggested by Discipleship.org is mastering what they call **phygital ministry**. Phygital is a word that simply combines physical and digital, and the basic idea is simply to have disciple-making groups that combine regular in-person gatherings with regular digital gatherings. Considering the ways we've worked to embrace technology that has kept us connected over the past year and the ways we're developing Community Groups that offer both in-person and digital gathering, I think we're keeping pretty close to the front line of transformative discipleship for this season of our congregation's life. And, I continue to feel grateful for your dedication and willingness to adapt and for the great team of people who have worked really hard to make these transformations in our ministry as seamless as possible.

So, let's continue to meet together in phygital ways so that the Spirit of God can continue to work through the body of Christ to transform us as disciples and disciple-makers. We grow together when we are transformed by Jesus.

**Lastly, we grow together by committing to the mission of Jesus.**

Jesus defined his mission this way in the gospels. He said, **“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”** And, when he co-missioned his disciples at the end of his earthly ministry, the mission he gave was this, “Go, and make disciples.” Not just, “Go to church and be disciples.” But, go into the world and make disciples of the nations.” That is the mission followers of Jesus have been asked to commit to, and we don't get better at it by sitting on the sidelines or resting on our time in the pews. Worship is important, but we grow together as Christ-followers by following Christ together in our shared commitment to seeking the lost, sharing the news of salvation in Christ, and making disciples who will make more disciples.

I'm struck by the fact that within one chapter of calling the last of his 12 disciples, Jesus began sending them out two-by-two to proclaim the good news of the kingdom. In Matthew 10, before they'd seen the crucifixion or the resurrection or really come to fully understand who he was, Jesus said to them, 16, 28 **“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”**

Do you think the 1<sup>st</sup> Century disciples felt totally prepared for that mission? Probably not. Most of them had only walked with and watched Jesus for a very short time. But, Jesus knew that they would learn and grow best by doing. And, so he tested their commitment to the mission, and he tested their trust in him as the one who gave them authority to carry it out. My question for you is, “Will you do the same?” Many of us have been in church learning about Jesus for most of our lives but haven't yet truly committed to the mission of Jesus. If your journey of faith lacks life or growth, it may be because you've only just dipped your toe in to test the water. Maybe it's time to follow Jesus more fully. As Proverbs 25:13 declared to us earlier, **“Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest are faithful messengers to those who send them; they refresh the spirit of their masters.”**

If you feel like you're long overdue in making that commitment, take heart. There is grace and mercy for failed disciples, even schmucks like me! If you've turned back or fallen short or gotten stagnant in your growth, I promise that God hasn't given up on you. Even after Peter denied Jesus three times, our Lord pursued him to invite him to join the journey again – and as a leader in the movement! God may be ready to make you a leader in the movement of His mission, too.

**So, who are you going to leave?** Do you want to leave a generation of disciples who will make disciples better than you did? Lord willing, we'll do our part to follow Jesus, to be transformed by Jesus, and to commit to the mission of Jesus that brings about a great movement of God that will never end.