

ONE HEART, ONE MIND
Worship and Prayer—The Foundation of Our Mission
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John 15:1-5
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As 21st Century people who have so many things at our disposal with the snap of our fingers, we live in the now and are bad at recognizing that we are where we are and have the benefits we do because others have gone before us and paved the way. As church leaders talk about our mission statements and what we hope to accomplish, we're notorious for thinking what we're doing is more relevant and highly spiritual than the generations preceding us. Referring to this tendency, Andy Stanley reminds church leaders that the things we want to change were one day considered cutting edge and the ideas and changes we think are so progressive now will be discarded by future generations as being stale and out of touch.

I emphasized it last week and I intend to continue pointing us to the reality that McBIC is blessed today, because of the sacrifices and commitments made by those who have gone before us and because of the goodness and graciousness of God. We can't lose sight of the fact that we're only minimally responsible for the blessings we experience. In Joshua chapter 24 the Israelite leader Joshua, who succeeded Moses and led the Israelites into the Promised Land, is reminding the people before his death, that the good things they will experience in the Promised Land are due to God's blessing, not their hard work. In verses 13 & 14 of chapter 24 Joshua says, *"I gave you land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant. Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness."* Joshua 24:13 & 14

And the author of the New Testament Book of Hebrews strengthens this connection between us and those who have gone before us when he writes, *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus."* Hebrews 12:1 & 2 The "cloud of witnesses" referred to here points to all the

saints who have gone before us who ran their leg of the race and who have “handed the baton” off to us to run our portion of the race. Those of us who are part of McBIC today aren’t seeking to fulfill God’s mission for us in isolation. We’re carrying on the vision of those who have gone before us. The saints who started our church in 1890 and thousands of people over the past 131 years who have attended this church, prayed, served in ministry, given financially and lived faithfully as followers of Jesus. We’re carrying on Jesus’ mission for them. In July our dear sister, Romaine Snyder passed away. Romaine was 97 years old and had been part of McBIC for over 60 years. Frequently, when I’d visit Romaine she’d remind me that her and my grandmother used to teach my Sunday School and VBS class when I was in early elementary school. And then Romaine would often say, *“If your grandmother was still alive, she’d be so proud of you.”* Romaine Snyder and my grandmother and thousands of others are part of that cloud of witnesses cheering us on as we run our leg of the race. Who are people who are important to you that are part of that cheering cloud of witnesses?

If you were with us last week you heard me introduce our new mission statement as, ***“Experiencing Jesus and sharing his love.”*** It’s a simple phrase restating Jesus’ call to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. And I also spent some time unpacking our vision statement, ***“Disciples who bring restoration and wholeness to Mechanicsburg and to the world.”*** Our mission statement captures what we do and our vision statement addresses how we intend to carry that out. And the third step in the mission/vision process our staff walked through was identifying the core values that support our mission and values. We identified 8 core values and we envisioned them as part of a wheel that move from point to point. The first value is WORSHIP and PRAYER and we explained that value with the statement, *“We make communion with God the foundation of our faith.”*

I’ve titled today’s sermon, *“Worship and Prayer—the Foundation of Our Mission.”* Worship and prayer can be thought of us singing to God—especially during services on Sunday mornings—and formally setting aside time to pray to God. While worshiping on Sundays and formally praying are part of our worship and prayer lives, we’re talking about much more than those formal activities. We tried to get at the more comprehensive nature of our relationship with God by using the phrase, “communion with God.”

Communion with God or relating to Him as we relate to other people is at the core of our faith. Communion with God is a unique aspect of our Christian faith. **While other religions are based on doing stuff for God. Christianity's essence is relationship with God.** We see this throughout the Old Testament. God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God spoke to Abraham and called him to set out for a new place. God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and called him to free the Israelites from Pharaoh's rule. God met with Jacob in several dreams and told him He was with him and would establish him as a great nation. Those encounters occur in the first 33 chapters of Genesis and God continued to meet with his people throughout the Old Testament. And then God's desire for relationship with his people culminated in the coming of Jesus. In the Incarnation, God became human, so we might more fully relate to Him. At Christmas we celebrate Immanuel—*God with us*—God came to earth as an infant.

