

# “Honoring Their Sacrifice”

Hebrews 5:11-6:1; 2 Peter 1:3-9; 3 John 1:4 <sup>1</sup>

*“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth”* (3 John 1:4).

As you probably know, what we know as Veterans Day began as “Armistice Day,” commemorating the cessation of hostilities in World War I at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of 1918. It was called “the war to end all wars.” If only that had been true.

In almost a century since, we in the United States have been involved in World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, Afghanistan, and two Persian Gulf Wars, not to mention the Cold War, the War on Terror, and many smaller military campaigns in Central America, the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe.

There seems to be no end to the killing, yet we do not have the luxury of retreating into our own borders and letting the world go its own way. We live in a global network of economic relationships that makes such isolation impossible. Further, as one wit put it, “There’s no point in sheep passing resolutions about vegetarianism so long as there are wolves who like mutton.”

Democrats, Republicans, Independents, and others have many differing viewpoints on our nation’s approach to these matters; but on Veterans Day we put aside these differences to honor the sacrifices of those who have given life and limb in the service of our country. Whatever we may think or have thought about a particular conflict, these Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Airmen gave themselves without reserve to the work the nation gave them to do because they had so pledged. How, then, shall we honor them?

As I thought about this question in light of our faith, I remembered something the Apostle John wrote in his last letter, which we know as 3<sup>rd</sup> John. As this aged disciple reflected on his life and legacy, he wrote, *“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth”* (3 John 1:4).

I could certainly say that about my own life and my own children. I could say that about the members of the churches that I’ve served. And I could say that about my service to my country: the sacrifices will have been worth what they cost if these whom I love live in the Truth.

I’ll come back to a consideration of our nation presently, but first I want to consider what “living in the truth” might look like for those of us who are a part of the Body of Christ. “Truth” means something that corresponds to the way things actually are, and in spiritual matters we only know that correspondence as God reveals it to us—usually through the Bible. It’s only as we allow God to transform our minds through the study of God’s Word that we can see and hear things as they really are (John 9:39; Romans 12:1-2).

Our text this morning has to do with what it means to “live in the truth,” particularly with that dimension of living in the Truth that has to do with spiritual maturity: *“There is so much more we would like to say about this,”* the Bible says, *“but you don’t seem to listen, so it’s hard to make you understand. You have been Christians a long time now, and you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things a beginner must learn about the Scriptures. You are like babies who drink only milk and cannot eat solid food. And a person who is living on milk isn’t very far along in the Christian life and doesn’t know much about doing what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right”* (Hebrews 5:11-14, NLT).

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on November 9, 2014.

Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago has been one of the most influential churches in American Christianity for over thirty years. Willow Creek has been innovative in many, many ways, and their methods have been widely copied. That's what makes Pastor Bill Hybels' confession at a recent leadership conference so astounding:

"We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and became Christians, [was to teach them] that they have to take responsibility to become 'self-feeders.' We should have taught people how to read their Bibles between services, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own."

In other words, spiritual growth doesn't happen effectively by making believers dependent on elaborate church programs, but rather comes through the practice of the ancient spiritual practices of prayer, Bible study, and accountable spiritual relationships. And the good news is that these disciplines don't require huge facilities and large staffs to manage.

Willow Creek's extensive research revealed four stages of Christian maturity, which they call "Exploring Christ," "Growing in Christ," "Close to Christ," and "Christ-Centered." Before very long, your family's Deacon will give you an opportunity to discover more or less where you currently are in those four stages of spiritual growth.

If we stick with Dr. Hybels' image of becoming "self-feeders," there's another way to talk about the four stages of spiritual maturity. Moving from "milk" to "solid food" in the spiritual journey, moving from immaturity to maturity, involves moving from "being fed," to learning to "feed ourselves," to learning to "feed others," and finally to "reproducing" ourselves as we lead others to Christ and teach them to obey Him.

These transitions happen neither naturally nor easily, as Bill Hybels lamented. Many—maybe even most—contemporary Christians never even make it past the first transition, from "being fed" to becoming "self-feeders." Let's look at these four stages of "spiritual infancy," "spiritual adolescence," "spiritual adulthood," and "spiritual parenthood" for just a bit.

**Spiritual Infancy** has to do with being fed, as a baby has to be fed: "*Like newborn babies,*" Peter wrote, "*crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good*" (1 Peter 2:2-3). Training in this area has to do with becoming well-grounded in the basics of the Christian life, such as finding confidence in one's salvation, learning the first steps of prayer and Bible study, and learning the rudiments of the spiritual warfare that we encounter every day.

Infancy isn't a place to stay, though, either physically or spiritually. In the stage of **Spiritual Adolescence**, we move from being fed spiritually to learning to feed ourselves. This second stage is what Dr. Hybels was talking about when he referred to becoming "self-feeders."

As Willow Creek discovered, this transition, while crucial, often doesn't happen as it should. Hebrews tells us that "*solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil*" (Hebrews 5:14). Training in this area has to do with learning to go deeper than the surface, taking seriously what it means to live out the Gospel in daily life. In Spiritual Adolescence, we expand our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and we begin to learn what it means to allow Jesus to be Lord all of life.

The third stage, **Spiritual Adulthood**, has to do with learning to feed others. Jesus said, "*Do you love me? . . . then feed my lambs . . . take care of my sheep . . . feed my sheep*" (John 21:17). As we grow to Spiritual Adulthood, we become more and more involved in the lives of others through

gift-based service within the life of the church. As Paul put it to the Ephesians, “*From Christ the whole body . . . grows and builds itself up in love, **as each part does its work***” (Ephesians 4:16).

