

- *Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”*
 - As I mentioned last week, these are the marching orders of Jesus and our most basic call of discipleship
 - In looking at the basics, we start at the VERY beginning. At the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis when it talks about the beginning of the world, who does the creating? God. And John opened his gospel so beautifully:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.*
- So, we start with God because God started everything.
- The most important and most basic message we must have as disciples is not about us but about God and WHO GOD IS.
 - God is our beloved and wants us to know it, even using sexual imagery in Song of Songs to demonstrate the desired closeness
 - Now this love calls us to others (that’s the message for next week) and guides our lives (that’s the following week)...Stay tuned...same Bat time...same Bat channel.
- But the point right now is to know God’s love for us, to allow God to love us...which may sound easy but can actually be pretty difficult. How can we allow God to love us?
 - Perhaps the references Jesus gives us in our Gospel today can help break this open: salt and light.
 - We miss the full impact of Jesus’ reference because we take both for granted. Need some salt? Find the shaker. Too dark for you? Flip the switch. Both are certainly easy to come by and relatively inexpensive.

- But in Jesus' day, salt and light were two of the most valuable commodities.
 - Salt was used both for flavor and as a preservative. It was difficult to extract from the sea water and was often used in place of money, usually considered more valuable than gold.
 - Light for most people was limited to the sun and to daylight. Oil for lamps was too expensive for most so the majority of life and certainly work was limited to the daylight hours.
 - Jesus wants us to know how precious we are and both can help us to understand what it means to be a disciple.
 - Like Salt we are called to preserve what is good, fight off what is bad and flavor the world for the good.
 - Like light we are to be the filter by which others can see the true reality before them.
- And these images of salt and light can also help us to know how to accept God's love.
 - How do we use salt? We add it to food so that the food tastes better. In other words, salt improves what goes into us.
 - Like salt flavors everything it touches, so our image of God flavors how we operate as disciples.
 - I want you to think for a moment of what your image of God really is. Think about who God is and how God works in your life. Go beyond the childhood images of the old man with the long white beard and flowing robes. Think honestly.
 - Is God the indignant judge calling you to a high standard impossible to reach?
 - The irritated policeman just waiting for you to step out of line?

- The precise accountant recording every blessing given and exactly how much you owe to make it up?
- Or...the angry parent who never recognizes any good while repeatedly pointing out everything wrong?
- Sure, we know these are skewed, but I think that they are often operating within our hearts; just below the surface perhaps, but truly controlling our relationship with the Almighty.
- The disciples in Jesus' day faced the same difficulty.
 - They were struggling to understand God and what God wanted. At the other end of the spectrum, the scribes and the Pharisees were focused only on the rules.
 - Nothing seemed clear to either, so Jesus offered some images:
 - God is like a shepherd with 100 sheep who leaves the 99 behind and searches for the lost one...and then brings it home gently over his shoulders.
 - God is like a woman with 10 coins who searches carefully for the lost one and then has a celebration costing more than the coin itself.
 - God is like a father who had two sons...going out to each to offer his heart.
- These and all the other images Jesus gives us of the Father are perfectly summed up in a single word in the one prayer Jesus Himself taught us. “When you pray,” Jesus said, “pray like this...Our Father, who art in heaven...”
 - The Aramaic word Jesus used for “Father” was *Abba*, which is the intimate form, used by a child.
 - Jesus has in His mind and heart, the image of a God who first and foremost, guess what ...loves us and loves us and loves us and loves us and loves us and NEVER stops loving us.

- God, Jesus tells us, is about mercy and forgiveness, about compassion and guidance and, well, love.
- Why is this important for allowing God to love us? Think for a moment about your closest relationship... think about the time when you wanted to do something out of love rather than compunction, fear or mere duty.
 - When we do something because we know we are loved and because we love, we operate from strength. We want to make our beloved proud. If we are loved, we have a different outlook. Love makes all the difference.
 - Our image of God who loves us and wants what best for us, even and especially when we are struggling, is the salt that should flavor our relationship with God and everything else we think and do.
- If our image of God is the salt, then prayer is our light.
 - Think for a moment how light works. In itself, light is not as important for what it is on its own but on what it does. Light allows us to see everything else.
 - That's why we Christ is the Light of the world. We are called to see the world in and through and by Christ.
 - When we focus on allowing God to love us, prayer is the light that helps us to see everything God does in love.
 - Prayer is not where we go after all other avenues are exhausted. Prayer is spending time with our Beloved, bringing to God our hopes and joys our challenges and struggles.
- Prayer establishes and builds an **intimate** connection that allows us to talk and listen to God, allows God to pull us outside ourselves, beyond our situation to see God's Presence and love.

- Sometimes, when we're facing difficulties, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, financial challenges, illness we can forget about God's love or, worse yet, think that God doesn't care or hear our prayers.
- Here's why Alpha is so valuable. Alpha makes the introduction to Jesus for us, giving us the basics to ground us, help to know Jesus better and to feel more confident in prayer.
- And that's why Jesus reminded us never to grow weary in prayer. He knows we can, or fall into rote, or stop praying all together because God doesn't seem to answer.
 - Jesus reminds us to stay the prayer course, not because God needs to hear us but because we need to hear God, we need to be reminded of our loving Father, and harder yet, we need to trust that this Father wants what's best for us, even and especially when life is difficult.
 - When it's hardest to pray, pray hardest. Not just when we're in the most trouble or when we need God to get us out of a tight spot, but also when I'm exhausted, excited, angry, anxious, annoyed, busy, behind, even distracted.
 - It doesn't matter how or when, only that you DO, that you take time out for God EVERY DAY. Just a couple of minutes: in the shower, in the car while you're parked on 270, after school and before your parents get home, in the evening before turning on the TV or opening Twitter to see what tidbit of wisdom your awesome pastor put out that day. Wherever, whenever but EVERY DAY.
- Don't know how? Start with a request, "Lord, help me to pray." Sounds simple but would you ever reject a request for help from someone you love? God all the more so!

- Then after that keep it simple, keep it real, and keep it up.
- There is no one way to pray. Pray in the way and at the time that works for you. Think of a conversation with your good friend, your BEST friend.
- Pray what's in your heart. Start simply: focus on Please, Sorry and Thank you. Eventually, you'll be more comfortable.
- If you're still having trouble, use the daily scriptures, There's even apps to read the scriptures to you if you're in the car.
- As my own Dad used to say, "If it's important to you, you'll find time, you'll make time."
- Nothing you do is more important even though other things may be more urgent, like taking care of your kids or reaching out to your spouse.
 - Remember what they say on an airplane? "Put your mask on first so that you can better assist someone else."
 - Prayer is our oxygen and, when the oxygen is flowing, then we can do more for others.
 - Or, perhaps we could say, prayer is the light that allows us to see God in our lives, active even at a distance, even and especially when it's difficult.
- Jesus calls us to be salt and light, to know God's love for us in prayer and service and then make that love know to others.
- Now, let's go, make disciples.