

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

November 22, 2009
Discipleship Series
John 17:6-19

Daily Prayer: Discipleship Bookends

Next Sunday will be the first Sunday of Advent, the first of four Sundays in which our focus is on the anticipation of God's incarnation in the gift of the birth of the baby Jesus that we celebrate on Christmas. The first Sunday of Advent is also when the church calendar starts over for another year. Which means that today is the last Sunday of the church year, the Sunday known as the Reign of Christ Sunday. So if the church year begins with that anticipation of Jesus coming into the world, the church year ends with our solid conviction that ultimately when it's all said and done, our sovereign God, who we understand as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is supreme over all.

Today also marks the conclusion of our 12-week emphasis this fall on the 6 marks of Christian discipleship. It is our conviction that with a renewed emphasis on discipleship in the church of Jesus Christ, as opposed to membership in an organization, the vitality of our church community will be enhanced as each of us grows in faith and maturity as disciples of our savior, Jesus. So as we conclude this 3-month series, we do so by focusing on the mark of discipleship with which we began back on September 6th—Pray daily.

Those of you who were here that day will remember that 3 sticky green dots were distributed to everyone with the suggestion that a dot be placed in each of 3 places in which an individual frequents in the course of a day. Seeing the bright green dot was to serve as a subtle reminder to engage in prayer right then and there, or at least sometime in that day. I know that many of you have found this idea to be effective even if a bit gimmicky.

Prayer is an essential element in living a life of faith. Engaging in prayer on a daily basis serves a number of purposes, but perhaps no more importantly than as a daily reminder of who we are in relationship with God. For in addressing our prayers to our Creator God, we are oriented away from a selfish and egocentric attitude and toward a theocentric, God-centered attitude which helps us to better understand the world around us in which we live. Regular, daily prayer fosters a genuine humility in us that enables us to live more faithfully as children of God.

Jesus himself is a model for us in that throughout his ministry as we read about it in the Bible, he engaged in prayer to God. This excerpt we read from John's gospel is one such example of a prayer by Jesus—in this case a prayer that Jesus prayed toward the end of his ministry. In fact it is his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane immediately prior to his arrest that led ultimately to his crucifixion. Among several things for which Jesus prays in this prayer is one that speaks so clearly to our focus on discipleship. He prays "that the life of the church be distinct from the life of the world." (Charles Cousar, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year B*, © 1993 Westminster/John Knox Press, p. 337) He says, "Make them holy—consecrated—with the truth; Your word is consecrating truth. In the same way that you gave me a mission in the world, I give them a mission in the world. I'm consecrating myself for their sakes so they'll be truth-consecrated in their mission." (*The Message*, John 17:18-19) That was Eugene Peterson's translation by the way.

In this case to be consecrated is to be made holy. Jesus is praying that his followers be made holy. Jesus' prayer is one that extends to any and all of those who would follow after him, right up to the present day. Now holiness is one of those characteristics that can make us squirm. Much of our squeamishness comes from our experiences—mostly negative experiences—with those who have made it clear to us, by telling us, that they consider themselves to be holy, leading us to observe in them an offensive holier-than-thou attitude. But true holiness has less to do about how we present ourselves to the world and more about how we present ourselves to God. Hence the role of prayer in reminding us again and again of who we are in relationship to our Creator God. That doesn't mean that those outside the community of faith won't see something that characterizes us from the rest of our society. But what they see will be what they observe about us rather than what we tell them about ourselves.

Daily prayer then becomes both a starting point for our commitment to discipleship as well as a source of strength along the way of growing in discipleship. John Calvin, the 16th century reformer who founded what eventually became the Presbyterian tradition, was a fervent believer in prayer and believed it to be a foundational practice for other aspects of faith. He writes, [We pray] "That our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve" [God.] (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, III, XX, 3, p. 852) According to Calvin, we pray so that we can seek, so that we can love, and so that we can serve. You know that sounds amazingly close to the themes that we've adopted for our church in the coming months: Learning Love, Sharing Faith, Serving People, and Celebrating God. Calvin is reminding us that it is in our prayers that our call to live out the ministry of the church is undergirded and strengthened. That Calvin, whose 500th anniversary of his birth we celebrate this year, was an amazingly insightful disciple.

