

SERMON – 09/08/07
Aiea UMC's Vision: Our Journey Together
John 15:1-11

I remember when my children were little... probably around ages 2-3... and their absolute favorite word in the word was... “WHY?”

- Do any other parents, grandparents or aunties & uncles remember that phase?
 - I don't know if it's a genuine inquisitiveness, as they're just starting to try and figure out the big wide world around them...
 - Or if it's simply because kids discover this is the one word that will keep their parents talking... (and get them the most frustrated?!)
- You remember those interactions, right?
 - “Mom? What's for dinner?” (Spaghetti.)
 - “Why?” (Because I just went to the store and thought it would be a good night for spaghetti.)
 - “Why?” (Because it's easy to put together, & I know how much you kids like it.)
 - “Why?” (Because you don't seem to like salads or pork chops.)
 - “Why?” (I don't know. I keep asking you why you don't like it.)
 - “Why?” (Because I care about you and want you to have a nutritious diet.)
 - “Why?” (Because the USDA has put together a pyramid plan for healthy eating, and I'm trying to follow along...)
 - “Why?” (*pause...* BECAUSE I SAID SO!!! Now don't ask me any more questions!)
- Actually, WHY is an important question to ask... (just not 15 million times in a row!)
 - Well today, we're going to address the question of WHY... but from a much broader scale...
 - Why are we here? What is the purpose of Aiea United Methodist Church?

Over the last four weeks, we've been journeying through a series titled “Destination: Faith!”

- We've been reminded of how God gives us new perspectives in familiar places...

- How, as individuals, when we're called by God, we get a new identity... and are given a new vision...
 - We're even challenged, as we saw last week, to reexamine our Savior... and just who it is we're following!
- Every summer for the past 5 or 6 years, we've had one Sunday here at Aiea UMC that we call "Why We Do What We Do!"
 - We've looked at the various elements of our worship service... spent time focused on Holy Communion... the music & hymnody of worship... baptism & what it means to belong to the body of Christ...
 - One year we even went "behind the scenes" and looked at everything that goes into preparing for worship.
- Today is kind of like the ultimate Why We Do What We Do... because today, we're going to be looking at the BIG PICTURE..."Why do we do this?"
 - Why do we gather here each week?
 - Why do we call ourselves "Christians"?
 - What is the purpose for us as a church?
- To help us get started thinking along these lines, I'd like to show you a 2-minute video clip from Pastor Rob Bell, and his series of short films...
 - This particular video is entitled "Sunday," and Rob is seated in a coffee shop, wrestling with why we, as Christians, come to church each week.
 - Let's watch...

When we start to ask the bigger question of WHY we do what we do... why we're here, in this place, at this time... we can start with the larger United Methodist denomination.

- The mission of the United Methodist Church is simple, "To make disciples of Jesus Christ."
 - That's also what we heard from Jesus in the Bible reading today from the gospel of John... He said, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."
 - Why do we do this? To become disciples of Jesus... followers of Christ!

- But then the 3-year-old in me wants to ask, “BUT WHY!?!”
- Being a disciple sounds good... but what does it really mean?

I just finished reading a book by Pastor Rob Bell with an interesting title, *Velvet Elvis: repainting the Christian faith*.

- In chapter 5, he sheds some interesting light on what it mean to be a disciple back in Jesus’ time...
 - Starting at age 6, Jewish children would begin to be taught the Torah, or the first 5 books of what we call the “Old Testament.”
 - They would most likely be taught by a rabbi in the local synagogue...
 - By age 10, they generally would have memorized these books of the Bible.
 - Rabbis who taught the Torah were the most respected members of the community. They were the best of the best... the smartest students who knew the texts inside & out.
 - Not everyone could become a rabbi!
- By age 10, students had started sorting themselves out... those who demonstrated natural abilities with the scriptures started distancing themselves from the others...
 - Some would stop studying, and transition to learning the family trade.
 - By age 13 or 14, however, the top students had the entire Jewish scriptures memorized (39 books!).
 - Students in this 2nd stage would also learn the fine art of questions and the oral traditions surrounding the texts.
 - You see, it wasn’t enough to just know what the text said... one needed to know what it meant... and show that it was understood!
- By the age 14 or 15, only the best of the best were still studying...
 - These folks would apply to a well-known rabbi to become one of that rabbi’s *talmidim*, or “disciples.”
 - It was much more than just being a student... the goal of a disciple was to **be just like** the rabbi.
 - He wanted to learn to do what the rabbi did.

