

Sermon, July 2, 2023
Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42
“Growing as Followers: Welcome”
Rev. Nikki Baker, Lead Pastor



SERMON SERIES: JULY 2 & 9

Good morning, new friends! It seems odd for me to say it on this first Sunday, but welcome to First UMC! I am Nikki Baker, your new pastor—or Pastor Nikki. It is good to be here with you this morning in this sanctuary and with all who are joining us from home.

Prayer of Illumination:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I've been considering the two Scripture lessons we read this morning since Bishop Palmer appointed me here as your pastor. I have been praying for you, for us, and for this community. The question that God has brought to my mind again and again has been, "What does it mean to follow Christ—to be a disciple and lead disciples in this new setting? How do we listen to God and follow Jesus' way together?" So, Pastor Amy and I have been considering and focusing our preaching on discipleship for the next several weeks as we begin our series on What is a disciple? How does being a disciple change how we live and how we see ourselves in relationship to a loving God?

Genesis and Trusting God's Provision

Abraham was a man who followed God. When God called him out from the house of his ancestors, out from the land of Ur, Abraham gathered his family and his belongings and he went. He did not know exactly where he was going or what the journey would be like, but he went, nonetheless.

He responded to God's call. He left what he knew for what he didn't know—the familiar for the unfamiliar, the comfortable for the uncomfortable, the status of insider for the status of outsider/ guest/ foreigner.

He trusted God's promise to provide. With each difficulty that Abram and Sarai encountered, they learned to trust God's provision. This learning to trust was not without mistake or misunderstanding on Abram's part, but the more he followed, the more he learned to trust. And God continued to provide for Abram and his family, even as Abram demonstrated his willingness to give to God the one thing he had wanted most, an heir, God provided a lamb, instead.

Abraham knew the one true God. In the region of where Abraham had been living with his father's family, the people had worshipped many gods. Most families had a god that they had adopted as their patron god. But Abraham left this way of worship behind and chose to worship the one true God. But Abram did not know God like we do. Abraham knew the transcendent God—God who was above all, God who only interacted from high places. Abraham did not have the experience of God revealing God's self to us in human flesh.

In His Son Jesus Christ, God chose to reveal God's self to us by becoming incarnate—by becoming human. And God revealed God's self to us in the fully human and yet fully divine person of Jesus Christ. As followers—disciples—of Christ, we listen to God's voice through what Christ had to say, we choose to live our lives looking to Jesus' way of living as our guide. And we trust that in Christ, we have all that we need. Like Abraham, we trust God's provision.

Today is the first of a series we are calling "Growing as Followers." We are focusing on what it means to be a disciple or follower of Jesus. Our particular focus this week is on Welcoming. Welcoming is more than a smile and a handshake. Welcoming is opening hearts and lives to experience true fellowship with another human being.

Loneliness in America:

An article from the American Psychological Association dated 2019 stated that loneliness is an epidemic not only in particular in the United States, but throughout the world. About one third of US adults aged forty-five or older report feeling lonely. However, I would also risk a guess that many of our youngest people, even though they are connected digitally, find themselves feeling lonely and disconnected, as well. The UK even hired a minister of loneliness in recent years.

Psychologist Susan Pinker reported pre-pandemic that "more than sixty-two million people...say they are socially isolated and unhappy about it. More than thirty-two million of those people live alone." I can't imagine what the latest statistics might be now, as we are post-pandemic.

If loneliness is so pervasive, what can we do to remedy this feeling of isolation and disconnection from one another?

Growing as Followers

The Gospel lesson from Matthew this morning offers wisdom on following Jesus—a lesson practicing the discipline of welcoming. As Jesus shared with His disciples, one way we welcome others is to meet their felt need. When we meet a felt need, it is like offering a cool cup of water to someone who is parched. That cool cup of water quenches their thirst and demonstrates a compassionate response to a need.

Cool Cups of Water in Haiti

The second mission trip I ever went on was to Haiti in January of 2017. Traveling to Haiti in January sounds good in one's head—warm weather, tropical beaches, palm trees. Reality was a little bit different.

