

**The Disciple's Path:
SHOW UP TO GROW UP**

John 15:1-11

You have to be present to win.

A sermon preached by
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I'll admit that one of my chronic conditions is "selective hearing." I'm not really hard of hearing—not much anyway—but often I don't hear what is going on around me. More problematically, I don't hear when somebody important, like my wife, is speaking to me. My selective hearing seems to be worse when I am reading a newspaper, watching TV, or looking at my phone. Carey and Abby can both tell you that I am practically deaf when I have my coffee, my breakfast, and my paper in front of me early in the morning. It's not that I can't hear, it's just that I am not fully present. Can I get a witness?

I think the proliferation of smartphones has contributed to the lack of presence in many of our lives. Last week I was walking into the Convention Center to attend the all-region band concert, and there were several groups of students standing around outside. But nobody was talking! They were all engrossed in their phones, like 6 or 8 people standing in a circle all looking at their tiny screens and nobody seeing each other. They were not really present at all.

Today I want to talk about the importance of presence. If you are going to be in relationship with one another or with God, you have to be present. Jim Harnish, the author of *A Disciple's Path*, calls it "the priority of presence."¹ This just means that Christian discipleship cannot be done alone; it takes a community to make it work. You have to be present with other people seeking discipleship and with God if you're going to have a successful journey. As the casinos say, "You have to be present to win."

The prior condition for our presence is the presence of God. God is present first. God is always present. God was here before the world was here, and God comes to us before we ever go to him. That's the movement of prevenient grace.

The responsive condition is that we then seek God's presence. That's why we pray. That's why we worship. That's why we go to church. We want to be in God's presence. We seek the face of God. This is why we do discipleship. As the Psalmist said, "*In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*"² That

sounds like a place we want to be, right? As Jesus told his disciples, “*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*”³ Yes, give me some of that!

When we join the church and become official United Methodists, we vow to uphold the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. Part of our basic covenant of membership is the promise of presence. What does that mean? I usually explain this to prospective members as the pledge to show up. Discipleship is a group process; you have to be in community to be growing in Christ. You really do. The analogy I use is a high school marching band or football team. You can’t perform well on game day if you haven’t been to practice. That’s where you learn the steps or the plays that will bring you success on the field. If you don’t attend practice, you won’t play well. You have to show up.

But presence is really more than just showing up. You can show up without being present. I’m in the room when I’m reading my paper, but I’m not usually present. Harnish says, “When Woody Allen said that ‘80 percent of success is showing up,’ he wasn’t talking about worship. There’s more to being present in worship than simply showing up on Sunday morning. Worship is not a performance we watch but an experience we share.”⁴

The Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard talked about two models of worship. Some people see God as the director of worship, the worship leaders as the actors on the stage, and the congregation as the audience. Physically, that’s how we’re arranged, isn’t it? But real, present worship is exactly the opposite of that model. The worship leaders are the directors, because somebody has to give structure to the process; the congregation are the actors, and the audience is God.⁵ How does that change your perspective on what you’re doing here in worship? Are you the audience or the actor?

Another word we often use for worship is “liturgy.” I think that’s a great word because it combines two Greek words that mean “work” and “people.” Liturgy is “the work of the people.” Being present to God,

truly being in worship, is something we all do together. It's the work of the people.

So there are two ways to be present with God. One is corporate worship. That's what we do on Sunday morning, Wednesday evening, and other times of worship. That's when the body of Christ gathers. I don't have to belabor that point with you because you're in worship! I'm preaching to the choir here. Except I might add that worship attendance patterns in churches as a whole continue to deteriorate. Active membership used to mean that you would attend church 3 or 4 times a month; now the average churchgoer attends one or two times a month. There are many reasons that is so, and it's not something we can fix. But the reality is that you cannot be as fully present to God when you practice it less often.

The other form of presence with God is in some sort of small group setting. Small groups for discipleship can take any number of forms. Some are intentionally focused, like Bible studies. Others are more relational, like our greeting card ministry or our knitting group that makes the mats and prayer shawls. Others are somewhere in between, like most of our Sunday School classes. You may find meaningful small group ministry outside of the church altogether, like a community Bible study or an accountability group at work or school. There are any number of opportunities.

The Wesley brothers were all about small groups. Many historians have credited the success of the Methodist movement to the small group structure that John Wesley set up whenever he went somewhere to preach. Before Wesley would leave town, he would set up a Methodist "society," which was like a church congregation. Then he would organize people into "class meetings"—about twelve people of both genders meeting together weekly to pray, read Scripture, and discuss their path of discipleship. For those who really wanted to dive deep, Wesley organized "bands," which were small groups of 3-5 people, same gender, who would engage in serious reflection and self-

examination and would hold one another accountable for the way each one was living.

