Know, Grow, Go, Glow (Part 2)

Those of you who were here last Sunday for worship might have had a sense of déjà vu when it came time for today’s sermon – same scripture, same title, same image. You might have thought, “Oh poor Rev. Bev, her senility has set in again, and she has forgotten that she gave this message already.” Possible, but not so. Today’s sermon is not a replay of last week’s, but rather a sequel, a reiteration and continuation. It’s “Know, Grow, Go, Glow” part 2.

The scripture (Matthew 28:16-20) just read is one of the most significant passages in the Bible. It is the commission that started the Christian Church and by which the church has spread into all the earth. For this reason, it is known as the Great Commission. These were the last words that the Risen Christ said to his followers before he ascended into Heaven. Though eleven disciples were the first hearers of this directive to “make disciples,” these instructions have been given to Jesus’ followers throughout the ages. And they are spoken to each of us here today. We are all called to discipleship – to take part in God’s continuing mission to save a lost world.

Just as no one is born a full grown human being. No one is born a full grown disciple. Christian Discipleship is a process of spiritual development whereby the believer moves progressively from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity. Let me give you an example from the Bible. In the Gospel of John, we can trace the faith development of Nicodemus. There are many verses. You might want to read them for yourself later. For now, I will just give some highlights.

John 3: 1-21 tells of Nicodemus and his first encounter with Jesus. Though Nicodemus was a Pharisee, one of the religious Jewish leaders of the time, he holds Jesus in some high regard already, since he refers to him as “Rabbi.” Yet Nicodemus doesn’t understand who Jesus is and what his kingdom work is about.

John 7: 45-52 demonstrates some growth in Nicodemus. He asks a tough question of the Pharisees; and in asking that question, he shows his faith in Jesus is growing. Near the end of the gospel (John 19: 38-42), Nicodemus arrives after Jesus’ death, bringing items to prepare the body. He and Joseph of Arimathea prepare and wrap the body, and lay it in the tomb.

In the first passage, Nicodemus has an interest in Jesus and his ministry, but he’s unable to give up what he knows (the law). In the second passage, Nicodemus has grown stronger in his beliefs about Jesus. He is willing to stand up and defend Jesus. In the last passage, Nicodemus has a full understanding of who Jesus is and how that affects him. He is no longer afraid to demonstrate his faith.

Colossians 1 verses 9 & 10 are a part of a letter from the apostle Paul to a young church in Colosse. It says, “So we have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better.”
It should be the lifelong quest of each and every one of us as Christians to know God better and better. Spiritual maturity doesn’t happen automatically or quickly. It takes time and effort. Some persons may start off on fire for the Lord, but lose their zeal. They develop a spirit of indifference or negligence. Others develop a level of maturity and stagnate. They are satisfied, thinking no more growth is needed.

It is our responsibility as a church to nurture, encourage, challenge and hold accountable persons on their spiritual journeys. To accomplish this, we must have a discipleship plan – an intentional process through which we guide individuals step-by-step toward spiritual growth. Here at First United Methodist Church of Euless, we want to meet people where they are spiritually and walk with them, and help them move from knowing God to making God known. We have developed our “Discipleship Journey.” This is much more than just another study or series of studies. It represents a new intentionality of our church in guiding people toward a life of discipleship.

I don’t care if you have been a believer for a matter of moments or most of your life, each one of us who claims to be Christian needs to consistently examine our lives and realize our need to always be growing in God. We cannot assume that because someone attends church and reads her Bible that she is growing as a Christian. Christian activity is not equal to Christian maturity.

There is no shortcut to spiritual growth. There is no instant pill I could give you today that you could take and tomorrow you are going to be spiritually mature. Spiritual maturity won’t happen without discipline. 1 Timothy 4:8 says that physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come. Just as physical fitness doesn’t happen by accident, neither does spiritual fitness. To be fit physically, you’ve got to exercise and develop some basic habits. That is true for spiritual fitness as well. We can choose to exercise and strengthen our spiritual muscles or allow them to become weak and vulnerable.

In his book, “The Life You’ve Always Wanted,” Joel Ortberg makes a helpful distinction between trying and training. He says anyone can try to run a marathon, but only those who train for it will accomplish it. He says, “Likewise, spiritual transformation, is not a matter of trying harder, but of training wisely.” So we have developed the Discipleship Journey to help you train wisely. You will hear much more about the Discipleship Journey in the weeks to come. But right now I will just give you a brief overview.

In John 16:12, Jesus says: “I have more things to tell you (or teach you), but you cannot hear them now. But when the Spirit of Truth comes he will lead you (or guide you) into all truth.” Jesus tells the disciples that they can handle this much now and there’s more later on. This clearly indicates that we learn in stages.

In the Discipleship Journey there are four stages through which people progress – Know, Grow, Go & Glow. In the KNOW stage, we learn the Basics about the Bible, God and Jesus. This leads to the GROW stage where we grow deeper in our faith and relationship with God. Then we move on to the GO stage where we discover our mission and go forth with God serving others. Then on to the GLOW stage where we witness and share our faith. It’s a beautiful reproducible cycle. It’s much like Jesus did – we teach and send. We move through the process and then ultimately repeat the process with others.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the people so that they could speak and hear in different languages. God grants that we might understand one another and that we might understand the
good news in just the way we need to hear it. Likewise different people are more comfortable with different approaches or styles to their study. Thus in the Discipleship Journey, we offer three different “Channels” to accommodate different approaches - The Individual Study, Small Groups and Retreat Events. No channel is better than another, so just choose the one that you are most comfortable with – the one that fits you best.

For the individual studies, we have chosen to offer on-line courses. We’re thinking that these might appeal to a wide audience – those that are early in their faith journeys, who are exploring and inquiring and maybe not ready for group experiences, those that are further on their journeys whose schedule won’t allow them to come to regular classes, or those that might just prefer this more modern genre or style.