Biologically, maturity is often defined as becoming able to reproduce, and spiritual maturity is very much like that. Mature disciples have attained the stage of **Spiritual Parenthood**, reproducing themselves through personal witness, missional activities, and equipping others to become spiritual leaders in all aspects of church and community life.

As Paul told Timothy, “*the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others*” (2 Timothy 2:2). Unless we are reproducing ourselves, we “aren’t there yet” (2 Timothy 2:2).

So where do you see yourself in these four stages of spiritual growth and maturity? Would spiritual leaders who know you well agree that you are well-grounded in the basics of the Christian life? Is there any evidence that you are feeding yourself spiritually rather than depending on others to do that for you? Can you name the names of persons whom you have discipled or whom you have led to personal faith in Jesus? Anybody *lately*?

As I’ve mentioned, your Deacon will soon provide a more tangible method for determining where you are on the journey toward spiritual maturity, and he or she will also suggest five practices that will move you up higher and in farther, no matter where you are right now. The truth of the matter is that if you’ve been paying attention at all, you already know what it will take to make progress, but you may not yet be doing those things. Life is frequently like that, isn’t it? Every one of us knows what we need to do to be physically fit, trim, and healthy, but most of us aren’t as diligent in those practices as health requires.

Well, for starters, let’s move ahead by remembering where we stopped last week: “*There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1). This is not about feeling guilty. If we are in Christ, we are forgiven! Keep that in mind as we continue.

Remember that our theme this morning is honoring the sacrifices of those who have gone before us. We think particularly of veterans, but also of the founders of our nation and of our congregation, and of generation after generation of believers since the Resurrection.

What sort of faith best honors their sacrifices? Which kind of faith brings more joy to those who watch our lives from eternity? Would it not be giving ourselves to the development of a more mature faith as the way of life of those who “live in the truth”?

There are actually a number of classical spiritual disciplines, time-tested activities of mind and body that enable us to bring our entire selves into cooperation with God’s purposes. These disciplines allow more and more of God’s Life and Power to become effective in our lives, making us little by little into superconductors of God’s power into our world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These “activities that Jesus engaged in” are called “spiritual disciplines,” and they’ve been catalogued in different ways. Perhaps the best-known scheme comes from Richard Foster’s famous book, *Celebration of Discipline*, in which he identifies “Inward Disciplines,” “Outward Disciplines,” and “Corporate Disciplines.” Foster’s **Inward Disciplines** are Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, and Study. His **Outward Disciplines** are Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, and Service; and his **Corporate Disciplines** are Confession, Worship, Guidance, and Celebration.

See Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, rev. ed. (HarperSanFrancisco: 1978, 1988); Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

There are many of these disciplines, but this morning I just want to focus on five. You've seen them before. They build on Jesus' Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31) and His Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), identifying five disciplines that are foundational practices without which we simply cannot make significant progress in spiritual life. Most of you already know what they are:

1. **WORSHIP:** A growing disciple will *participate* in at least one corporate worship service every week.
2. **CONNECT:** A growing disciple will *participate* in at least one small study and accountability group every week.
3. **GROW:** A growing disciple will *practice* daily spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, virtue, and compassion.
4. **SERVE:** A growing disciple will *serve* the church, the Body of Christ, in at least one way every week.
5. **GO:** A growing disciple will *serve* God's Kingdom in the world in at least one way every week.

These are really pretty easy to remember, though they're challenging to practice. Let's say them together: **WORSHIP; CONNECT; GROW; SERVE; GO**. John wrote, "*I could have no greater joy than to hear that my children live in the truth*" (3 John 4), and this is what "living in the truth" looks like: **WORSHIP; CONNECT; GROW; SERVE; GO**.

As you and I grow in grace, we find that each of these disciplines is actually one of God's pathways to joy. As we discover release from the patterns of sin that uniquely bind each of our lives, what we discover is freedom, gladness—even singing and dancing! And as we begin to enjoy that fullness of life that God has always intended to give us (John 10:10), we'll become more and more excited about telling other people about what we've found.

Now return with me for a moment to the consideration of Veterans Day. As gather this morning to honor the sacrifices of those who have gone before us, the Bible tells us that *We must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it* (Hebrews 2:1).

As we gather this morning to honor the sacrifices of those who have gone before us, it seems to me that honesty compels us to confess that our nation has in many ways drifted far away from the Truth of which John spoke, and in so doing, we have failed to honor those whose sacrifices we venerate this week.

There's a scene in Ezekiel that strikes me as an appropriate response to our situation on this Sunday between Election Day and Veterans Day. This passage describes a vision Ezekiel had of the Temple in Jerusalem shortly before it was destroyed. In this vision, God sent a man through Jerusalem to identify all those righteous persons whose hearts were burdened for the state of their city and of their nation (Ezekiel 9:3-4).

Perhaps one of the things you and I need to do this morning in order to honor the sacrifices of those before us, beyond committing ourselves to growing toward becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus, is to cry out to God because of the sins being committed in our land. Perhaps we need to hear again God's ancient call to national repentance: *Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land* (2 Chronicles 7:14). If we do this, perhaps the sacrifices that bought our freedom will not have been in vain.

As we come to a time of commitment, we do well to remember that we will take only two things with us across the boundary into eternity: our character and other people whom we've led to

Jesus. The spiritual stages of INFANCY, YOUTH, ADULTHOOD and PARENTHOOD are some of the steps by which God adds to our eternal cargo. What steps do you need to take today in order to move in farther and up higher with God?