

True Disciples
John 8:31-32; 2 Peter 1:12
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In a little bit, we'll pray for the youth being confirmed, "The Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit, you may live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ" (*The United Methodist Hymnal* 37).

In another version of the Confirmation Service, there's this prayer: "The Lord defend you with his heavenly grace and by his Spirit confirm you in the faith and fellowship of all true disciples of Jesus Christ" (*Hymnal* 47).

What does it mean to be a faithful or true disciple of Jesus Christ? Today, I'm mostly talking to the ones being confirmed and reminding them of some of what we covered in class. But I hope everyone will listen and hear the invitation to put your faith in Jesus or to reaffirm your faith and commitment. We can experience afresh the grace of God that brought us to God. The grace we received in our baptism. The grace that sets us free, sustains us, and establishes us in the truth.

We're also starting a new sermon series today: "Being Who We're Meant to Be." Over the years, I've encouraged you to pray, "God bless this church and help us be all that you want us to be." Last fall, I started praying that again and then I tied it to the Scriptures I was reading at the time. So, I prayed, "God bless this church and help us be all that you want us to be" after I'd read 2 Peter 1:12. The phrase "established in the truth" stood out to me and I saw it describing part of being the church God wants us to be. God wants each of us, and all of us together, to be established in the truth. Later, I read John 8 and saw that being the church God wants includes being true disciples who abide in Jesus' word and are set free by the truth. For the next several weeks, I'm going share insights from various places in Scripture that spoke to me about being the church, being the people God wants us to be.

Today, we're starting with being established in the truth and being true disciples. I shared these verses with the Confirmation Class. Now I want us to explore these ideas more fully.

We start with Jesus. We're his disciples. Jesus is the one we believe. It's his word we continue in. He's the truth we know, the truth that sets us free. Notice a few verses later, he says, "If *the Son* sets you free, you will be free indeed" (36). At the beginning of John's Gospel, we read that Jesus was full of grace and truth and that grace and truth come through him (1:14, 17). Later, Jesus declares that he is the way, the truth, and the life (14:6).

God's word is truth and Jesus embodies God's message (5:33; 8:40, 44-46; 17:17). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth who testifies about Jesus (14:17; 15:26; 16:13).

So coming to Jesus, believing in Jesus, knowing Jesus, staying with Jesus, loving and obeying Jesus—all this brings us into the life of the Trinity. And, the life of the Trinity is in us. God is Father, Son, and Spirit. God is a community of love. And God invites us to enter into that community—to know that we're loved, to love God and love one another.

All of this is part of being true disciples of Jesus. Our discipleship is true when we know the truth. That's more than just memorizing some facts. We do need to know things about Jesus. We need to know what the Bible says. But we also need to know and experience God ourselves. We know God through Jesus in the Holy Spirit.

Being true disciples means believing Jesus, believing in him, and following him. To people who believed, Jesus said, "You need to continue in my word, abide in my word, make my word your home. Hold to my teaching and do what I say."

Discipleship is about more than getting our sins forgiven. Salvation is more than going to heaven when we die. Discipleship and salvation are also about life now. We have life with God, life in Christ, life empowered by the Holy Spirit.

When we live this kind of life of discipleship, we know the truth and the truth sets us free. We grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). The truth, Jesus himself, sets us free from sin and death, from everything that keeps us from being who God creates and calls us to be.

In the Baptismal Covenant we profess or confirm or reaffirm our faith. As we do that we renounce, reject, and repent. We accept, confess, and trust. We promise, remain, and serve. (see *The United Methodist Hymnal* 34)

Renounce, reject, repent have to do with turning away from sin and evil. We give up and stop supporting anything that's against God and God's ways.

Then we accept the *freedom* and power God gives. Being disciples is not just about avoiding bad stuff. It's about being empowered to do good stuff. We're not only set free from shame and guilt, but we're also set free for new life with God. Pay close attention when we get to that part of the service in a little bit.

Around the time I was reading and praying from John 8 about truth, I also read 2 Peter 1:12. After describing ways that God's power works in us to change us, Peter writes, "So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have."

We never outgrow learning about God and God's ways. We never get past our need for the basics of the gospel and Christian living. We need to be reminded of them. This is one reason we keep reading the Bible, we keep praying, we keep worshiping, we keep getting together with other followers of Jesus.

We need to be reminded even if we're firmly established in the truth. Peter's confident that the people he's writing to are firmly established, but he's still going to remind them of the truth.

The truth here refers to content, what we believe. But that's still part of truth as relationship, who we believe and know—Jesus himself. We're supposed to be established in Jesus who is the truth and we stand firm in the truth about Jesus and the good news and God's guidance for living.

We looked at one statement of the basics last week when we saw that the apostle Paul said that the essential Christian teaching he received and handed on is that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and he was seen (1 Corinthians 15:1-11).

That summary/tradition in 1 Corinthians is kind of a creed. The word creed comes from *credo*, "I believe." A couple of centuries later, the church started using this summary and some others in the Bible to form a statement of basic Christian faith, an expression of what Christians believe. A basic statement about Jesus was combined with some questions and answers used in baptism. The result was a statement of belief we call "The Apostles' Creed." We use it as part of the Baptismal Covenant. This is the creed many branches of Christianity use at baptism. Every time we recite the Apostles' Creed, we're remembering our baptism (or anticipating it). This is the faith of the church across the centuries. We don't get to make up our own beliefs as followers of Jesus. The faith, the theology of the church is given. It's given to us in Scripture, in Jesus, and in a summary like the creed.

Notice that the creed is Trinitarian: "I believe in God the Father ... I believe in Jesus Christ ... I believe in the Holy Spirit." The largest section of the creed is about Jesus. Describing who he is and what he does was the big need at the time it was written. The creed expresses the faith of the whole church. When it was written there was just one church; there weren't denominations like Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic, and so forth. There weren't even non-denominational churches. There was just the Church. It was called "catholic" (with a small c), meaning of the whole, universal. When we say the creed we're joining with all God's people everywhere in declaring our faith.

Christian faith or belief is given. We don't make it up. But it's also personal; we have to claim it for ourselves and live it for ourselves. Christian faith is not just content, it's also relationship. It's not just believing, but it also includes belonging and behaving. Faith means having an encounter with Jesus and living a life with Jesus.

We say we believe in God, but how do we encounter God and enter into life with God? I often use this summary: The gospel is good news, bad news, good news. What's the first good news? God created the universe and made us in God's image to relate to God and to reflect God's glory. What's the bad news? In a word, sin. Every one of us is infected with sin and every one of us turns from God, disobeys, rebels. What's the second good

news? God is in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. God is out to rescue and redeem his fallen creation, including us.

We're United Methodists in the tradition of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. We talk about the good news in a particular way. With Wesley, we emphasize God's grace. Grace is God's favor and love for us. But it's also God's active power. Grace is another way of talking about the Holy Spirit. Grace is God doing for us what we can't do for ourselves.

We talk about experiencing grace all through life. Wesley used different terms to describe various experiences of grace. But it's all one grace. *Prevenient Grace* is the "grace that comes before." This is the Holy Spirit's work in our lives before we're aware of it and before we accept it. Because of sin, we can't naturally choose God on our own. But God in grace gives us some freedom to choose, creates in us a desire to know God, and draws us to himself.

When we surrender to the pull of prevenient grace and say yes to God, we experience *Justifying Grace*. This is God putting us right with himself, restoring the broken relationship, forgiving us and reconciling us.

At the same moment we receive justifying grace, we receive new birth and that's the beginning of *Sanctifying Grace*. This is the work of the Holy Spirit transforming us, changing us, making us to be more like Jesus. God in grace equips and empowers us to live, to serve, to witness, to become all that God wants us to be.

John Wesley sometimes compared life with God to a house. The front porch is repentance. We've heard the invitation of grace and we've left old ways of sin to come to God. The door is justification. That's where we enter, we come into this new relationship with God, this life with God. Sanctifying grace is exploring all the rooms of God's great house. We become more at home, we get better acquainted.

I've also heard a similar illustration that's flipped around a bit. Our life is the house. We hear Jesus knocking and calling. We open the door and receive him. Then he comes in and starts to fill our life with his life. He starts renovating who we are, restoring us to be all that we're created to be.

Are you ready, are you willing to open yourself up to the Lord's presence and power to come into you, forgive you, clean you up, and

renovate you? Are you ready, are you willing to step across the threshold into a new life with God? If you've done that, do you want to reaffirm and recommit to being a true disciple, continuing in Jesus' word, set free by the truth and established in the truth?