

## **After Tasting**

During our “We Say Yes” growth and stewardship focus each is encouraged to consider the scripture stories and questions in conjunction with their personal faith journey and relationship with God. This is essential, not just for these four weeks, but as developing disciplines which aid in life-time spiritual growth. I will be doing this “hard work” in relation to my own life, encourage each to truly engage in this process, and to know that I am here, as the Book of Discipline describes, “to equip the saints to serve”, and will be glad to join with any in prayer and Christian conversation.

However during this occasion we call the “sermon” we will be looking at the same passages as the “church” seeking discernment from God and illumination from the Holy Spirit on how we are “saying yes” as a community of faith, as a part of the Body of Christ. For just as we are each unique individuals, so this and each community of faith is more than the sum of its parts, it is also something unique, in its behaviors and relationships.

A few foundational things as a shared foundation for understanding “church”:

Though all are welcome to attend and participate, the church is made up of its members. Membership in a local church involves commitment to worship the Lord corporately, edifying brothers and sisters through mutual exhortation and service, cooperating in mission, and holding each other accountable to walk in a manner pleasing to the Lord as a witness to the truth of Christ in the world. As United Methodists we name this in our vows as a call to support the local congregation with prayers, presence, gifts and service, to support the ministries of the United Methodist Church (denominational level, connection) and to acknowledge our membership in the church universal (all believers in Christ).

Individual members develop habits, some healthy some destructive, in the ways they interact as a part of the church. Some put on their best behavior; others “let it all hang loose”. The local church is a family and can develop the same dysfunctional behavior patterns as any family, seeing others, and self, not necessarily as they are, but as they were in the past. Think of the unique dynamics which come into play when you gather with extended family.

The church, as it is a society, develops and projects expectations, levels of acceptable behavior, social norms, and power sharing structures, many which are never examined for effectiveness or deeper theological messages.

The church not only preaches stewardship, it is called to practice stewardship. Stewardship is the acknowledgement of God’s ownership and our management of God’s property. For the church, good stewardship is based on understanding and acknowledging that the church is God’s and we are called to manage it under the guidelines and purposes of God. The purpose of the church is to make disciples while loving God with all and neighbor as self.

God called out “where are you” to Adam and Eve after they turned away from God, and while they were hiding. As a local congregation we need to ask ourselves, and to talk to each other within the structure and organization of the church, where are we on the journey to being a body focused on disciple making and love sharing. We need to look for ways that we “hide”; for the unhealthy but seemingly easier ways we avoid issues, and for places where self is a greater focus than God.

God called out, not for information but in accountability. God knew, God knows. God called Adam and Eve to come face to face with God, and to answer for their choice. God calls us, as a community, to be accountable for the society and church we create. We need to ask ourselves and God where are we, Lebanon First United Methodist, in our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service.

God called out to Adam in Eve’s presence. We are called to be a place where mutual accountability is the norm. A place where accountability to the ways we behave and interact in the name of the church is seen as one of the ways we share love and embody Christ. Accountability should be mainly instructive and affirming, though not always, or perhaps often, what one wishes to hear. It means that all of us in the church are responsible both to give and receive encouragement, counsel, consolation, exhortation, and admonition (*1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 3:13; Galatians 6:1; 2 Corinthians 1:3f.*). Accountability includes being willing to name when we feel discounted, threatened, or hurt, not in a “you did” manner but in an issue based, “I felt, heard...”) way. It also means we are committed to putting our “selves” aside to hear, learn and accept what others offer, rather than to insist on our own way.

Accountability as a church includes taking time to look at the message that each thing we do and way we treat any “other” convey, to see that all brings honor to God. It means taking the time to grow in understanding the difference between reaching a consensus and taking a vote. That consensus grows from the question what will it take for all to be able to support the outcome, rather than which plan has the most votes. Like accountability, consensus is about give and take, about living in relationship in such depth that the relationships with others and God bear the fruits of the spirit.

Sound both wonderful and impossible? That’s a mark of God’s leading. God will stir a longing in all hearts and calls each and everyone beyond what they can ever imagine. Just as those in our study groups are being asked

Let’s be willing to ask the same as we come together to be the church. The church that is much more like a weaving loom than a melting pot. The church that is much more a community, which is continually growing; that a crowd gathered for a short time or specific event.

Let’s be willing to be a church that does not hide, even as God calls out and asks “where are you”?