Corporate worship is important, but the real meat of discipleship formation is found in small group settings. That's where you form deep relationships that can handle honesty and accountability and can really change your life. It's not always easy to take the step to join a small group. In fact, it can be uncomfortable and scary at first. But it's crucial if you really want to grow your faith. You have to be connected. That's why the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says, "*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.*"⁶

If we seek to be present with God through our corporate worship and small group ministry, God will come to us and be present with us for the development of our discipleship. We will grow in our faith, strength, love, grace, peace, and hope. God is already here, and our being fully present to God just opens up our lives to all that God has to give us.

The Biblical image for this life-giving relationship is the vine and the branches. Jesus said, "*I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*"⁷ In this image, God is the vineyard owner, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. Branches depend on the vine for life, but it's the branches, not the vine, that produce the fruit. The value of a branch depends on its ability to bear fruit. The branches that bear fruit are pruned and cared for so that they may produce more fruit. The branches that are fruitless are cut away so that they don't waste the resources of the vine. Over time the fruitful branches can keep growing and producing. The word is "abide."

I did a little research to find the stats on the world's largest grapevine, similar to what Jesus was talking about. The largest grapevine in the world, certified by *The Guinness Book of World Records*, lives and grows in Hampton Court, an English village outside of London. It was planted in 1769, 250 years ago. The vine at its base is 4 meters (over 12 feet) thick. The average branch is 120 feet long, with the longest being 250 feet long. It is constantly cared for by a gardener, because the annual harvest of grapes from this vine is between 600 and 850 pounds of grapes.⁸

When we are connected to the life of Jesus, when we are fully present to God—through our prayers, our worship, our small groups—we are fully alive. We are bearing fruit. We are right where we are supposed to be.

Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of Scripture called *The Message*, translates verse 7 of our text as, “*I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. ...if you make yourselves **at home** with me and my words are **at home** in you.*”⁹ Isn't that a great way to put it? “At home”—when we are fully present to God, and God is fully present with us, we are at home. We are fully present, and it gives us life.

A special form of presence comes when we share Holy Communion together. Jesus Christ is present with us when we partake of the Lord's Supper. John Wesley encouraged the Methodists to take Communion as often as possible; he often did it three or four times a week. The Wesleys' term for what happens at the Lord's Table is “Real Presence.” It's not that the body and blood of Jesus is physically present in the elements, but it's more than just a memorial of something that happened 2,000 years ago. Spiritually, but in a very real way, Jesus comes to us in the bite of bread and the taste of juice to heal us, to forgive us, to strengthen us, and to give us life. No matter how far from home you are, physically or spiritually, Jesus is there.

We watched an interesting movie Friday night called *First Man*, about Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon in 1969. Most of us are familiar with Neil Armstrong's historic statement as he stepped onto the moon's surface: "That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind." Some of you may even remember that Armstrong's companion on the lunar surface was an astronaut named Buzz Aldrin. But few know about the first meal eaten on the moon. (It was not in the movie, either.)

Buzz Aldrin had brought along a tiny Communion kit provided by his church. He sent a radio broadcast to Earth asking listeners to contemplate the events of that day and give thanks. Then the radio went dead for a few moments to give Aldrin some privacy. He pulled out the communion set and read the words, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit." Then he gave thanks and took Communion on the moon.¹⁰

On the moon, on earth, in Fort Smith, Arkansas, at First United Methodist Church, in this space at this time, Jesus is here. If you want to get real with your discipleship, you figure out a way to be fully present with God—in prayer, in worship, in a small group, at the Lord's Table, whatever. You abide in Christ, and you will bear much fruit. The joy of Jesus will be in you, and your joy will be complete.

¹ James A. Harnish and Justin LaRosa, *A Disciple's Path: Companion Reader* (Nashville, Abingdon, 2012), 39.

² Psalm 16:11.

³ John 15:11.

⁴ Harnish, 41f.

⁵ James A. Harnish and Justin LaRosa, *A Disciple's Path: Daily Workbook* (Nashville, Abingdon, 2012), 56.

⁶ Hebrews 10:23-25.

⁷ John 15:5-7.

⁸ <https://getaway.travel/2014/03/25/largest-grape-vine-in-the-world/>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwUBRep5bc0>.

⁹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible In Today's Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), ____.

¹⁰ Dennis Fisher, "Communion on the Moon," *Our Daily Bread* (June/July/August 2007).