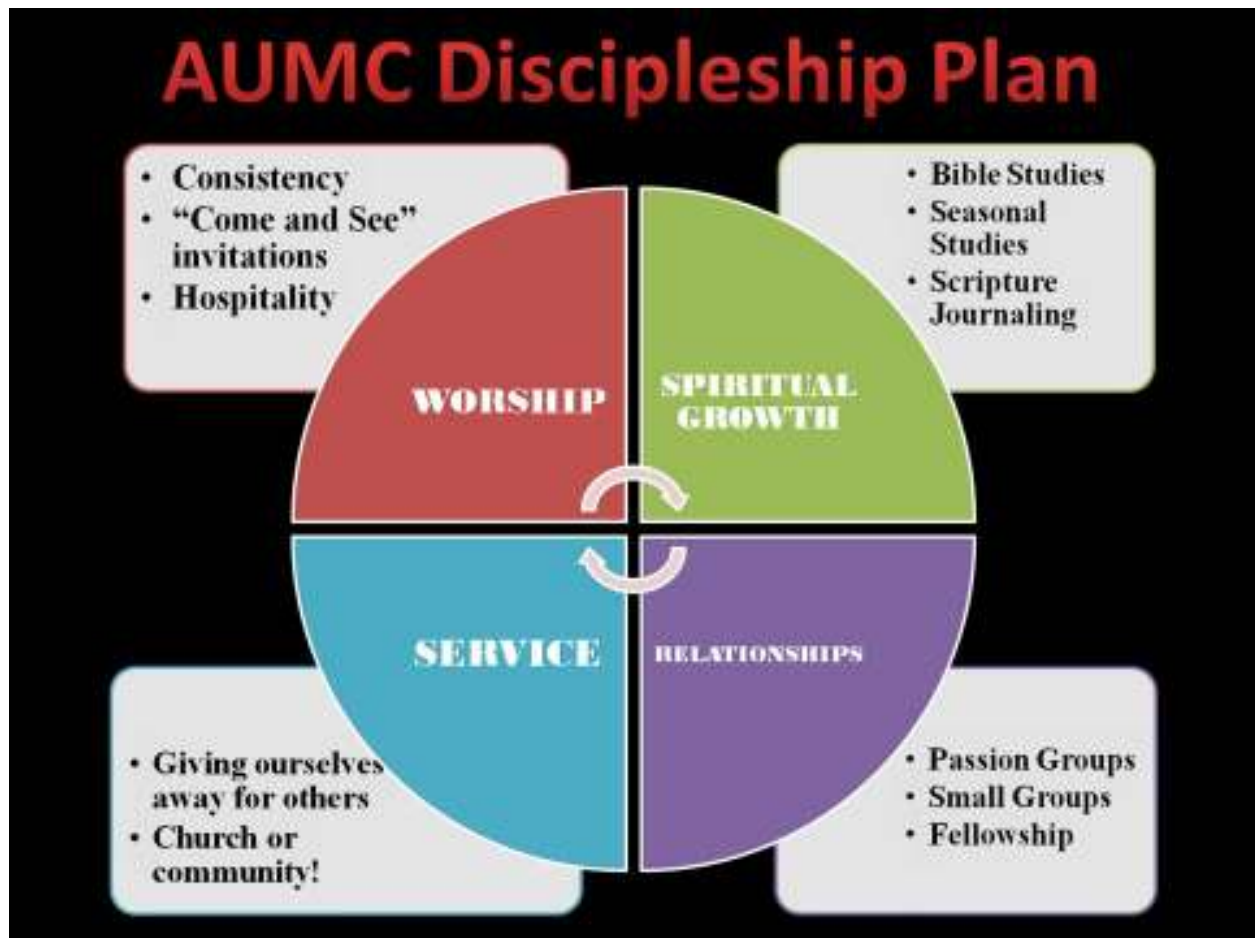
- Before a rabbi agreed to take on a disciple, he had to find something out: Can this student do what I do? Does he have what it takes to be the best of the best of the best?
- The rabbi would then start questioning the student... about scripture & interpretation... about the prophets & the sages... about words & phrases... all the time trying to discern if this kid had what it took to be like him.
- If the rabbi thought not, then he'd say so, and encourage the youth to keep learning the family business.
- But if he believed this one could be like him... could do what he does... he'd say, "Come, follow me."
- And at that point, the youth would leave his family... his village... his friends... and devote his life to learning how to do what his rabbi did!
- So at age 30, when a rabbi generally began his teaching & training of disciples, we find Jesus walking alongside the Sea of Galilee...
 - He sees two brothers, Simon (called Peter) and his brother Andrew.
 - Do you remember what they were doing? Fishing!
 - Why are they fishermen? Because they aren't disciples. They didn't make the cut. They weren't the "best of the best of the best."
 - And still Jesus said, "Come, follow me."
 - He called the "not good enoughs"... the ones who had already been rejected somewhere along the way.
 - Is it any wonder they immediately left their nets & followed him? Here was one who said, in effect, "I think you can do what I do. I think you have what it takes to be like me!"
 - He didn't ask them if they believed in him... Jesus, by calling them to be his disciples, showed that he believed in **them!**
- Friends, Jesus still calls us to be his disciples... to follow him...
 - He says to us, "I think you can do what I do. I think you have what it takes to be like me!"
 - The question is: will we follow him with our whole heart?

The leadership of this church, our Administrative Council, has been wrestling over the past 2 years on what it means to follow Jesus... and how God might be calling us, as the community here at Aiea UMC, to live out our discipleship!

- We've come up with a refocused vision – or PURPOSE, as we've chosen to call it...
 - Something so clear and simple that everyone can say it, memorize it and understand it...
 - We believe our purpose at Aiea UMC is: **“Knowing, loving, and serving God.”**
 - Everything we do here should be able to be filtered through this lens... does it enable us to know, love & serve God better?
 - If not, we don't need to be spending time doing it!
- But we also recognize that we need specific guidance on how to live this out... so we've also come up with “Our Journey”...
 - We believe that the Christian faith is best expressed as a journey... not a destination!
 - It's a lifetime of growth... not something we can ever “master” or “complete.”
 - Following Jesus is more than coming to church on a regular basis... and even more than making a financial commitment to the church.
 - We see our journey as **“building a life-changing community that follows Jesus through worship, relationships, spiritual growth, and service.”**
- Because we're all on a journey, none of us are at exactly the same point in our walk with Christ...
 - So it's not rational to expect everyone to live out their faith by doing the same exact things.
 - I like to use the example of college when talking about our discipleship journey...
 - The University of Hawaii at Manoa (my alma matter) has tens of thousands of students – all at the same campus – often at the same time!
 - But not everyone takes the same kinds of classes, do they?
 - It depends on such factors as what **year** one is in school (an undergrad freshman should have a completely different course schedule than a grad student working

on her PhD!)... and what **course of study** one is pursuing (theater majors, like I was, didn't have to take as many math classes as physics majors... thank God!).

- So we've been working to develop a DISCIPLESHIP PLAN... a pathway that we can follow as we live out our faith...
 - We don't have it completely finalized just yet... but here's a model along the lines of where we're moving...



- It all starts with WORSHIP... Worship is central to the life of a Christian... and to the life of this church...
- People usually come to this church because of a worship service.
- This is the first place we can give our **hearts** to God... with regular, sustained devotion in worship.

- What a wonderful opportunity we have here to invite others to “come and see” just how life-giving this community’s worship can be!
- Then at some point, when people have been coming long enough to know this might be a place they want to stay for a while, we invite them to attend an **orientation** session...
- We’re starting to hold these one-hour sessions every three months... immediately after church... so people can get to know us a little better: our history, purpose, journey & denomination... and how they can get more connected.
- Building on the foundation of worship, we have **spiritual growth**... intentional deepening of our faith, outside of the regular worship experience!
 - Over the course of a year we have many opportunities to deepen our spirituality... through such resources as:
 - **Daily Scripture Journaling** (on own or w/ group)
 - **Weekly Sunday School or youth group** (from children through adults!)
 - **Monthly Passion Group Bible Study** (focused on the current sermon series)
 - **Disciple Bible Studies & Companions in Christ groups**
 - **Seasonal Studies** (Advent & Lent)
 - **UMC 102** (Getting to know Methodism)
 - We believe that everyone should have something they’re doing outside of worship to deepen their spiritual life... the newer one is on the journey of faith, the more this section is crucial!
- Then we know that Jesus put a big emphasis on **relationships**... and the launching of our Passion Groups is one way we’re working to help each other grow in this area!
 - Life-changing community is formed through relationships... and we’re blessed to now have 11 different passion groups... if you haven’t had a chance to sign up for our fall semester of groups, I encourage you to do so today!
 - Plus we also have many other ongoing ministries & programs in the church that allow people to connect with one another outside of the Sunday morning worship time.

- We need to deepen our relationships in meaningful ways...
- Finally, we can live out our discipleship by doing what Jesus did... giving himself away for others... modeling our Master when it comes to giving of our time, gifts & energy in serving others!
 - This doesn't have to be a "church-related" project, either... it can be out in the community as well...
 - Anytime we put others before ourselves... and engage in actions that become a blessing to those in need, we are rendering service.
 - But it's important that we take time to focus on others, through service.
- The leaders of this church feel very strongly that these four areas of discipleship are crucial to the life of a Christian!
 - Having said that, along the course of our journey, there may be seasons when you are living out your faith in each of these 4 areas... and those will be very fulfilling times, I'm sure!
 - But there may be other times when you feel God calling you to focus on say, 2 of them...
 - It's not about "doing more"... it's about following Jesus...
 - Doing what he does... walking in the footsteps of the rabbi who has called us!

I'd like us to watch another short segment from Pastor Rob Bell's video, "Sunday"...

- [NOTE: it finishes with "Could anything be more beautiful?"]
 - That is our journey together, my friends...
 - Building a life-changing community whose hearts start beating more and more like God's heart!
 - We are at an exciting time in the life of this church... can you feel it? Can you sense it?
 - Can you imagine what God might be able to do here... if He had all of our hearts?!
 - Could anything be more beautiful?
 - Thanks be to God. AMEN.