The entire Bible is filled with stories of God relating to human beings like you and me, so I have a lot of Scripture to choose from in trying to illustrate our first core value: WORSHIP and PRAYER. There are many Scriptures to choose from, but I've landed on John chapter 15 for us to examine more closely today. John chapter 15 falls near the end of Jesus' ministry on earth, prior to his arrest and crucifixion. Jesus had just eaten the Last Supper with his disciples, after which He washed their feet. In what may have been the first time they fully understood what He was talking about, Jesus told his disciples He was going to be forcibly taken from them and that all of them, including Peter, would fall away in his hour of greatest need. And Jesus' teaching continued in John chapter 14 where He comforted his disciples, telling them He wouldn't leave them as orphans, but would send the Holy Spirit to be with them, comforting them and guiding them into all truth. Many of things Jesus communicated were difficult for them to comprehend. For example, He said that when He left them they'd be better off than when He was with them and that they would do greater things than He had done after He was gone. I'm sure what Jesus said to them was overwhelming in the midst of all the emotions they were experiencing. In fact, Jesus' words in these chapters are still difficult for us to comprehend today, though we're 2,000 years removed from Jesus' time on earth and many of us have read these words dozens of times.

I invite you to follow along as I read verses 1-5 of John chapter 15:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:1-5

We'll look more closely at those words in a moment, but before we do that I'd like to invite our Worship Pastor, Dave Hershberger—we call him Hersh, to join me on the platform. Hersh, some have called him *Worsh*, you've been at McBIC now for nearly 25 years. **Can you tell us briefly how God brought you to our church?** Since you came to McBIC in 1997 there have been a lot of changes in worship ministry right? Styles, song selection, sound and stage, all have changed pretty dramatically. But one of the things I've always appreciated in working with you and watching you lead our church family is your commitment to helping us focus on communing with God. **As you read Jesus' words in John 15 verses 1-5, what do they say to you about our worship and how you've sought to lead us in worship ministry at McBIC?**

The worship and prayer ministry of this church has been a great blessing! It truly is the foundation of all we do. We're blessed to have meaningful worship experiences on Sunday mornings and worship has also been an integral part of our Children and Youth Ministries. I love how Hersh has invested in children and teens to develop them as worshipers and worship leaders. And our church has also been greatly blessed in prayer. Our prayer room, pastors' prayer partners and the priority many of you place on praying for our church, our staff and our community is part of the fabric of our church, but I want to move beyond worship and prayer as ministries and explore what communion with God means for each of us. Let's go back to John chapter 15 and hone in on verses 4 & 5:

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:1-5

“Remain in me, as I remain in you.” Other translations use phrases like, *“Make your home in me,” “abide in me”* and *“live in me.”* I find it interesting that Jesus instructs us to *“remain in him, as He remains in us.”* He points us to the relationship reality of the back and forth between us and Him. He doesn’t call us to do all of the work in staying connected to Him. He promises to remain in us and challenges us to reciprocate. Jesus goes on in this passage to remind us that we are unable to bear fruit unless we maintain our connection to Him. He says, *“If we remain in Him and Him in us, we will bear much fruit, but apart from Him we are incapable of doing anything.”*

We might object and say, *“Well, surely I can do some things apart from Jesus?”* Sure, we can do stuff, but we can’t bear fruit for his kingdom apart from Him dwelling in us and us remaining in Him. Jesus defines this further in verse 16 of John 15 when He says, *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.”* John 15:16

Think about our mission: *Experiencing Jesus and sharing his love with others.* Last week I directed us to Matthew chapter 5 where Jesus calls us as his followers to be salt and light. I read Matthew 5 verses 13-16 from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase The MESSAGE. Peterson paraphrases those verses with two phrases I find compelling. **We’re called to be salt that brings out God flavors and light that brings out God colors in our world.** You and I have the opportunity to draw out God flavors and God colors wherever we live, work, go to school or hang out, but our ability to do that hinges on remaining/abiding/living in Jesus as He lives in us. Worship and Prayer—staying connected in relationship with Jesus is foundational to our mission. None of us no matter how gifted, intelligent, passionate or hard-working can bear fruit that lasts for Jesus’ Kingdom apart from staying connected to Him.

I understand that when a challenge is given for us to spend more time with God—through worshiping, praying or listening—it’s easy for us to feel like we’ll never measure up. It’s so intangible. I understand that because I struggle with it like you. I want to share something I’ve found helpful. In his book, *Secrets of the Vine*—an exposition on John chapter 15—Bruce Wilkinson explains that abiding in Jesus has two facets: time we set apart to read Scripture, pray or worship and prayerfully tuning into God’s heart throughout our day as we walk through

our day. As we move to our time of response in singing, I invite you to quiet your heart and listen for Jesus' whisper. **What is Jesus saying to you about your connection with Him? Is He inviting you to set aside more time for you to be with Him? Or, is He asking you to grow in your focus on Him throughout your day—what I referred to several weeks ago as “living prayerfully?”** Note that I've used the words *invite* and *ask*. I've done that intentionally, because as in any healthy relationship, we respond to invitations not expectations. How is Jesus inviting you to deepen your connection to Him today?