

“Listening and Learning”

John 3:1-15; Luke 10:38-42

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This morning we continue reflecting on our theme for 2018: **FBC263: A Call to Discipleship**. This theme grew out of a discussion the staff and Spiritual Formation Advisory Team had about Mark Tidsworth’s book, Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church.

In his book, Tidsworth informed his readers the word disciple or discipleship is repeated in the New Testament 263 times. This is especially important in light of the fact the word, Christian, is only mentioned three times and the word, Christianity, is never written.

This year our goal is to discover why the word disciple was chosen so often by biblical writers to describe those who followed Jesus. What message were they sending their readers about what it means to follow Jesus and to feed his sheep?

Through sermons and small group studies, we’ll answer these questions by finishing these two statements:

1) The call to follow Jesus is a call to...

2) We feed Jesus’ sheep when we...

We’ll focus on the first question this winter and the second one after summer.

We began this journey last Sunday by declaring the call to follow Jesus is a call to...**trust**. We trust God like Jesus did. We trust Jesus like Nathanael did, and as a result of our confidence

in God and Jesus, we vow to make hope visible to everyone we meet everywhere we go every day we live on this earth.

This week, let's turn our attention toward our **role as students** who are eager to learn and grow in our faith. When I read about those who became Jesus' earliest disciples, I discover they had two things in common—their willingness to say yes to Jesus' invitation to follow him and their eagerness to learn everything he wanted to teach them about God, life and faith.

Their call to be Jesus' disciples was not based upon genealogy, education, experience, status or previous religious service. It was based upon their availability and their confidence in Jesus to teach them what they needed to know to fulfill this divine mission.

All they were asked to bring with them on this magnificent journey were big hearts, open minds and generous spirits. Jesus would supply the rest.

The key, though, was their ability to listen to Jesus and to learn from him. Their purpose was not to define the mission but to fulfill it by being the presence of Christ everywhere they went.

As Jesus' disciples in the 21st Century, this is our purpose, too. This is why a call to follow Jesus is a call to...**learn**.

All four gospels highlight the importance of Jesus as teacher. He is commonly referred to as Rabbi, or teacher, even by his adversaries.

It did not take Jesus long to attract large crowds because he taught as no one the people had ever heard. Word spread quickly about his wisdom, insight, compassion, humility and relentless passion for justice and peace.

He spoke with an uncanny certainty when he described the good and gracious God to whom he prayed. He preached with an untamed courage when he exposed some of the corrupt religious teachers who referred only to the god they created in their attempt to hold on to their power and lavish lifestyles.

Never had anyone spoken to people, including the ignored or forgotten, as boldly, plainly and compassionately as Jesus. He took time for the least of them and lifted up the lowliest of them. And he did it all while teaching them about an ethic of love that leads to a better life for everyone.

No wonder Nicodemus, a proud and prominent Pharisee, sought Jesus out one night to converse with him about the mysteries of life and faith. No wonder Mary assumed the role of a disciple and sat at Jesus' feet listening to him teach at her family's home, ignoring Martha's pleas for her help in the kitchen.

The opportunity to listen to and to learn from this masterful teacher whose hope filled words inspired them and brought the best out in them was never to be squandered. Mary, and I believe eventually Nicodemus, knew Jesus was a gift from God whose presence and words could change their lives forever.

Do you?

I have devoted all of my adult life to studying, teaching and preaching in the context of the local church. If I had it to do over, I would do it again.

One reason is because I believe so strongly in what Jesus taught and modeled. I have found no flaws in the way he arranged his values and priorities, the way he handled his problems, challenges and temptations and the way he related to people, friend or foe. No one has demonstrated a better way to live that builds healthy communities and leads to a meaningful and abundant life.

What has disappointed me over these almost five decades in ministry is the number of people who has not taken advantage of every opportunity to learn from Jesus about life and faith. Down through the years, I have grieved while watching people I love misplace their priorities, mishandle their problems and mistreat others.

The consequences of their mistakes have been devastating and have led to difficult challenges. I believe their mistakes could have been avoided had they sat at Jesus' feet as Mary did or had candid conversations with Jesus as Nicodemus did.

They chose not to do this for a variety of reasons. They paid a high price for their negligence.

It is never too late, though, to learn a better way. Ask Nicodemus. This seasoned teacher and community leader realized Jesus was special and wanted to discover why.

The private conversation Nicodemus initiated that night with Jesus was tough and challenging, but I believe it led to many more just like it and changed Nicodemus' life for the better. I am convinced this Pharisee became a disciple who shed old ways of thinking and embraced the mind of Christ.

