

“Discipleship: A Life Long Learning Process”
Psalm 19:7-10, 14; Mark 8:27-38; James 3:1-12
Salem United Methodist Church; September 13, 2015
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Fall is the time of year we think about learning. Children, youth, and adults head back to school. Teachers prepare their classrooms, lesson plans, and syllabi. But we don't need to be in school to learn. We are learning from the moment we take our first breath until we take our last one. As infants, we learn how to eat, sleep, communicate, walk, and play. When we go to school we learn to read and write. We learn math, history, a variety of sciences, and the arts. We also learn how to get along with others. As we grow older we choose career paths which usually require more education. So we go to college and perhaps even graduate school. When we land a job we may be required to take some new training, or we may need to earn continuing education credits for a certification or advancement. No matter what our age, we never stop learning. One of the things I've learned is that the more I learn, the more there is to learn. We can never learn everything there is to learn, but we can try. Someone asked me what I was going to do after I received my doctorate. I said, "Continue learning." I think my love for learning comes from my great-grandfather. He was born in the mid-19th century. His parents were farm laborers. He only went to the second grade because he was needed on the farm. However, this never stopped him from learning. I remember him in his nineties sitting on the rocking chair reading. The last words he spoke to me from his hospital bed were, "Get all the education you can. No one can ever take it from you." So I continue to learn. We all continue to learn. We may teach ourselves a new skill like baking or carpentry. Or we may want to learn another language. Every day we learn something. It may be something about our relationships or a piece of useless trivia. No matter what our age, we are continually learning. Life is a continual learning process. Even when we are taking our last breath, I think, we learn that we are not alone. That God is with us inviting us into the next part of life.

And so it is with our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We are constantly learning something new about it. We can say we know God. We can say we know Jesus. We can say we know the Bible, but there is always something more to learn. Just like any relationship whether it is a marriage, any relationship in the family, or a friend, we are always learning something about these people. So it is with our relationship with God. As we walk through life God teaches us things about ourselves and things about who God is. Our Psalter today is all about learning about God and God's ways. When we learn that God has plans for us to live by (the Psalm calls these plans 'instruction,' 'laws,' 'commands,' 'regulations,') then we will be revived, wise, have joy, and will be able to see our lives in relationship to God. Knowing these plans help shape our hearts and minds, so we will say and do what is pleasing to God. How can we know what God's instructions, laws, commands, regulations are? We need to learn and continue to learn. How I saw God as a child is quite different from whom I know God to be today. When I was a child, I saw God as a judge who punishes people for what they do wrong. Through reading the Bible, through being in small groups with other Christians, I have come to know that God is a God of love whose grace forgives and shapes us into becoming more and more like Jesus, the human image that we have of God.

Speaking of Jesus, he was the consummate teacher. Everywhere he went, he taught and he taught everyone he met. It didn't matter if they were male or female, rich or poor, Jew or not, he taught people how to love God and how we are to love each other. He taught by telling stories and by asking questions. Did you catch the question in our Gospel lesson? He asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They answered. Then he asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Think about that question. Who do you say Jesus is? If someone were to ask you, "Who do you say Jesus is?" how would you answer?

When I was a child, I probably would have answered this question with, "Jesus loves me." Now, I might answer this with Jesus calls us to learn about God and to serve each other. This is really the meaning of discipleship. The Greek word for disciple is *disciplicus*, which means learner. To be a disciple or a follower of Jesus is to be committed to being a lifelong learner. The more we know about God through Jesus, the more we realize there is more to learn. So being a disciple is a process of learning. And by God's

grace, we do learn and continue to learn. The word, discipline, then means to practice what we are learning. This is what I love about being a Methodist, because we do practice what we learn. That's the "method" in being Methodist. We are a practical group of Christians. We practice our faith. It isn't something we do on Sunday mornings, but we live it 24/7, in every aspect of our lives. We just never know where God may be calling us to serve God's people. Shanksville UMC felt called to be ambassadors to the visitors that came to their small town after the plane crashed near their town on September 11, 2001. (See video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdyV4iWEyF0)

Disciple of Jesus Christ from Shanksville UMC answered the call to help a nation grieve. We never know how God may be calling us. This is why it is so important to be devoted to learning more about our faith in God. It leads us into ministry. And we are to be a people ministering to others as well as each other. This is one of the beauties of being in a small group or Bible Study group. We learn from each other, too. Each of us brings different life experiences to the group. When we share with each other and listen, we see a different perspective and our view is broaden. Another advantage to being in a small group, is when one person has troubles or is struggling, we can support each other and pray for each other. We have several small groups at Salem. I wish we had more. My dream is that every person would be in a small group of one kind or another. We have the Adult Bible Study between our worship services. We have the Upper Room devotional group that meets on Wednesday mornings. We have the Salem Prayer Partners on Tuesday mornings. We have a book club that meets once a month. They read a particular faith based book and then meet for discussion. A lot of sharing and support happens through their discussion. Our youth group acts as a small group. We learn, play, pray, and celebrate life together. And our Men's group which meets once a month, usually the first Saturday, is a small group. They eat, share, learn, and pray together. I wish we had a women's group that met on a regular basis to learn, pray, and share together. Anyone want to start one?

We are starting two learning groups for this season. The first one is called Covenant. It is a twenty-four week Bible study based on the theme of covenant which is the promise between God and humankind to live in a faithful and loving relationship. Living the covenant is not always clear so we gather to learn and learn again. The weeks are divided into three eight week sessions. The first one is about creating the covenant. The second session is about living the covenant and the third one focuses on keeping the covenant. Each day there are biblical readings. Each week the readings will be from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. The class meets once a week for 90 minutes. There is a video from a Biblical scholar with discussion following. (See video: <https://vimeo.com/79411434>).

The second class is just six weeks long. It is called "Not a Fan." This is a small group bible study, centered around the calling of every Christian to truly follow Jesus Christ. Are we a fan in the bleachers or are we on the field following Jesus? This is a six week class driven by a video with discussion. No outside preparation is necessary. (See video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0jCVJh-YX4>)

We will close with this quote from *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. "The people of God, who are the church made visible in the world, must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced. There can be no evasion or delegation of this responsibility; the church is either faithful as a witnessing and serving community, or it loses its vitality and its impact on an unbelieving world" (§ 130.) How can we have an impact on an unbelieving world, how can we be made visible in the world unless we continually learn how to be a faithful to God in Jesus Christ?

Resources: "UMTV: 9/11 Memorial in Shanksville," www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdyV4iWEyF0; "Not a Fan Intro," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0jCVJh-YX4>; "Covenant," <https://vimeo.com/79411434>; *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012*.