

**SERMON – 3RD LENT
MATTHEW 20:20-28 & I PETER 2:1-12
MARCH 15, 2020**

“LIFE TO LIFE DISCIPLESHIP PART II – WHY WE DO IT”

I read an article recently about declining birthrates in the world. It’s been going on for quite some time and for the author has reached a point where steps should be taken to reverse it. This is not a sermon about having children – at least not the kind the article was referring to. Rather my goal is to discuss how our faith “has children.” But back to the article for just a moment – of all the complex and interwoven factors that could be leading to declining birthrates in the world – one stuck out for me, and it was best supported by research from the good ol USA.

It was what the author called “*a loss of transcendence*”. That’s a big word – but this is what he meant. Couples, because of their faith, once believed it was their *duty* to have children. In Genesis 1:28 God said to Adam “*be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth.*” Folks through the ages didn’t just want to be parents because of that command – they wanted to enjoy kids and, up until a few generations ago, knew children were necessary as caregivers in their old age. The study supposes that as other forms of societal care replaced the family, and the cost of raising children increased, this sense of “transcendent duty” to have kids has declined too.

It’s a theory – and may have never once entered your thinking if you are a parent today! Nevertheless, the author may have stumbled on something we do need to think about in our churches – and that is “*will our faith have children*”, and at what rates? I’m referring to the faith of our children, but I also mean spiritual children, people of all ages who are unrelated to us. “*Growing an Intentional Discipleship Culture*” in our church is a “birth rate” question. The study I read about people having fewer biological children concluded that “it’s complex” and there IS no one factor. We would be trying in vain to think there is one reason for the decline of our churches and religious belief in our society.

We would also be wrong to engage in endless self-criticism of our efforts. Jesus promised us fields “*white unto harvest*” and called us to be his “*harvesters*” - a metaphor for evangelism and discipleship. But he also warned us that the good seed of his word routinely falls among thorns and thistles and dry ground and is sometimes “*snatched away.*” God’s word both encourages and gives us perspective. The task is not easy. Here at Calvary our worship is beautiful, our education programs bible-centered and our teachers dedicated, our service to the needs of our neighbor near and far genuine and generous, our friendship real and prayers for one another consistent and sincere.

And yet, the overall Christian “birth rate” is declining. Many of you in this room today have children. Many of them profess faith in Jesus Christ, (including those sitting next to you right now), this is the deepest longing of a Christian parent. Some of you I know have children that do not, or do not appear to – and from conversations I’ve had this is one of the deepest sorrows of a Christian parent. I do not present to you what we call “Life to Life Discipleship” as the one solution to the church’s “spiritual” birth rate. But consonant with our Bible lessons today, I do present it as what precisely the church was commanded to do, and when God’s people do what they are commanded to do, or shall we say created for, we prosper.

Leviticus 19 is part of what the Jewish people call “the holiness code.” Spanning nearly 7 chapters, the injunctions are often predicated with or concluded with the words “*I am the Lord.*” This is what “set Israel apart” from other nations, and quite literally insured its survival among those nations. Why did they leave some of their harvest for the poor, not steal, lie, exploit or seek revenge, and above all, as verse 18 says, love their neighbor, including the non-Jew, as themselves, as though they were a Jew? Because God was their Lord. That’s all.

I Peter 2 stares straight at this holiness code, and says you, one by one have been fitted into a “spiritual household” by faith in Jesus Christ. Your baptism has made of you a “living stone” –an interesting image - something otherwise thought of as cold and hard being in fact “alive.” This “spiritual house” which we are a part of is made, I Peter 2:5 says, of “holy things” and so we think Leviticus again – things Christians do (or refrain from doing) because Jesus is our Lord. That’s all. I Peter acknowledges that by faith in Christ we are a new person - you are part of a “new people.” This life is plural, not singular – “we”, not “me” – just like Leviticus was.

Our Lord Christ told his disciples this very thing in Matthew 20, when he deflected, and that is putting it mildly, the inward thoughts of James and John and directed them to the wider world – saying holiness cannot remain just “*what you are by grace*”, but must become “*what you do by faith*”. Part of “what you do” is think of your life as a means through which someone else will find life in Jesus. If James and John had been taking notes from the previous three years of their life with Jesus they would have known what that was.

They would have embraced God’s word before and above all others, prayed in humble dependence on God, embraced a servant spirit in place of the competitiveness and glory grabbing we in our day have turned into a daily if not hourly obsession, treated possessions as stored servanthood and not trophies of personal accomplishment, kept children and those God wants to make his children in view at all times, and above all relinquish control of the outcomes to God.

In 1519 Martin Luther wrote a document called “*Two Kinds of Righteousness*” – a word which for our purposes can be regarded as “holiness.” The first kind is the greatest – the holiness of Christ that becomes ours by faith. The second is what he called “*our proper righteousness*” – not because we alone work at it, but because we work *with* the first – it is the holiness of the grateful, obedient Christian. Discipleship is our chief good work – sharing faith by sharing our life – as Jesus gave his. The center is Jesus, always. The origin is Jesus, always. The glory is Jesus’, always. The will and the power to do it comes from Jesus – his words, our prayers, our worship and our witness.

It’s a birth rate thing – that our children will have faith yes, but that our faith will have children too. We’ll conclude these reflections next time with a call story. AMEN