What leads me to believe this? Who helped Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus off the cross and bury him? It was Nicodemus, the man who was born again and again and again each time he talked to Jesus.

If you are young, I challenge you to make spiritual growth a priority. Take advantage of every opportunity to listen and to learn as you explore the mysteries of life and faith.

If you are up in years, it is never too late to begin. Get serious now about learning and stay that way until you die.

How is this possible in a world filled with distractions and demands? How can it be done?

Make spiritual growth a priority from this day forward, whatever your age. Don't let the allure and pursuit of the things of this world crowd God out of your life. Don't let life's many demands keep you from carving time out of your busy schedule for study, prayer and meditation.

After Martha scolded Jesus because he refused to tell Mary to help her prepare the meal, Jesus replied, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her.” (Luke 10:41-42)

To be candid with you, we are both Martha and Mary. At times we are busy with tasks, and at other times we are more sedate and reflective. Making room for both and knowing what needs to be done at a given time are the keys to being a faithful disciple.

Mary set aside years of religious and cultural traditions to sit at Jesus’ feet and to listen to him teach because she sensed this would be the final time he would be in her home. The full weight of the cross was bearing down on him now that Passover was near, and he was on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Things that were important to Mary before Jesus’ surprise visit were no longer as important.

Faith only grows in a heart that yearns for God. This is why Jesus said you must love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Nothing less will withstand the temptation to drift away from God. Nothing less will give you a clearer vision of what needs to be done when facing conflicting responsibilities or opportunities.

Adopt a humble attitude. Mary’s posture, sitting at Jesus’ feet, revealed her humility. The fact that Nicodemus, perhaps the most revered teacher in Jerusalem, chose not only to visit Jesus but to engage him in a lengthy conversation revealed his. I sense a teachable spirit in both of them.

Embrace this teachable spirit by acknowledging your limitations and valuing others’ discoveries. Allow every person you encounter to become your teacher.

Listen to their story and perspective on life. Discover where God is at work in their life and how each one reflects God’s image. Let every encounter with another person broaden your understanding of who God is and what God expects of you.

Humility is the soil in which faith grows. Arrogance will poison that soil.

So, put down your defenses. Be willing to examine and re-examine everything you believe. If it is true, it will endure a high level of scrutiny. If it is not, you need to know it now.

We cannot grow spiritually if our goal is to impress people with how much we know or to get in the last word to prove our point. Growth occurs when we suspend our understanding of truth and open our hearts and minds.

Nicodemus had to put down his defenses, which had to be hard for him to do as a Pharisee. If there was one thing Nicodemus knew for sure, it was that he had a clear vision of the Kingdom of God and was actively participating in it by virtue of his birth, gender, ethnicity, status and lifestyle.

Can you imagine how Nicodemus felt when Jesus opened their conversation by saying, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above?” Nicodemus had no idea a relationship with God was open to anyone who approached God with a humble spirit and contrite heart.

According to Jesus, God did not play favorites. God loved the whole world and everybody in it, including Nicodemus, his gentile neighbor and the woman at the city gates begging for bread.

I wonder what we believe that may be wrong. How would Jesus begin a conversation with you and me? How would you receive what he had to say?

Open hearts and minds make up the soil in which faith grows. A defensive posture will poison that soil.

Develop a ‘holy curiosity’. Become comfortable with questions. For most of us, faith begins with questions, and for all of us, faith grows as we wrestle with the complexities of life and faith. The dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus certainly indicates this.

When Jesus told Nicodemus no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit, Nicodemus asked, “How can this be?”

Even Jesus was puzzled because of Nicodemus’ lack of understanding and asked, “You are Israel’s teacher and do not understand these things?”

There is no shortage of questions in this narrative, which I see as beneficial to faith development. The Christian faith has a leavening influence and is meant to disturb and disrupt. An authentic faith will lead to questions that result in a greater understanding of God, life and self. I believe this was true for Nicodemus and equally true for Mary.

A few years ago, one of my mentors taught me faithfulness has more to do with the questions we ask than the answers we memorize. He’s right; questions will take you places answers will not, and these questions will lead to new revelations. So, don’t be afraid to ask questions and never interpret the lack of answers as a weak faith.

Curiosity is the soil in which faith grows. A certainty that refuses to ask more questions will poison that soil.

Let me return to something I said earlier in this sermon. Jesus’ earliest disciples had two things in common—their willingness to say yes to Jesus’ invitation to follow him and their eagerness to learn everything he wanted to teach them about God, life and faith.

Can the same be said of you?