

## **The Accidental Disciple: Planning for Success in Your Spiritual Life, Sunday, 9/8/19**

**1** When Jana and I lived in Anoka County, we received one of these post cards in the mail-perhaps you received one as well in the county you live in. The Anoka County Department of Disease Prevention and Control mailed these out, along with a refrigerator magnet attached to the front of the card. The card reads, “You can’t schedule your next disaster,” and the date book shows a pandemic flu outbreak scheduled for the 13<sup>th</sup> of the month, shortly after a lunch date with John and three days before it’s time to pick up the dry cleaning. The take-home message the county was trying to deliver appears in faded letters in the background of the postcard: “I’m committed to start a habit and break the chain.” In particular, the county wanted us to start the habits of planning, preparing, and preventing for a pandemic flu outbreak, something we know is likely to happen again but it’s impossible to actually know when. Flu pandemics are not the same as the seasonal flu outbreak that we’re all accustomed to. Pandemics spread more quickly and kill more people, usually millions.

I’ll bet almost nobody who got one of these cards in the mail actually followed through with the necessary planning to prepare for the next flu pandemic. The truth is, most of us don’t really believe that we’ll be caught up in a disaster like that. We know the facts and the probabilities, but deep down in our hearts we believe that disasters happen to other people. So when disasters do strike, we’re caught unprepared. And the middle of a crisis like a flu pandemic is hardly the time to begin planning for success.

**2** It’s the same way with preparing ourselves for the resurrection life, when we’ll stand face to face with Jesus. Most of us fool ourselves into thinking that we have an unlimited number of days to grow in our love of God and neighbor, while at the same time we know from experience that people die, young and old, and the days of preparation eventually come to an end. Most of us won’t know the hour of our deaths until it has arrived, and yet, our deaths are really as predictable as the setting of the sun. One day the hour will come, as inevitably as the spinning of the earth, and all the money and medical technology in this world won’t prevent us from dying. And if we don’t plan, prepare, and prevent in our spiritual lives, that day could be the most significant disaster we have to face. So what are you actually doing to ready yourself for that day and to ready the world for the return of Jesus?

Somone once famously asked why Christians place such hope in spending an eternity with God, when so much of our earthly existence is spent begrudgingly seeking God in prayer, worship, and the Bible. It's a question I've asked of myself during seasons of spiritual lethargy. You may have your own explanation for why you drift away from God, but in my experience, the reason is almost always that I've drifted away from reading and doing the Word of God, the Bible.

**3** When read, reflect, and act on what we find in our Bibles, we come to know that the most important element in a plan for success in our spiritual lives is allowing ourselves to be shaped by God's Word. The psalmist put it this way: "Oh, the joys of those who...delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank."<sup>1</sup> I'm not sure what that tree looked like in the mind's eye of the person who wrote that psalm, but here's one way I imagine it to be: Sunrise on Grandpa Lake in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA), with the sunlight shafting through the fall fog and lighting up a rather ordinary looking tree. I remember the call of a loon echoing over the water, the birds beginning to stir in the trees, and even the coffee water beginning to boil on the camp stove as I took this picture! That's the kind of tree I want to be, a rather ordinary tree until illuminated by God's Spirit. But I'll never be that tree unless I meditate day and night upon God's Word, and I'll never do that unless I make disciplined plans to do so.

**4** We read in Jude that the alternative to Godliness is to be "like trees in autumn that are doubly dead, for they bear no fruit and have been pulled up by the roots."<sup>2</sup> I've seen hundreds of uprooted trees like this in the BWCA. The soil is so thin on top of the glacial rock that the roots don't have anywhere to go but sideways. I've also seen scores of uprooted lives like this, toppled by some unexpected turn of events- a tragic death, a lost job, an unfaithful spouse- with no rootedness in the word of God upon which to anchor their lives. And let me tell you, lying sideways with your roots exposed is a tough time to start searching for God and Christian community, with little or no knowledge of God's word planted in your heart. It's far better for those who are already bearing the fruit of Christ in their lives when, and not if, the straight-line winds of life knife through their branches.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 1:1-3. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition).