Which then brings us to the other marks of discipleship in addition to this first one. Daily prayer becomes bookends for the other 5 marks. Daily prayer fires us up to WORSHIP weekly. Daily prayer inspires us to grow in our knowledge and understanding through regular Bible READING. Daily prayer focuses our sights on how best we can SERVE both in this church and beyond it. Daily prayer draws us closer to one another as we develop RELATIONSHIPS to encourage spiritual growth in others and in ourselves. And daily prayer provides a clear perspective on how our time, talents and resources can be put to use by GIVING some of them away.

But even after we have addressed these 5 marks of worshiping, Bible reading, serving, developing spiritual relationship and giving, it's most appropriate and indeed called for that we pray yet again to thank God for the gift of discipleship itself. Daily prayer can be understood then as discipleship bookends.

Today is Discipleship Commitment Day. Although it comes at the end of this sermon series this fall, discipleship commitment day is not the end of this emphasis. Discipleship commitment day is not the end of anything. Rather discipleship commitment day is the opportunity for a beginning or for a new beginning. Many of us, or dare I say most of us here today have been disciples of Jesus for years and years and in many cases for decades and decades. Let's not forget that this is the oldest continuing Presbyterian church in the state of Montana—137 years old! That's why I say today can be a new

beginning. For some though, this may indeed truly be the beginning of discipleship. In all cases this is a celebration of how God is working in the life of First Presbyterian Church through the many people—men, women and children—who make up this church family.

Making this commitment to discipleship is not to suggest to yourself or to anyone else that you're fully living out the 6 marks of discipleship. There may be some folks here who are doing that. But I am confident that for the largest majority of people here, there are varying degrees of success in living out these marks. Many will be strong in a couple of them and in need of attention in the others. The point today is not to evaluate anyone's success. The point today is to honor the call to make this commitment anew.

In fact, I'd suggest that if you're feeling even a bit tentative, that you pick one or two of the 6 marks and make that the focus of your attention. For example, with the start of Advent, one week from today, why not pick up one of the Advent daily devotional booklets we have available and use it each day until Christmas. If you do, you'll be covering both daily prayer and regular Bible reading. For those of you more cyber connected, there are daily Bible readings suggested each day on our denominational website, www.pcusa.org. Or maybe your calendar commitments have had you missing worship more often than you'd really like. The four Sundays of Advent make for a wonderful and glorious way to make your Christmas celebration a spiritual event as well as a cultural and family event. Commit to being in worship each week through Christmas and you'll be well on your way to a new or renewed habit of weekly worship.

The leadership of our church—pastors and elders—are committed to providing resources and support in the coming new year to aid in living out this commitment to discipleship. As we move into January, keep alert for these opportunities. We're all in this together and that is a blessing in and of itself!

If you've looked at the bulletin you will see that printed on the cover are the themes we've adopted for our church as well as the 6 marks of discipleship. This is a summary for us as disciples of Jesus in this place. Our service today from this point on is somewhat different from our usual order. In a moment we will enter into a service of discipleship commitment. We will speak to one another. We'll sing a song together. And then we're beginning a journey together.

Instead of the offering plates being passed through the pews this morning, as is our usual custom, we're following the lead of Christian churches in places around the world such as Africa where the offering is the high point of the worship service. For it's the opportunity to make a tangible response to the incredible love and grace of God. In some African churches the people not only come forward singing, they do it dancing as well. Here today, although we would not object to singing and dancing, we're asking that each of you—everyone here today, member, friend, family, visitor alike—come forward.


You will find in your bulletin this morning a Discipleship Pledge Card. For some of you, this may be helpful to sign your name, and date it. Others may not find that helpful. But in any case we're asking that you come forward to place this card in the offering plates on the Lord's table, whether you have signed it or not. If you have a monetary offering or pledge card to present today, they also can be placed in the offering plates. Then before

returning to your seats, church elders will have for you a wallet card to remind you of the 6 marks of discipleship as well as an Advent devotional booklet. For those of you in households with children there is a special Advent devotional booklet especially for you.

This act of physically moving from your seat to the table and to the elders is nothing more than a symbol of the path upon which God has placed you in your journey through life. Please, come, not because you're worthy, not because you're holy, not because you're better. Come, because God calls you.

But before we begin our commitment service, let us pause for a time of silence so that you can read the discipleship pledge card.

Learning Love
Sharing Faith
Serving People
Celebrating God



Marks of Discipleship

As a disciple of Jesus I will strive to...

- **PRAY** daily
- **WORSHIP** weekly
- **READ** the Bible
- **SERVE** at and beyond First Presbyterian Church
- Be in **RELATIONSHIP** to encourage spiritual growth in others
- **GIVE** of my time, talents and resources

"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" —Micah 6:8

Discipleship Commitment Day