Here is a picture of the process, with the Stages horizontally across the top and Channels vertically down the left hand side. The important thing is that with this Discipleship Journey you are systematically progressing through the Stages over time regardless of the Channel you might choose. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey right now is great, but one thing is certain – it is not where you are supposed to stay indefinitely. You are to keep moving on the Journey and fulfilling God’s will for you.

The Courses will be set up like Spring and Fall semesters at a college. Each of the classes will be offered at least two times a year. The pattern will be repeated year after year after year. There will be a Program Description Course Catalog produced each year with the specific dates and details about each course to help you plan your own personal journey.

Bible Study is crucially important to the faith development of any Christian. God cares enough about us that he didn’t just plunk us down here on earth and say, “Do the best you can. Hope you figure it out. Good luck.” He gave us the Bible as an instruction manual that tells us every thing we need to know about Him, about us, about life. But it doesn’t do us a bit of good unless we read it. That is why the courses in the KNOW stage are about the Bible.

The courses in the GROW stage explore foundational truths and beliefs of the Christian faith. Learning how to grow spiritually is a life-long journey, which occurs as you read and apply God’s word to your life. 2 Timothy 2:16-17 teaches us, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that man may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

1 Corinthians 12: 4-7 - “There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all people. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” In these verses, the apostle Paul is talking about how every person in the body of Christ, the Church, every believer, has been given something, a gift, a manifestation of the Spirit, that will help us to contribute to the whole body.

The courses in the GO stage are about Service. They are to help us learn about the nature and value of spiritual gifts and explore how you might best serve. The courses in the GLOW stage are about witnessing. They are aimed at helping the participant develop a personal witness that they are comfortable sharing with others. It could be spreading the Good News to a neighbor or moving to another country to reach the people there. It could be sharing with less fortunate kids down the street. Wherever you go, you are to share and inspire others to commitment to Christ.
Our Discipleship Journey is not the only way for spiritual maturity, but it is our church’s core plan, our method of intentionally guiding individuals to becoming informed, energized, committed disciples of Jesus Christ, taking part in building God’s Kingdom.

Philippians 1:27 says that the church is believers standing firm in one spirit, with one purpose, working together side by side as one for the faith, which is the Good News of Jesus. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, taught that we grow in discipleship as individuals and as a community.

You can’t be a disciple without God, the Holy Spirit. But you also need other disciples to survive and thrive as a disciple of Jesus – people sharing a commitment to Jesus and who are all heading in the same direction, a group where there is mutual love and mutual commitment, a group of disciples who experience the Presence of the Holy Spirit together, a group of people with a shared perspective and shared moral values, a group of people who belong to each other as well as they belong to Jesus. That is the church.

When Paul, Silas and Timothy planted churches during what we call “the Second Missionary Journey of Paul the apostle,” they had a carefully defined goal. In each locality they wanted to plant a disciple-making church – a church whose faith was flourishing, love for one another was growing and endurance prevailed. This church – First United Methodist Church of Euless certainly fits these qualifications. A faithful, loving, persevering congregation has existed here in this same location for more than 135 years, working for the Lord.

When Paul, Silas and Timothy planted churches, they went for disciples – not just converts. They were passionate disciple-makers. They planted disciple-making churches. And their disciple-making churches changed their world and turned the Roman empire upside-down. They were not satisfied or content with sympathizers, admirers, attenders, or mere converts. They were all about making disciples, just like Jesus.

God wants each church to be a disciple-making church. God wants First United Methodist Euless to be a disciple-making church. Congregations that are successfully making disciples are congregations in which every member and constituent of the congregation knows and understands the mission of the church. Every member – no matter what their age – not just the pastors, the designated leadership team, the “old timers,” or the “newcomers,” all are leaders in the disciple-making process.

It is our hope that with God’s help our Discipleship Journey will guide each individual to a life of discipleship. And eventually the whole congregation will embrace this focus, this emphasis, this movement, and we will be a Disciple-making congregation. We won’t be known, as we have been in the past, as the church with the pretty roses or the church with the big blue sign. We will be known as the church that makes disciples.

I encourage each of you to prayerfully consider how you will participate in this opportunity to carry out the Great Commission. Let me make your decision easier. The Great Commission is bracketed by two all important statements which proclaim the crucial element of discipleship – the presence of the Master. If we ignore them, then the Great Commission becomes just another program or church growth justification.
First – in verse 18 Jesus said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Jesus claims authority. This leads to the “therefore” that establishes the commission. Jesus isn’t passing the buck. He’s not delegating authority. He’s taking responsibility and he is doing the work in us and through us. The early church never claimed that anything they did was by their own effort. They were witnesses to the work of God among them as it oozed out into the world. When they healed, it was Jesus healing. When they preached, it was Christ’s message.

Second – Jesus concludes his commission with the words of verse 20. “Remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.” That should fill us with joy, hope and awe! I like the versions of the Bibles that begin this last statement with the word, “Lo.” “Lo, I am with you always.” We hardly use that word; our equivalent would be “hey” or “look here.” It’s an attention grabber, telling us something important is fixing to happen. Christ makes it clear that he is not leaving this commission up to us. We need never fear that we are left alone to speak for Christ. He will always provide us with what to say and the power to be his effective instruments. We just have to learn to trust. We cannot change the hearts of people, but God promises to do that.

The church is made up of the recipients of God’s grace and salvation. It grows because Jesus continues to save those who submit to his Lordship. We are the ongoing chapter in that story. May we be faithful and obedient disciples of Jesus as we walk in closest intimacy with him and proclaim the good news.

Enjoy the Journey, and God’s presence with you every step of the way. AMEN