<sup>2</sup> Jude 12, Ibid.

**5** There have been times in my life when I've been more like the chaff of Psalm 1 that blows away in the wind. Chaff is all the leftovers that remain after wheat kernels are separated from the rest of the wheat stalk. It's basically good for nothing and only gets in the way. If being a tree means constantly meditating on God's Word, then being chaff means being completely separated from God's word. We become chaff when we live as only as accidental disciples, with no regular commitment to grow in the knowledge and love of God and neighbor and no plan to live that out in service to Christ's body, the church, and to the world. We become content to blow from here to there, hearing snatches of God's Word as circumstances happen with no disciplined approach to applying God's Word to our lives in practical ways. That's such an impoverished way to live, when God has graciously revealed to us everything we need to live joyfully and abundantly.

Spending time with God's Word provides the foundation of all other spiritual disciplines. The Bible is the clearest revelation we have of God's identity and God's will, and without constantly refreshing ourselves with it, we can never hope to be trees planted by streams of waters. Without the Bible, there is no truth, no full understanding of the good news of Jesus Christ, and no compelling reason to lay down our lives in the service of others. Without the Bible, we, the church, become merely an empty shell- chaff, for the winds of the world to blow away.

**6** Paul spelled out the practical usefulness of the Holy Scriptures to Timothy, when he wrote, "Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way."<sup>3</sup> But ultimately, Paul recognized that the gift of God's Word isn't just about our salvation and the joy we can experience today when we choose to follow Jesus.

You may remember me saying that Jesus was on a mission that we're still on today. Paul referred to it in his letter to Timothy in the very next verse, saying "Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us."<sup>4</sup> That's right: God has tasks for each one of us, and God's Spirit gives us gifts to accomplish those tasks with supernatural power- power that comes from God and goes beyond anything we could hope

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<sup>3</sup> 2Timothy 13:16, The Message.

<sup>4</sup> 2Tomothy 13:17, Ibid.

to accomplish on our own. Sometimes those tasks change as our lives change. Sometimes they are leadership tasks and sometimes they involve following. Sometimes we see them bear spectacular fruit, and other times what we do appears to be inconsequential activities drowned out by the noise of the world.

We're all called to be the tree God made us to be. Just like a forest is made up of many trees, the body of Christ, the Church, fulfills the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ by adding up the contributions of all the trees planted by the water of God's Word, no matter how large or small the contributions of the trees appear to be. I wonder, what kind of tree has God made you to be? What are the unique ways God has prepared you to serve in our mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ?

**7** The bible is full of many other metaphors describing our spiritual lives, many of them found in the parables we studied this summer. They contrast the fruitful life of Jesus followers with the unfruitful life of the curious crowds, who gather to listen to Jesus but then walk away when it becomes clear that being a disciple of Jesus involves sacrifice and an intentional plan for growth. The weeds and the wheat. The seed that landed on the path. The wise and the foolish bridesmaids, who failed to plan and prepare. The gracious father and the hard-hearted son who couldn't accept or offer grace.

Like Timothy before us, each of us has been given a charge to bring the Word of God to others, reflected in the words and actions of our lives. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us."<sup>5</sup> If we don't know the Word of God, it won't shape our lives and we can't share it. We need to associate ourselves with God's Word so closely that God's Spirit transforms us into the very living image of God's Word, Jesus. And that simply will not happen by accident, and it won't happen in a moment or even a year. It's the journey of a life time, but it starts with a plan and a commitment to grow.

Don't be an accidental disciple, driven from one circumstance to the next with no plan in place to grow closer to God. Be a tree planted by streams of living water. Commit yourself today to a new habit of being and doing the Word of God. Do that, and you will be

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

blessed, this church will be blessed, and those living in the communities around us will also be blessed, as we take the blessing of God's word to them and share it with contagious joy. This church exists to make disciples of Jesus Christ, so that all may know joy. May it be so, for you, and for me, and for all of us together. Amen.



**Bill Reinhart, Pastor**

[pastorbill@buffaloumc.com](mailto:pastorbill@buffaloumc.com)