

This year our stewardship theme is Love, Grow, Serve: Followers of Christ together.

Followers of Christ. A familiar phrase, perhaps overly familiar, maybe even so cliché we've lost appreciation of its real inward power. The words can easily flow from our mouth, but to live them, is so much harder. Even Henri Nouwen, beloved author, priest and spiritual giant, said **he was** more a wanderer of Christ than follower.

One minute we're on the path, and the next we've lost it, over and over again. And sometimes we get far off course before we are even aware of it.

This year, your Stewardship committee, is inviting you, to join us, and follow Christ **together** next year. The committee chose three key words to help guide us on – love, grow, serve. We consider these foundational for following Christ. We can use them to help gauge whether we are on the path or not.

Jesus began his ministry by inviting people to follow him, to join him, with a very simple invitation: come and follow me. There was no lengthy speech on what it would require, what they might expect, where it would take them ...just come and see. And they did.

Invitation to follow is a recurring theme with Jesus. It didn't stop with twelve disciples. Even today's parable of the talents, which comes much later in Jesus' ministry, can be seen as an invitation from Jesus, to follow him. It's the third of three **waiting** parables in this section of Matthew. They're also known as the hard teachings of Jesus because of the harsh consequences and judgment *for those who have not been **waiting well**...*those who have been asleep, unaware, or uninvested. Yet, within today's parable is an invitation to come and share in the master's joy.

Right from the start the servants are given a large sum of the money, called talents, by the master, each given different amounts to tend while waiting for the master's return at some unspecified time.

As the story tells us, two of the servants invest their talents, doubling what was given to them, however the third servant, who was afraid of the master, he buried the one talent he had been given and returned it exactly as it had been given to him. He simply held on to what he had, controlled for all the variables, nothing gained, nothing lost, took no risk, make no investment and in the end...he found himself in the outer darkness, a place devoid of joy.

The two who had doubled their talents, who invested the talents, were invited into the joy of the master, into happiness, and entrusted with more.

Surely, this story isn't telling us that God is the master who desires to make the rich, richer and condemn the poor, only making them poorer?

So what is the invitation from Jesus?

There are other invitational parables, two of the best-known are the wedding banquet and the prodigal son. Both great stories about people invited to celebrations, to come to the party, and they refuse. Sometimes we just don't hear the invitation, sometimes we can't accept God's grace, sometimes we want to just hang on to what is, we don't want to have to change.

Jesus keeps inviting us into the kingdom, the one that is near, it's at hand. Inviting us right now into Christ's presence, right now to receive God's grace and allow God to love us.

And, every time we say **yes** to the invitation, we are transformed, for the healing of the world. We can't remain the same if we are following Jesus. There is always movement, there is always growth. Of the three stewardship words for 2021: Love, Grow, Serve – Grow is probably the one we overlook the most, and yet growing beyond our small self and into Christ-self, we grow in freedom to love and serve more fully.

Lisa Sharon Harper, a Christian activist, says that when we are following Christ, when we are in Christ ---- we are looking around at the world through baptized eyes, we come up from the baptism water and we see the image of God in all. It fundamentally changes how we view the world.

Like Paul writes in Galatians 3, **before** we are baptized, we see slave and free, we see male and female, Greek and Jew, but when we are in Christ, now we see everyone as a child of God. And when we are **in** Christ, we let go of power relationships. We move away from domination and oppression and into loving and serving.

In the Gospel of John, when John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, and told his disciples Andrew and Simon Peter, there goes the Lamb of God, right then and there, they started following Jesus. And when Jesus noticed he turned to them and asked - *what do you want?* And they answered, *where do you live?* They were asking Jesus, what are you like, what is your way of living. Jesus told them, come and follow me, come and see.

Invitations come in many forms.

One invitation I received was actually through my oldest son, Will, when he was only 5 years old. At that time, our sons, were 5 and a 2-years-old, and we weren't attending church, I belonged to a church but for one reason or another, I stopped going after having children. And, I confess, my children were getting very little in terms of Christian education at home. But one morning Will woke up, came out to our living room where he began to play with his

toys and then he casually mentioned that he saw Jesus last night. For some now baffling reason, I asked him 'what did he look like?' I got no answer, he just continued to play with his toys. But the next morning, I was given another opportunity, because once again Will woke, and started tinkering with toys and casually mentioned again that he saw Jesus last night, and this time, I took a little time, and I asked, "did he say anything?" and Will simply answered, "he said, I love you." Nothing more was ever shared – Jesus had come to Will two night in a row, sharing a simple message of love. A gift of grace to Will and an invitation to me. Jesus said, follow me. We began looking for a new church home and Maple Grove became our church.

