

"Growing in Faith"

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, November 5, 2006

Text: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 Ephesians 3:14-19; 4:11-16 NRSV

FOLLOWING JESUS – BY ALL AGES

A concerned young girl approached her father one day and said, “Daddy, I just don’t believe it is right to ignore Jesus.” Her father, more than a little confused, answered, “I agree with you. We shouldn’t ignore Jesus. But what made you think of that?”

She replied, “Well, it’s that Christmas song we sing at church. You know, the one that says, ‘O come, let us ignore Him.’”

We do not want to ignore Jesus. We want to do all that we can to follow him. Richard Chichester of England prayed a prayer 800 years ago that was made popular in a musical called *Godspell* almost 40 years ago. He prayed, “Day by day, O dear Lord, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, day by day by day by day by day by day.”

As we develop our faith, we grow in following Jesus. We are all together in this boat called the Church – seeking to follow Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ invitation to many people in the first century was “Follow me.” I don’t say to you, “Follow me.” I say, “Join me in following Jesus.” (Point to stained glass window) In following his teachings and his example.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, emphasized our growth as Christians. We are to grow in love and holiness, going onto perfection. The Christian

life is a journey, and we are never too old to grow.

On this All Saints' Sunday, I consider all of the people who have faithfully followed the Lord. Some are beautifully pictured here in this sanctuary. There are Sarah, Ruth, Dorcas, and Lydia. Over there are Abraham, Moses, Philip and Timothy. There in the balcony is John Wesley. Then there is Sarah Hobbs and Gertrude Merritt and all of the others who we will remember later in this service – 21st century followers of Jesus. Their faithful witness encourages us to follow the Lord.

We seek to help people of all ages to grow in their faith. This training begins at an early age.

A young boy once found a dead squirrel in front of his house. It upset him a great deal. For hours he cried about it. His father, seeing that the squirrel had been struck by a car, seized this moment to teach his son a gentle lesson. He talked to his son about the mysteries of life and death. Then he mentioned that the same thing could happen to his son if he was not careful when he crossed the street.

That evening his mother came to check on him. She wanted to remind the boy of the lesson he had learned about not playing in the street, so she remarked, "What did you learn from your talk with Daddy today?" The boy answered, "I learned that when you die, you turn into a squirrel."

It is important for us to teach our children and youth about the faith. It is also important that we are very clear about what we teach. In the book of Deuteronomy we read, "Recite (the truths about God) to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."

(Deuteronomy 6:7) The partnership between the Christian home and our church is very significant.

ENGAGING CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Part of the vision of our church is to nurture spiritual growth and discipleship in

children, youth and adults through engaging Christian education and warm and caring fellowship.

We seek to design Christian education that is engaging, that engages our minds, our hearts, and our wills. Nooma is one example of this. Nooma is the presentation of a biblical truth in an innovative, creative manner. The next session of Nooma in the Soul Café is planned for November 29.

The apostle Paul wrote his younger helper, Timothy: to study the scriptures “so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (II Timothy 3:17) We study the Bible, so that we can know the foundation of our faith and that we can serve the Lord.

Every Sunday morning we have a variety of Sunday School classes for all ages. A number of them focus on the study of the Bible. Many good things are happening in our Sunday School classes. We have plans to give our Sunday School classes more visibility next year.

The apostle Peter also emphasizes the goal to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (II Peter 3:18) Our middle school and senior high students are preparing to go to Pilgrimage next weekend. Pilgrimage is a conference-wide youth rally at the Crown Coliseum in Fayetteville. Over 6,000 United Methodist youth and adult leaders from across eastern North Carolina gather there. There is powerful worship, praise singing, and dynamic speakers. Sometimes Christian youth in middle school and high school can go to school and think, “I’m the only one here who is trying to live as a Christian.” It can be discouraging. One of the blessings of Pilgrimage is that youth get to witness 6,000 youth in one place who are trying to follow Jesus.

CARING FELLOWSHIP

Another way that we seek to nurture Christian discipleship is through caring fellowship – an environment of a caring community. We seek to do this in a variety of

ways here at Duke Memorial. That is why we sponsor Lemonade on the Lawn during pleasant weather in the spring and fall. We have covered-dish lunches occasionally following worship in Whitford Hall. The “Does Duke Memorial have talent?” show with Randy Ellis’ grilled Halloweenies for supper a couple of weeks ago was a great event. The Primetimers lunch for senior adults on the first Wednesday of the month is a great opportunity to hear an interesting speaker and get to know some new friends.

The purpose of the Soul Café is to help people who may never have been in a church or who may have had a “bad church experience” to find a place of caring community and ultimately a spiritual home. The Music/Arts series has a wonderful array of talented musicians who will perform in the Soul Café. Invite someone to join you this Wednesday evening, or to come with you to the Will McFarlane and Family concert on November 18.

We try to accept people where they are. We seek to provide a supportive environment where people can ask questions and learn and grow.

How wonderful it is when a person who has lived outside the church finds a spiritual home! Think about what it feels like to arrive at home after a long trip or vacation. You feel safe, secure, comfortable. That is what it is like when you find a spiritual home among friends who love God and who love you.

A goal of Christian education is for Christ to “dwell in our hearts through faith, as we are being rooted and grounded in love.” (Ephesians 3:17)

When I was in the sixth grade, I became a part of the confirmation class at Rosemary United Methodist Church in Roanoke Rapids. The pastor, Allen Lee, was in his late 60s, and he was preparing to retire in several months. I especially remember several things about that class. Rev. Lee had collected over 200 different versions of the Bible in his 40 years of ministry. He showed them to us in his library. Boy, were we impressed! 200 versions! Rev. Lee loved us and was diligent in teaching us. I remember that the day of my confirmation was a serious and profound moment for me.

I committed as much as I knew about myself to as much of God as I could comprehend. I publicly proclaimed, "I want to follow Jesus."

Today, almost 40 years later, I am still trying to follow Jesus. Join me in following Jesus. Take advantage of all of these opportunities that I have mentioned this morning, so that you can grow in your faith – so that you can see Jesus more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, day by day by day. Amen.