

Message: Enriched by Faith**[Watch “Day by Day” from Godspell, 1973]**

This fun video captures a beautiful prayer to God. They ask God for three things: “to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly day by day.”¹ That’s a great way to live. People have taken it to heart for 2,000 years. In fact, we have a record of what people who followed Jesus did after he died. “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*” (Acts 2:42). Luke tells us new people joined them every day. They put their beliefs into action through the way they lived. Learning more about Jesus and their faith was a key part.

So, how do you live by faith? What is a disciple? How do you become a disciple? How do you make a disciple? How do you live like a disciple? Most of us have no idea. We have to learn – from God’s Word and from other Christians.

The main reason we intentionally develop our faith is to learn how we can live life more fully. When we’re intentionally living out God’s purpose for our lives, life becomes an exciting adventure. Each day is filled with God’s presence in some way. We look for opportunities to gather with others. Bishop Dietrich Bonhoeffer teaches us we find joy when we’re with other Christians. We see “in the companionship of a Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of Christ.”²

That’s important. It’s why we gather in large and small groups.

Every Christian needs a community (and a buddy for sharing).

When we’re alone, we have a great tendency to try to justify ourselves before God. I have news for you: Jesus, who died for our sins, is the only one who can justify us. When we gather with others, we see Jesus present in their lives in ways we haven’t experienced. That leads us to look to Christ for our salvation, not to our own intellect or ego.

¹ Stephen Schwartz, *Godspell*, 1973

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Harper @ Row, 1954, p. 20

Faith enriches our life, showing us how to live. Paul said, *“It’s not that I have already reached this goal or have already been perfected, but I pursue it, so that I may grab hold of it because Christ grabbed hold of me for just this purpose. Brothers and sisters, I myself don’t think I’ve reached it, but I do this one thing: I forget about the things behind me and reach out for the things ahead of me. The goal I pursue is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 3:12-14, CEB). Our lives are more complete when we follow Jesus.

Some of us seem to drift through life without real purpose. Sure, we have family, friends, work and lots of activities on our calendar, but we have no passion or spiritual life. Just problems. We don’t get up excited and energized. Life is the same, day in and day out – dull. Worry, anxiety, fear and doubt haunt us. Let’s face it: we aren’t handed a purpose in life. We don’t just “accidentally” find passion for life. Jesus’ call changes things. There’s a new way to live, with passionate energy and joy.

Maybe we need a warning sticker on our church: living life with purpose means living intentionally. We’re called to live our faith, with authenticity. We’re made to be part of the solution, not the problem.

Growing in faith requires intent. Here’s an illustration: how many of you remember marking your height on a wall? You know “32 inches at age X”? It’s an important measurement. I remember when I was a boy always wanting to know when I’d reached the next inch, half-inch or quarter-inch. When we were children, we didn’t grow accidentally. We got taller slowly and steadily, with occasional growth spurts. You couldn’t really predict when you would grow more rapidly, though we have some clues. We’re more likely to change and grow during different seasons of life, like infancy or the teenage years.

Faith is the same. We measure our growth by looking at our attitude, the way we participate and when we show our love for others, even when they don’t ask. Sometimes we grow slowly and steadily. Other times we grow more quickly. There are different seasons as grace moves

and works in us. Learning is an important part of our spiritual growth. We grow from spiritual infancy to spiritual adolescents and beyond.

Following good practices helps us grow in faith. When we attend worship services to hear God’s Word, share with others and participate in acts of grace, we grow. When we regularly go to Bible study, small group, Sunday school, UMYF, UMW or UMM activity, or any of the other opportunities to learn, we grow. When we share our experiences of God and pray with others, we grow. When we serve with others, we grow.

The hardest part is the first step. It may be awkward at first, but there are benefits. You’ll learn more about God. Your heart, mind and spirit will be fed. You’ll experience Jesus in relationships. You’ll find a group of people who care for you and who you can care for in return. You’ll find joy in sharing your experience of God with others. These are just a few ways we grow in faith.

Growing in faith develops our relationship with God. Our greatest desire is to know God, to be spiritually connected with something greater than ourselves. We, as human beings, are driven to seek a higher purpose. When we try to cut God out of our life, we find ourselves seeking things or experiences to fill the gap. For example, drugs, sex and rock and roll has always been a popular catch phrase. Mindfulness is another example you hear today.