It's really quite remarkable anytime we hear, or perhaps recognize, an invitation to follow Christ, to come and see. I say that not because I believe it's rare, I actually assume invitations are constant, and ongoing, but the noise, the distractions, the doubts, make it so hard to hear. And every time we say **yes**, it is equally remarkable, because I doubt anyone who has ever said **yes** to following Christ, actually knew beforehand what they were saying yes to.

Our stewardship invitation is *not just to follow Christ*, but to do so, **together**... in community, which is probably twice as tough but also, twice as rewarding.

Peter Rollins is a masterful storyteller and theologian who tells the story of two rabbis, arguing over a passage in the Torah, they've actually been arguing over it for 20 years and yet never come to agreement. God gets so annoyed listening to them constantly arguing about this passage that he says to the angels, I'll go down and tell them what it means. So he parts the clouds and goes down and says, "Dear friends, I've listened to you argue about what this passage means for a long time, so I'll tell you what it means." And in a rare moment of unity the two rabbis turn to God and say, "what right have you to come down from heaven and tell us what it means, leave us alone and let us argue about it."

Rollins says, what's important is not that we get the right message but that we wrestle with it, argue with it, and are transformed by it. The two rabbis are friends, they meet every day to talk about the passage and yet they have diversity of beliefs and interpretation. What's most important is that they belong together and share rituals together.

Brene Brown, who is a research professor and has become a huge cultural influencer for wholehearted, authentic living, in her talk, *Rising Strong as a Spiritual Practice*, she explains why she belongs to a church. She said that at church she passes the peace, shares in the eucharist and sings with people she wouldn't otherwise talk to because she doesn't like what they believe in and stand for. She says, we have got to have something, somewhere that is bigger than politics, bigger than ideology and bigger than hate. We've got to have that somewhere. And the thing that's bigger - - is love and belonging. Brown goes on to say that the hallmark of true belonging, is dissent. To be a part of something bigger than us with people we don't agree with - that's real belonging.

Jesus was absolutely a master of love and belonging. Jesus brought people back into community, the very community that had shut them out. He empowered those who had been disempowered. He restored them to their true identity as people worthy of love and belonging. He invited all to follow him and receive God's grace.

As Christians, we commit to follow Jesus' path of transformation, restoration, reconciliation, invitation for others to share in the joy of the master. We fan the flame of the image of God in all people – including ourselves.

In this stewardship season we ask you to prayerfully consider being a follower with us. Or at least a wanderer of Christ with us.

I often read the blog of Pastor John Pavlovitz, and in February of this year, even before all the changes due to the pandemic, he wrote about the burden of these days...and he confessed that some days he just wants to leave this world. He said, living here much longer simply feels like an emotional impossibility. The cruelty is too prevalent, the atrocities too pervasive, the fractures beyond repair. But, he said, that's just the sadness talking. Leaving isn't really an option because this is still my home.

And so today I just want to leave this world.

I want to leave it more compassionate than I found it.

I want people here who are pressed up hard against desperation to encounter rest in me; for them to feel less alone in the grief and the disbelief they carry on their rubbed-raw shoulders and to be able to exhale again.

I want to leave this world more just than when I arrived.

At the end of my time, I want to know that while I was here I spent every bit of the unearned currency of my privilege to make room at the table for the excluded and uninvited and unloved; to create spaces of refuge where people experience true belonging, *in my presence even if few places else.*

I want to leave this world lighter than it was when I got here.

I want to be a source of the kinds of fits of laughter and kind acts and joyful exchanges, that are medicinal to the souls of people afflicted by the heaviness of loss, disappointment, failure, and rejection.

So as we live in **waiting, and yet ever mindful of Christ's presence which is always with us...**

let's invest our time and talents in being followers of Christ together who love, grow and serve in new and powerful ways in 2021.