

July 14, 2013

A Sermon Preached by  
The Reverend Dr. W. Douglas Hood, Jr.

On the occasion of  
The Installation of Rev. Jessi Higginbotham  
Associate Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DELRAY BEACH

*The Community Church by the Sea*

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## What Makes A Disciple?

John 15:8

### **Will You Pray With Me?**

*Gracious God, You have always chosen leaders to direct Your people in the way of Jesus Christ. We thank You for calling Jessi Higginbotham into ministry and for directing her path to us. On this day that we install her as our Associate Pastor, we ask that You grant her uncommon wisdom. Grant that her ministry among us be one that inspires and equips us for even greater impact for Your Kingdom. Amen.*

I don't remember the exact details of this story and you may correct me following the service if you recall this incident with greater clarity. Some years ago, a guest in the office of Mr. Ford noticed something exhibited in a lovely display case. He asked Mr. Ford about the object and Ford responded that it was the very first carburetor for the Ford Mustang. It was, as Ford described it, "A thing of incredible beauty."

"That's no carburetor," responded Ford's guest. "Well, yes it is. I build cars. I know a carburetor when I see

one. This is the first one ever manufactured for the Mustang," responded Ford.

"With all respect," Mr. Ford, "I know something about cars as well. That's not a carburetor. It is nothing more than a huge chunk of bright, shining metal. Carburetors work with other components of an engine to move a car forward. That piece of metal isn't connected to anything and moves nothing. That's not a carburetor."

After that conversation, Mr. Ford removed that chunk of metal from his office, had a special Mustang built and installed it into the engine. After placing fuel into that new Mustang, Mr. Ford inserted the keys into the engine, turned the keys and the engine hummed. Ford then took that car out of the garage and went for a drive. On that day, a piece of bright, shining metal became a carburetor.

Friends, a ticket for a show is of no value until it gets you into the theater.

A plane isn't a plane until it is flown. A ballet dancer who does not dance isn't a ballet dancer. And a chunk of metal isn't a carburetor until it works with other components and moves a car forward.

Years ago when my children were quite young, I took a Sunday off from my Florida church. My family worshiped at the First Presbyterian Church in Highlands, North Carolina. As young children do, my own became restless during the service and my wife removed them from the Sanctuary. I remained and enjoyed the service as I always do – speaking the liturgy with gusto and singing the hymns with great enthusiasm. At the end of the service, a woman seated in front of me turned and said, “You must be a minister.” “What makes you think I am a minister?” I asked. “I listened to you sing. You're no choir member. The only other people who sing out like that are ministers.”

Friends, that woman made an important observation that day. Choir members tend to have a decent voice. I do not. More importantly, however, even those who can sing well are not a choir member until they actually sing in a choir.

Here in John's Gospel, Jesus tells us what makes a disciple – disciples bear fruit. Simply, a disciple produces disciples.

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produces disciples.*

I know churches that spend considerable time and financial resources developing a compelling, well-worded mission statement. There is nothing wrong with that effort as long as the church isn't renegotiating the mission given to it by Jesus. Jesus tells us plainly that the church is to make disciples who make disciples.

Why are churches not more effective in advancing this mission? The reasons are many, but I share the three I most often see. First, we permit people to hold onto the belief that they can be good Christians without belonging to a church. Jesus takes issue with that. In His own ministry, Jesus tells us not to fail to meet together, to pray together and for one another and to worship together. There is simply no support in the scriptures for following Jesus without belonging to a faith community.

Second, many church members become very busy with church activities, while neglecting their own formation as a follower of Jesus. When we are not growing as a Christian, we have little to say to another about following Jesus. Busyness in church does not equal spiritual growth.

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Third, we are distracted from Jesus' mission by the details of church life. I served a church once where people were more concerned with what the young people were wearing to church than asking, "Are they growing in their obedience to Jesus?" A racecar driver has one question before an important race, "Will this car complete the race?" How the car is decorated is of little importance.

Tim Bowden, in his book, One Crowded Hour, wrote of the 1964 confrontation between forces of Malaysia and Indonesia. A tribal group in Malaysia was asked: "Are you willing to jump from transport planes into combat against Indonesians?" The tribal group had the right to decline. They were not trained for combat nor did they have any training parachuting from aircraft. Nonetheless, they usually agreed to anything when they believed in a common purpose, so the question was asked. They said no.

The next day, the tribal leader came back and said, "We discussed your

question last night. We will jump to advance our cause but under three conditions. First, the land below our jump must be marshy, soft and no rocks. Second, fly the plane as slowly as possible. Third, fly no more than 100 feet from the ground."

He was told that the parachutes his men would have on their backs would not open from that height. "Oh, that's different! We will jump with parachutes anywhere! You didn't mention parachutes." Friends, may I say that is a commitment to a mission! Imagine what the Church of Jesus Christ could accomplish with that kind of commitment.

Jessi Higginbotham has that kind of commitment. It is a commitment that is birthed from an intentional, purposeful walk with her Lord. It is a commitment that is unmistakable in how she has approached her responsibilities in this church in the past month. Thank you for calling Jessi Higginbotham as our Associate Pastor. Thank you for the privilege of calling her my colleague in ministry. First Presbyterian Church of Delray Beach grows stronger today because she is installed as part of the pastoral team.

During the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln worshiped in the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. However, he

didn't sit in the Sanctuary because it was so disruptive when people took notice that the President of the United States was among them. So Lincoln would sit in the pastor's office with the door opened so he could hear the service. Following one particular service, a White House aide who accompanied Lincoln in worship asked what he thought of the sermon. Lincoln answered, "The sermon was well thought out, well constructed and well delivered." "So you liked it?" asked the aide. "No! It utterly failed. The preacher didn't ask us to do anything great!"

Friends, we often reduce our faith to right belief or asking people to trust in Jesus Christ. Those things are OK as far as they go. Trouble is, they don't go very far, at least as far as Jesus is concerned. Jesus tells us plainly right here in John's Gospel that God is glorified when we produce much fruit, when we make disciples. This will be how we prove that we are ourselves disciples.

What makes a disciple? Jesus tells us, disciples make disciples. It's that plain. And Jessi Higginbotham is committed to showing us the way. Amen.