First Presbyterian Church  
Spartanburg, South Carolina  
September 9, 2012  
ACTing As The Church II. Discipleship  
Acts 2:41-47; Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-25  
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America is a culture of pop trends and fleeting obsessions. Jeggings, pet rocks, mullets, disco and more have all properly found themselves on the trash heap of history. But unfortunately our fleeting attention spans have also bled over into our life of faith. Methodist preacher and professor William Willimon has the following observation,

Contemporary religious life is plagued by momentary enthusiasm...in fact in contemporary parlance, ‘enthusiastic’ [literally: filled with God] is a virtual synonym for a short term high that does not take root in long term commitment.

But as followers of Christ we cannot become the disciples Christ meant us to be with millisecond attention spans. It takes sustained concerted effort to become what God intends us to be. Thus after “Worship that inspires our experience of God,” you have chosen “Discipleship that deepens our relationship with God” as the second strategic initiative for us to become the “Church of Acts”.

Willimon continues,

Acts itself was part of the ongoing attempt of the church to reflect upon the implications and applications of the gospel within the church so that the church might continue to be faithful to its calling...the church is not ...to resuscitate Pentecost on a weekly basis; rather the church moves immediately to the task of teaching, keeping itself straight about what it is not what it is to be about.

After 3000 people were moved to faith by Peter’s sermon, they immediately “devoted themselves to the apostles teaching” that is to learning more about their newly found faith, to becoming disciples themselves.

From your statement on discipleship in the strategic plan found in your bulletin we will focus on the following concepts:

Discipleship...
 ... within a body of believers
  ground[ed] in Biblical teachings
  ... while deepening our personal relationships with God

While being propelled through discipleship into service is a critical component we will address that aspect in a few weeks when we tackle mission.

...Discipleship...

These key notions for discipleship are present in both the Deuteronomy and Acts passages. The Greek word for disciple, μαθητής, mathētēs, refers to a pupil of a teacher or master craftsmen. As we discover this wondrous and awesome Lord in worship we seek to grow closer to Christ through discipleship. We are told that these early believers devoted themselves to this task. The disciple of Jesus is not merely about learning some hobby or craft but in connecting with the source of all being. Our Deuteronomy passage known as “the Shema” from its first word meaning “Hear” “Listen up!” sets the stage for all disciples. Old Testament professor Patrick Miller makes the following observation about this passage, “In thinking about what is at stake in this claim...there is only one ultimate or absolute; the power that undergirds all reality is one
and not multiple, faithful and not capricious.” To be a disciple of Christ is to commit to growing closer to the source of all being.

The disciple is in an intimate relation to the master and submits themselves to their authority. This process can involve some genuinely intractable problems. CS Lewis remained an atheist for a period of his life unable to resolve the problem of a broken world expressed by Lucretius, a Roman Poet and philosopher of the first century,

“Had God designed the world, it would not be, a world so frail and faulty as we see”.

The disciple does not give up intellectual integrity and hard questions about faith. The difference between the merely intellectually curious and the follower of Christ is the disciple does not simply struggle with his/her own intellectual conundrums but wrestles with the Lord himself. At that death of his wife Joy, even after CS Lewis had been an ardent Christian for years, his wrestling continued when he wrote, “So this is what God is like deceive yourself no longer.”

... within a body of believers...

Since these questions can be so difficult, the early church recognized the need for the community to journey together when in verse 42 it tells us “they devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to fellowship.” When we face the hardest questions of faith it is good not to face them alone knowing that others have come before us.

...ground[ed] in Biblical teachings...

Just as a disciple of Mozart would have a piano and the student of Van Gogh a canvass, the disciple of Christ has the Bible. Engaging in scripture is an articulated path for this church’s discipleship when in the strategic plan it calls for being “Grounded in biblical teaching that leads us to grow to maturity...and a deeper more satisfying spiritual life.”

C.S. Lewis said, “No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally – and often far more – worth reading at the age of fifty and beyond.” Perhaps this can be said to be the most true of scripture. Many of us read it as children and have since left it behind but indeed, with each year that passes by in life, it gains more power.

An ancient theologian of the 3rd century, Origen, believed that the Word of God was incarnate in scripture and could touch readers of the word. Thus the Bible is the instrument used by the Holy Spirit that draws us closer to Christ. The Shema challenges the hearer of these seminal words to “keep them in their heart.” The words of scripture on the path of the disciple are not learned only with the mind but are meant to become a part of ourselves.