The problem with things and experiences is there’s never enough to fill the void. Inside us is what the philosopher Blaise Pascal called our God-shaped vacuum. We’re incomplete unless the void is filled by a divine spark, God’s Spirit. Saint Augustine knew it well. He wrote, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”³

There’s only one problem: we can’t grow in isolation. We need other Christians to bloom. When we develop our faith in the company of other believers, we discover that we’re part of a bigger picture. Our story is interwoven with Jesus’ story and God’s larger purpose. Following Jesus

³ The Confessions of Saint Augustine, John K. Ryan, ed., Doubleday, 1960; p. 43

isn't satisfying when we do our own thing, acting on our own. Our life story is affirmed and strengthened when it joins with the faith stories of others. That's where we find God at work. It's where we find acceptance, care and understanding. It's where we find peace and joy. Our common connection in Christ is what makes us a community. Jesus is the glue and our leader.

Paul teaches us about faith. Faith isn't static or a possession or an "all or nothing" proposition. Faith is something we grow into and strive toward. Faith is putting away our "*former way of life, [the] old self,*" to clothe ourself "*with the new self*" (Ephesians 4:22,24). While our attitude may change overnight, it takes time for the rest of us to catch up. That's why gathering with believers to study God's Word, pray, care for one another, and serve together are important practices to learn.

Bible study, small groups and Sunday school, all make a difference in our lives. I know this from personal experience. Three years ago, I started a weeknight Bible study. It went against all the expectations. You know, "no one will come out after dark," and "no one wants to come to a weeknight study." We did it anyway. There was a basketball group renting the gym next door at the same time. I got to know the coach. He introduced me to his wife, who taught cheerleading and fitness. They didn't go to church or know much about it, but they liked us and showed up for some of the activities, like our summer barbecue.

One night, I invited them to try out our Bible Study after class. They weren't sure they would be able to make it, but they showed up one night. They didn't have a Bible. We gave them one. Two weeks after they came, she asked where she should start reading the Bible they got. We helped her. One thing they did have: a lot of curiosity and a willingness to ask questions, even when they felt dumb doing so.

That 40-something couple was near and dear to the hearts of the group. You could see God doing a work in their lives. They came back to Bible Study. In fact, after the first few weeks, they never missed! They kept asking questions. They found quiet time with God during the week and prayer at home with their son. He shared a personal issue one

week and asked for the group’s advice. God moved in his heart, he heard and understood the teaching in the middle of the night two days later. God was working in their lives and the lives of everyone they touched. I heard an update about six months ago. They joined the church! He’s the head of the trustees.

Being intentional opened up the world in a way this couple had never experienced before. They went from feeling unsatisfied to being hungry for God. They truly exhibit what the author of Psalm 42:1 said: *“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.”* We can follow the same path with intent. We can pursue the prize of a deeper, more meaningful and authentic faith.

I invite you to join us for Bible study or a small group. If none are convenient, I’m happy to help you start one at your home, work place or even in a park. Invite a few friends. We’ll have an easy-going conversation about faith. Then we’ll be seeking, “to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly day by day.”⁴

Let us pray...

“God, as we look forward, lead us into your new creation in Christ. Help us say good-bye to the old and go with confidence to a new future. Help us, like the apostles, to truly devote ourselves to teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Amen”⁵

⁴ *Op cit, Godspell*

⁵ Schnase, *Op cit.*, p. 18

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (NRSV)

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

1 Corinthians 9:19-24 (NRSV)

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (CEB)

The LORD’s word came to Jonah a second time: “Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you.” And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD’s word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days’ walk across.)

Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, “Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant.

God saw what they were doing - that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn’t do it.

1 Corinthians 9:19-24 (CEB)

Although I’m free from all people, I make myself a slave to all people, to recruit more of them. I act like a Jew to the Jews, so I can recruit Jews. I act like I’m under the Law to those under the Law, so I can recruit those who are under the Law (though I myself am not under the Law). I act like I’m outside the Law to those who are outside the Law, so I can recruit those outside the Law (though I’m not outside the law of God but rather under the law of Christ). I act weak to the weak, so I can recruit the weak. I have become all things to all people, so I could save some by all possible means. All the things I do are for the sake of the gospel, so I can be a partner with it.

Don’t you know that all the runners in the stadium run, but only one gets the prize? So run to win.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (The Message)

Next, GOD spoke to Jonah a second time: "Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer."

This time Jonah started off straight for Nineveh, obeying GOD's orders to the letter. Nineveh was a big city, very big - it took three days to walk across it. Jonah entered the city, went one day's walk and preached, "In forty days Nineveh will be smashed."

The people of Nineveh listened, and trusted God. They proclaimed a citywide fast and dressed in burlap to show their repentance. Everyone did it - rich and poor, famous and obscure, leaders and followers.

God saw what they had done, that they had turned away from their evil lives. He did change his mind about them. What he said he would do to them he didn't do.

1 Corinthians 9:19-24 (The Message)

Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized - whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ - but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be *in* on it!

You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally.