

“GOING DEEPER”

Luke 5:1-11

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It has been several years now since I participated in the *John Wesley Great Experiment*. The *John Wesley Great Experiment* is not something that the founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley, began in a laboratory at his Alma Mater in Oxford, England. It is a small group program that was started at the John Wesley United Methodist Church in Florida, and it has attracted worldwide attention among Methodists.

My wife and I, along with about a dozen other people, made a covenant to do four things for six weeks: (1) We would get up at 6 o'clock every morning and spend the first half hour of the day reading the Bible and praying in solitude. (2) We would attend a weekly meeting of our small group where we would share together the joys and concerns that were on our hearts. (3) We would give 10% of our income to the church, and (4) we would do at least one deliberate act of service weekly, something that we weren't doing already or wouldn't be doing if we weren't part of that covenant group.

Well, as a pastor, I saw lots of places to do service, so doing service was not difficult. The only difficulty was carving out the time to do it. My wife and I were already tithing our income, so that part was easy. Attending the small group meetings was not difficult, either, except for the fact that we needed to keep Sunday nights clear on our calendar for the meetings. What was a challenge in those days, was getting up a half hour earlier! It seemed as if the alarm clock went off in the middle of the night! A half hour seemed like a long time to read the Bible and pray. The first morning I was done in ten minutes and kept looking at the clock.

As the days went on, it got easier and easier. I actually began to look forward to that morning time alone with God. My days began to get more focused. My prayer life became richer and more meaningful. By the time the six weeks were over, we had found as a group that the experiment was so meaningful and so valuable that we wanted to continue on. We did continue for some time. In fact, I have continued the morning devotional time to this day. I have never been what you might call a “morning person.” But now I get up, take a mile run through the neighborhood, get a shower and then have my morning devotions, seven days a week — almost without fail. One of the women who was in our group commented to me years later that the *John Wesley Great Experiment* was one of the best spiritual experiences she had ever had. It was for me as well.

This morning I want us to think about “*going deeper*” in our faith journey. In Chapter 3 of his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Bishop Schnase asks the haunting question, “*Are we closer to Christ than we were five years ago?*” Some people here this morning can answer “yes” without a moment's hesitation. You have made a decision to follow

Jesus, joined the church, and become active in this congregation. We are still working on some of the year-end statistics, but we reported to the Conference that 61 persons joined Church of the Saviour in 2009. New members, I praise God for your decision and your commitment to Christ and the church. For some, the question, “Are you closer to Christ than you were five years ago?” is an unqualified “Yes!” Five years ago, some of you did not know Jesus. Now you do!

But there are others of us, who are, in what I might call, a holding pattern. It’s like the treadmill. We keep walking, but we don’t seem to be getting anyplace. We are pretty much at the same place we were five years ago, maybe ten or twenty years ago. We may have changed addresses; we may have changed jobs; we may have even changed churches, but have we grown spiritually? Are we closer to God and more in tune with the things of the Spirit than we were five years ago?

John Wesley was as passionate about seeing people grow in faith as he was about inviting people to begin the walk of faith in the first place. We have talked about radical hospitality — hospitality that comes from our deep desire to share the Gospel message with people that they are valued and forgiven and loved. Last week we thought about passionate worship, and Rev. Bogre challenged us to let go of whatever it is that is keeping us from worshiping and praising God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. This morning we are focusing on intentional faith development, and by “intentional” I mean deliberate, purposeful, something on which we place a high priority. Some things in life happen almost by accident: we are simply in the right place at the right time. But the faith development that Jesus models for the disciples, the faith development that John Wesley envisioned and that Bishop Schnase writes about is not something that happens by accident, but through our deliberate action.

Growing in faith is not easy. It doesn’t just happen. Any time we set out to accomplish something, there will be challenges and roadblocks and setbacks along the way. Any time I have taken on something new in my life, especially in the realm of the Spirit — to join or lead a Bible study group, to become more disciplined in my prayer life, to make a fresh commitment to service, to go on retreat or to camp or on a mission work trip — a myriad of challenges get in my way. John Wesley discovered early that the faith journey was too difficult to embark upon alone. So he organized his congregations into groups of twelve people — he called them classes — for accountability and support.

It’s only been a month since many of us made New Year’s resolutions. How are you doing? Do you even remember what they were? I read a bit of advice from the health club where I belong. It said, “If you want to keep your New Year’s resolutions, tell other people what they are!” If your resolution is to lose ten pounds, if other people know that and see you reach for that sixth cookie in the parlor at coffee hour, someone is sure to say, “Hey, I thought you were trying to lose weight!” If your resolution is to go deeper in faith, then someone might just nudge you and say, “How about trying our Sunday school class? We have a lot of good discussion. It really helps me think more deeply about some things.”

Of course, sharing is risky business. It makes us vulnerable. Because I have shared that I try to run every morning, some of you will ask me from time to time as we shake hands after worship, “Are you still running?” Or more pointed, “Did you run this morning?” That’s a nudge for me to keep going. We all need to be accountable for our actions. I repeat, it’s too difficult to travel the faith journey by ourselves. We need each other.

We need to be **accountable** for our actions. We also need each other for **support**. There is a beautiful passage in I Corinthians about how we are all members of the body of Christ. When one member suffers, all suffer together. When one member is honored, all are honored together. How meaningful those verses became when my infant son was in the hospital and the congregation I was serving at the time rallied around us with love and support. How meaningful when a new baby is born in this congregation and folks show up at the door with food, lovingly prepared for the family. How warm the feeling to receive cards and expression of concern when we are sick or someone we love passes away.

We strive to be a caring community and a church that is known for its love and concern, but in a big church it is sometimes challenging to find a place to belong; a place where we are known and accepted and loved, a place where we are missed if we are not there. I was thrilled when our Youth Council, under the leadership of Curt Campbell, began the *Sprockets* groups with our youth. The idea is that a small group of youth meets twice a month with a couple of caring adults for Bible study, prayer, sharing and just plain fun. Do our busy teenagers have time for this activity? Of course not! But more and more of them are making time, because they are beginning to understand what Martin Luther meant when he said, "I have so much to do today, I will accomplish it only if I spend a substantial amount of time in prayer."

Intentional faith development does not happen by accident, but sometimes it comes as the bi-product of another activity. Some of the most meaningful experiences of my life have been the mission work trips in which I have participated. I shall never forget the trip to Appalachia with a group of youth, the trip to inner city Cincinnati, the week helping to build a church in Costa Rica, the trips to New Orleans, to South Carolina, and the list goes on. My purpose in going, or so I thought, was to lend a helping hand to the less fortunate. Each trip has had a profound effect on my life and has caused me to grow closer to God as well as grow closer to the other participants. Spiritual bonds have been formed that are strong and enduring.

Retreats and other experiences where we focus on the things of the Spirit can also be life-changing encounters with God and wonderful times of spiritual growth. I have never known a person to come home from an Emmaus Walk or a Chrysalis Flight that has not been drawn closer to God and to the other participants. I would encourage each of us to seek out such experiences as we become more intentional in our walk with God.

I would caution you, though, that we should not think of intentional faith development as a self-improvement program. This is not the spiritual equivalent of the do-it-yourself books we see at the check-out counter of drugstores and supermarkets. We are not trying to improve ourselves; we are seeking to allow God to shape us and make us the people God wants us to be.

Part of the risk is that when we make more time for God in our lives, we never know what God will ask us to do or where the journey may lead! What I am asking you to do is to re-order your priorities by being more deliberate, more intentional in the time you spend with God. Some may be able to sign up for a mission work trip, an Emmaus Walk, a Chrysalis Flight. Others may need to join a Sunday school class or Bible study group here at the church. Hopefully, many of us will get at least a taste of how we can grow spiritually through a commitment to 90 X 90, just an hour and a half of service over the next three months — not much in terms of time or commitment, but possibly opening a door or a window that will lead us to a deeper relationship with God.

Jesus taught the people one afternoon using a boat for his pulpit. That was innovative!

Then he told the disciples to put their nets into the deep water. Simon, the spokesperson for the disciples, said, “Lord, we’ve tried. We’ve already fished all night and caught nothing. But, if you say so, we’ll do it.” We all know the story. When the disciples followed the instruction of Jesus, they caught so many fish their nets almost broke!

The lesson is clear. We are not supposed to stay in the shallow water. Jesus wants us to **go deeper**. He wants us to stick our necks out, to take the next risky step of intentional faith development. Are we closer to Christ than we were five years ago? Will we be closer to Christ five years from now?

The disciples went out into the deep water, and their lives were changed. Our lives will be changed, too, when we follow the instruction of Jesus. May each of us resolve to **go deeper** in our walk with God.

Prayer: Lord, as we read these words of instruction to the disciples, “Put out into the deep water,” we realize that you are talking to us. Help us to go deeper in our spiritual lives, in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.