Perhaps the best method for this in the history of Christianity is called Lectio Divina, or Divine Reading, a four stage process of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. For the practitioner of Lectio knowing the scripture is not the objective behind reading the text, rather coming to know and be known by the source of the scripture is.

A few years ago I visited the St. Bernard’s Abby in Cullman, Alabama. The monks graciously welcomed me into their daily routine—which was profound in its clarity of purpose. They wake up at 5:30 a.m. and pray the Psalms in chants for an hour and a half. At lunch they continue where they left off and go another hour, and then again in the evening. Then they wake up the next morning and repeat, FOREVER! Lest you think they are slackers, their free prayer takes up another hour or so in the afternoon between work, and the method they employ is Lectio Divina.

Previously I had experienced Lectio through Protestants and to tell you the truth I was not impressed. However after listening to Brother Marcus I realized protestant Lectio might be
something like expecting Budweiser to produce a stellar French wine, say 1985 Châteaux Marguax.

Brother Marcus, President of St. Bernard’s school, said Lectio is “how monks pray.” Lectio reverses the scripture, to go back to the experience that prompted the writing of the scripture to begin with. Think about it. How filled with the presence of God the actual authors of scripture must have been! How inspired! How filled with the Spirit. Imagine reading scripture in such a way that you experience that same inspiration! Such inspiration inevitably changes us and change is not always pleasant.

... while deepening our personal relationships with God

The struggle of faith, of growing into maturity is a painful process, ask any teenager, or parent of a teenager, or anyone who has been a teenager! C.S. Lewis quipped, “I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.” But if we can make it through the painful parts of the truth found in the word of God, we just might experience what 12th century mystic Bernard of Clairvaux compared the Holy Spirit to a kiss by the Eternal Father which allows the practitioner of contemplative prayer to experience union with God. This is the ultimate goal of Lectio Divina and the last stage called contemplation. At the Cullman Abbey, Brother Marcus described Contemplatio in this way,

After reading for about an hour or so perhaps once every few years you reach this stage and it is sheer gift. At this moment you stop being in control, you let go of the will, it is a sense of grace. The mystics speak allegorically like a heart on fire, a deep quiet, or like being assumed into sapphire light. They revived this practice in 1902 after the ban was lifted.

Apparently they banned this practice because people were loving God too intensely! Perhaps none of us are spiritual giants enough to ever reach this point. But I can testify to witnessing the power of knowing the word of God.

It was 1994 and I was visiting my grandfather in the last days of his life with two of my cousins Morgan and Cameron. We entered his bedroom and for the first time I saw him look vulnerable as he lay prostrate in bed. The 6’2”, 220-pound man had shrunk down to skin and bones of 140 pounds. He was only a shadow of his former self. Even the presence of three grandchildren could not bring him to full awareness of his environment. The man I knew for 25 years who was always in control was spiraling out of control fast. I searched for something to say. “Grandpa, do you remember that home on Snowden Lane with the creek we went fishing in? “ “Grandpa, how about that soup grandma made, oh it was so good.”

But nothing registered and I felt tears welling up as the world as I had always known it was crumbling. Since my childhood my grandfather had represented stateliness and power. I never saw him without a tie the first 25 years of my life. I had given up and began to leave. And remembered one more thing. A few weeks before I had conducted a funeral service. I said more to myself than to him, “Grandpa, I conducted a funeral and used Romans 8.” And then he said in a weak voice, “The suffering of the present time will not compare to the glory about to be revealed to us. Tom, its true what’s happening to me now will only magnify God’s glory.” As clear as a bell these words came forth. He was back once again and he went on. “And we know that all things work together for good for those that love God.’ Those are words of hope, Tom, it’s been true my whole life as I look back on the blessings God has given me.” And yet, another verse from Romans 8, “What shall separate us from the love of Christ?” Tom, nothing, nothing shall separate us from the love of God.” My grandfather was dying and I could not bring him back. I couldn’t make him fit into the neat categories of how I thought the universe should be,
with him shining forth as the eternal strength, despite how many images I tried to conjure up. But the Word of the Lord has power, power that can only come from God. Know that in this man’s life it made a great difference and in knowing it, can make a difference in yours and in those you love.

CS Lewis eventually came around to embrace this God and this is what he had to say regarding the connection between scripture and the next life:

At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so.

So recite these words to your children and talk about them when you are on the way and when you are home, when you rise up and when you lie down, Amen.