We did experience warm weather and palm trees, but the beaches were another story altogether. We traveled there because we were visiting Kay Ang, a children's home for those orphaned, mostly by Hurricane Katrina. Kay Ang was not far from Cap Haitien in the north part of the island. The temperature most days was well into the 80s and 90s and the humidity was extremely high as we were not terribly far from the coast.

I was amazed at the revelation that my hair was curly from the humidity. The children were fascinated by the constant sheen of sweat on my arms. Most days, it was so hot that I was sweating in a cool shower. Water was a major focus of my day. Water was life.

One day, we went with the children to visit the Citadel. Haiti is half of an island, so it sits mostly at sea-level, but the Citadel sits at 3,000 feet. The road or path begins in the town of Milot and goes 7 miles to the top. We did not have to do the entire 7 mile climb because the first 6.25 miles were accessible by car. So, we parked at the upper-most parking lot and set about climbing the last $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile. The incline was ridiculously steep. It felt like it was just short of climbing a cliff face. In the first few hundred yards, my Achilles tendons were strained and begging me to stop. It was hot and I was already drenched in sweat. I had one water bottle for the trip. It was a beautiful, sunny day. And it was quite possibly the longest $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of my life.

Our students were running back and forth ahead of us urging us to hurry up. As I was somewhere between lament and desperation in my prayers, a young man not from our group came up beside my roommate and me and urged us to rest—we must have looked horrible. We were drenched and well past caring how we looked. We were sweating faster than we could replenish. and he had cold water to give. That was the best water I've ever tasted! The young man sat down with us on the raised cement edge of the path and talked to us. He urged us to breathe deeply and only sip and not gulp our water. He walked with us all the way to the top, going back and forth to bring us water. And I think he celebrated our reaching the top almost as much as we did! He asked questions about the US and what things were like where we live. We asked questions about Haiti. Then, after our tour, he joined us once again as we slowly made our way down the mountain.

Here is what I learned from that young man about welcoming:

- 1) He started by meeting our felt needs: rest, water, compassion and encouragement.
- 2) He was curious. He was open to give and open to receive, sharing himself and receiving what we had to offer.
- 3) He was genuine. He made the effort to communicate around our language barrier, laughing at our mistakes and laughing at his own.
- 4) He met us where we were and walked with us at our pace.

I have never had such a strenuous experience be such a welcoming experience at the same time. This young person offered us cool cups of water. But he also offered us cool cups of water in the ways he welcomed us into his day, into his life, and into fellowship with him as he met us with compassion, shared his curiosity, interacted in his openness, in his genuineness, and in his willingness to walk beside us at a much slower pace than he was able to go.

Opportunities of Welcome:

I have already received many cool cups of water from the staff and SPRC here at First. You've made the difficulty of moving much more bearable. Pastor Amy has worked with the staff to get me organized and

help me to meet people. There are several opportunities that we can meet one another and dream together in the coming weeks, and I would love for us to welcome one another into a journey of faith together. But we also have opportunities to welcome people we may not know, together.

There are people in our community who are feeling lonely, cast out, excluded, afraid, or may have been hurt by the church, or are searching for a place to belong and to be loved.

There are people who are searching for a new church home—a place to grow in their relationship with God and grow as disciples or followers of Christ.

So many people need cold cups of water. Let's just sit with that for a minute. Consider where you spend the bulk of your time every day. With whom do you interact? Who might you meet in compassion? What felt needs to you recognize? Clarence is a music teacher—Clarence, I know that music teachers tell their students that in order to be the best musician they can be they have to...practice! That's right! As a former Spanish teacher and coach, I told my students and athletes the same. Well, in order to be the best disciples or followers of Jesus we can be, we have to...what? Practice! So, how can you practice welcoming this week? I challenge and encourage you to consider ways you can practice welcoming in the weeks to come. This is how we grow as followers of Christ, we practice living the way Christ himself lived. Thanks be to God!