

Sunday, August 7, 2016 - A Bonfire On The Beach

John 21:1-13

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

I love being by or on the water. Riding a ferry across the Sound, sitting by a dock on a lake, swimming in a South Carolina lake, walking on the beach in Nome, Alaska, jet skiing, stand up paddleboarding, kayaking, you name it. If there's water involved, I love it.

I'll still never forget the phone call from our district superintendent about coming to Marysville. While he's talking, I pulled up a map online and saw this: (map of PNW coast) Before I even knew who you were, I was interested in hearing more!

Our faith has a deep connection to water. Jesus began his ministry by stepping into the Jordan River. Throughout the Bible, images of water symbolize chaos, rebirth and new life. Jesus walked on water, turned water into wine and quieted a chaotic storm.

SCRIPTURE READ: John 21:1-13

Our Jesus story for this whole month is Jesus appearing to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This story is about how we recognize Christ. Which is really what we all want, isn't it? **We want to keep learning how to see, experience, know and be loved by Jesus Christ, in every area of our lives.** Because that seems to be the source of freedom, new life, healing and wholeness.

This process of learning how to do and be that kind of person is what we call discipleship.

And this month we're going to imagine a story of discipleship together. Because here's the thing. Most churches have the same mission. We want to make disciples of Jesus Christ. In the United Methodist Church, our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And how exactly do we make a disciple? The answer is both simple and very complex.

But what I've seen many times in church life is that we have a vague understanding of how we grow as a disciple, but it's very nuanced and hard to put into words. We all grow so differently, depending on our life experiences.

It's tempting to distill the discipleship process into a linear step 1-10 document. If you do A, then you will get B. That hasn't been my experience of the Holy Spirit. Instead of following steps 1-10, I sense God nudging me over here, then other there, then back to this place, and then way over there. And each time, God is already there calling me forward to new people, new places, new ways of loving others. The more and more this very non-linear rhythm happens, we learn to trust the Spirit that leads us.

But that leaves us at an interesting place for discipleship in the local church. How do we communicate how exactly someone grows in their faith?

Well, we have an idea to try. Inspired by Scripture, our Methodist tradition and our local context, we can create a story of our discipleship journey. As new people join us, they can find themselves in this story and discern their next step of growth. Is it a linear process? No, we will all move around in it in different ways and in different seasons of life. That's the beauty of the Holy Spirit. It's kind of like a "Choose Your Own Adventure" book lived out in community. We're all moving through the story at our own pace and in our own way, but we're doing this work **together**.

And in my experience so far, when we choose to intentionally move in and among things like corporate worship, learning from others, Bible study, honest sharing & listening and serving our community, we **will grow in our relationship with Jesus**.

So, you ready to hear the story?

SHOW VIDEO: <https://vimeo.com/178035365>

WORSHIP AS BONFIRE ON THE BEACH

- One day in May I was riding on the Amtrak down to Portland for General Conference and as I gazed out at the water, trees and cities passing me by, the thought popped into my head... “what if our weekly worship feels like a bonfire on the beach?”
 - To me, a bonfire (and our worship gatherings)
 - Easy to invite someone to, it's fun
 - Relaxed, cozy, intimate but can be a big gathering
 - Not in a hurry
 - There's space to be vulnerable and share stories and be honest
 - We often eat around a bonfire - roast s'mores - we fill ourselves back up
 - Sometimes uncomfortable when avoiding smoke and ashes - It can burn you, irritate your eyes
 - It provides heat and warmth
 - It provides light in the darkness
 - We can see them from a distance and have a good idea of what people are doing
 - Do we like and agree with all the people around the bonfire? No. But we keep showing up and eating together. Somehow, we become a community, united in our common calling to love God and love others.

I could have a bonfire by myself. Well, first, I probably wouldn't be able to build it. But if I somehow miraculously got a fire going, are they much fun if we're by ourselves? For most, no. Some of you would LOVE that. But for most, a bonfire encourages us to pull up a camp chair, to plop down in the sand, and be present in community.

This image of our worship as a bonfire on the beach is compelling. It doesn't sound like something I go to out of duty or obligation. It sounds like a celebration. It sounds like a place I can be myself. It sounds like a place I can be encouraged and strengthened for the week ahead. It sounds like a place we can connect with God.

That's what I want our weekly worship gathering in this place to feel like. We're not here out of duty or obligation. We're here because we sense there's more to life than what we see. We believe the One who created all we know is the One who created and loves us. And we're compelled to step closer and closer to that source of life and love. And we do that in community, together.

In the weeks to come, we'll explore the rest of our discipleship story. What does it look like for us to wade into the water, to get in a boat, to be a navigator or a lifeguard. But first, we begin this journey together by receiving the gift of communion.

In our Jesus story today, we have an image of Jesus waiting for the disciples at a bonfire on the beach. He's holding fish and bread, ready to feed his friends.

That's all we really need, isn't it? A community who loves and encourages us and food from Christ that will forever nourish us for the work that lies ahead. This is our discipleship rhythm. Community...Christ....Community....Christ. Our story begins. Amen.