

G – GROWING IN GOD’S WORD

Acts 1:1-11

INTRODUCTION

Twelve years ago, in May of 2013, the pastors and delegates of this congregation sat together in the front couple of rows on the righthand side of the center aisle at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Mansfield, OH. We were attending the annual convocation of the Ohio Mission District.

We listened as Bishop John Bradosky shared the exciting news that our denomination had just signed a multi-year agreement with the Navigators to build a culture of disciple-making churches throughout the North American Lutheran Church. The Navigators have a decades-long history of making disciples, extending back to its founder Dawson Trotman in the 1940s.

We did not know anything about this coming announcement until it was made. But we did know that for the previous two years our congregation had been preparing for just such an moment. Our leadership and our adult Sunday School classes had just completed studies of two formational books: *Simple Church* (by Thom Rainer) and *Thirty Years that Changed the World* (by Michael Green). Through these books God had inspired our hearts about becoming seriously engaged in the disciple making process. Going into that meeting in Mansfield the overriding questions in our minds were:

“Now What?” and “What is God calling us to do next?”

Immediately following the Bishop's remarks, the convocation took a break, and with great enthusiasm we rushed the platform to tell him “We are in.” And with that this congregation became the first church in the North American Lutheran Church to commit itself to a partnership with the Navigators so that we could build a disciple-making culture.

On this Ascension Sunday we begin a five-part sermon series that reminds us all of that commitment to making disciples. It is a commitment we made because that was the express commandment of Jesus on this day.

Luke's version of this commandment is recorded here in Acts 1:8:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

The word “disciple” is not expressly used in this verse. But when the Gospel of Matthew tells this same story, the word leaps off the page:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and **make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Make disciples. What does that mean? Here's the definition we have used since those early days.

Making disciples means helping other people grow into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

Making disciples is a journey, not a one-time action. That's why we call our process "the Discipleship Pathway."

- You see that journey reflected in the prayer of the Apostle Paul in today's second reading:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. (Ephesians 1:17)

Know Him better. We don't come to a place where we ever know Jesus completely, but each day we strive to know Him better.

- Making disciples means we help people know Jesus better.
- That's something we all need. You need it. And I need it.
- No matter how well we know Jesus, there is always more to learn.
- To use our lingo, we are on a "Discipleship Pathway."

So how do we do that? What's our process for helping people to know Jesus more?

Capitalizing on the name of our church, we have created a process known as

"Growing in G.R.A.C.E."

G.R.A.C.E. is also more than the name of our congregation. It is an acronym for five characteristics of a disciple who is striving to know Jesus better. Beginning with this sermon, and continuing over the next four weeks, I will describe in greater detail the skills and practices we encourage you to develop in your own walk of faith.

- Each week I will focus on one letter, so this week the letter is "G." (If you want to know what the others mean before you hear the sermon, you can find pamphlet titled "Growing in G.R.A.C.E." on the table in the narthex.

The letter "G" stands for "Grow in God's Word." A disciple who wants to know Jesus more spends time regularly engaging with the Bible. It is a characteristic described in such texts as:

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2)

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. (Psalm 119:105)

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16)

And many others.

We call the Bible “God's Word” because we believe that in it and through it God speaks to us. Thus, by knowing what He has to say, our lives can be shaped and molded into the people He wants us to be.

- This is why we are encouraging you to read it together with the rest of the congregation. Last year, the New Testament. This year the Old Testament.
- It is why the Scriptures play such a prominent role in our worship services.
- A disciple needs to know what the Bible has to say.

In fact:

Nothing will help you grow as a Christian more reading your Bible.

So to fully engage with the Scriptures, we suggest three skills and practices for you to incorporate into your devotional life.

#1: USE A “RESPONSE-FOCUSED” BIBLE STUDY METHOD

That is, your Scripture reading should always lead you to a point of application. What did you read that will impact what you will do? Was there ...

A promise to claim?
A sin to confess?
An example to follow?
A command to obey?

There are a number of methods which we can easily teach you.

- The AEIOU method
- Stop, Look, Listen, Respond
- Swedish method

Whatever the method, your time reading the Bible should always bring you to a point of application.

What is this passage saying to me? How will it make a difference in my life today?

#2: MEMORIZE VERSES OF SCRIPTURE

Second, we encourage you to begin to memorize verses of Scripture that have special meaning for you – maybe even verses that come from your daily readings.

- Doing so allows God's Word to form you from the inside out and guards your heart from temptations and sin.

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. (Psalm 119:11)

Mildred Nelson is my all-time favorite layperson from one of my congregations. No offense to anyone here at Grace or anywhere else, but Mildred is the best. She was a former missionary to Sierra Leone, West Africa.

- She had the largest personal garden I have ever seen, and a pantry that was stocked like a grocery store.
- She also knew her Bible very well.

During the final year of my time as her pastor, she became ill to the point she could not get off the couch and could not stand to have any lights on in the room. She would eventually recover, but we were all very concerned about her.

- She told me that during that time her one "saving grace" (as she called it) was being able to recall and recite the Scriptures she had memorized throughout her life.

I realize that is a skill that becomes harder the older we get. I experience that too, but I keep working on it.

The best place to start is to think about what is happening in your own life and find verses that speak to that issue.

- Use Google to find those verses. For example, just google "Bible verses about comfort." And you will get dozens from which to choose.

#3: DO DEEP DIVES INTO SMALLER PASSAGES

Third, do more in-depth study of Bible passages.

In my free time, I am trying to write a yearlong devotional based on the book of Philippians. I have 10 devotionals written about the first verse of the book. Why? Let me read to you from the introduction to my book:

I have always eaten my food too fast. "Gulping," Mom called it when she was being diplomatic. "Eating like a pig" was the phrase I heard more frequently. Mom thought food was to be savored and didn't see any way possible I could even taste what she had cooked as I "gulped" it down.

I also read Scripture fast. Mom did not point that out. I figured it out on my own. Over time I realized that, much like Mom's assessment of my dinner habits, I in

essence gulped the Bible. I was speedreading the daily text, seeing each of the words, getting the general picture and moving on through to the next passage or the next item on my calendar. But in so doing I missed much of the flavor of God's Word.

Doing a deep dive approach allows you to really think about the passage of Scripture over an extended period of time to find its deepest and most complete meaning. This is not as difficult as it might sound! At Grace we teach what is called the "inductive" method:

You "observe" what the text says, "interpret" what it means, and "apply" it to your life.

APPLICATION

Our Gospel reading today describes a walk Jesus took with two of His followers on the day of His resurrection. These followers were confused and maybe even afraid about all that had happened in the previous days.

- Jesus entered into their conversation, and what I read to you this morning told us:

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:27)

What did Jesus do? He took his followers into the Scripture. There's a lesson there!

Because we as a church are committed to helping you "Grow in G.R.A.C.E." we provide several resources to help you with the letter "G."

- If you don't own a Bible, we have copies that you can have free of charge. These are found in the Grace library.
- We also provide daily Bible reading schedules called "5x5x5" and daily devotional guides, all of which can be found on the table outside the library.
- And of course, we have a team of people eager to walk alongside you as you learn how to do any of these skills and practices. See Pastor Brodbeck for more information about any of these resources.

Keep "GROWING IN G.R.A.C.E.!"

Amen.