

"Encouragement in our Mission."

3 John 1-8

Today we start into 3 John. Now I was initially planning on doing 3 John all in one Sunday, but after reading the text I've decided to break it up into two Sundays. 3 John is different from the other two letters of John because this one is a personal letter, rather than a letter to the community.

There are two themes present in 3 John. The first is a word of encouragement to a person named Gaius. We don't know much about Gaius except what is in this letter. We think he is a leader of the early Christian community. The other theme is a word of criticism for a person named Diotrephes. Again, we don't know much about this person, but we know that he faced some criticism from John. We'll discuss that portion next week.

Today, I want to focus on the encouragement present. In this letter John tells Gaius how proud he is that Gaius has stayed true to the faith and stayed true to the truth of the early Christian community. John is overjoyed, for the line from verse 4 "I have no greater joy than this; to hear that my children are living according to the truth." If you think about some of the other themes from the letters of John, this is a good thing, because we know that John has been critical of some of the leadership of the early Christian communities.

It's a good thing to know that there was much to be joyful about in the early Christian communities. It is on this encouragement and good things that we exist as a community today. We have a lot to be thankful for in encouragement. It's a good thing to know that there are reasons in this world to be thankful and encouraged in the faith.

I have to tell you all something this Sunday. I am encouraged about Faith Church. We had an awesome vision meeting this last week, where we discussed the need for growth in the

church and a new model of discipleship of the church. I presented to the meeting the need to do evangelistic growth in the congregation as opposed to general growth. The group was very receptive to this idea and I believe that is good feeling of encouragement for our process.

What it means to have evangelistic growth is that we focus on bringing people to Christ. It's a focus on reaching the unchurched, those that do not have a church home or have not professed Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. It's reaching the people that are living without Christ, who are in need of a direction of faith. We have been given much in this congregation. We have the gift eternal life, and it is our biblical mandate to share that with the world.

In this meeting I gave us a preview of the Discipleship process that we will be engaging in as a way of deepening our faith and getting ready for the new folks that we plan on reaching out to. You may be wondering how we will get new people to the congregation, but I encourage you to come and talk with us and participate in the outreach meeting tomorrow evening at 6pm. All people are welcome to participate in the outreach meeting. Every person present here is welcome to attend the outreach meeting.

Yet I want to focus today on our discipleship process for Faith Church. I was planning on discussing this later, but I feel the scriptures today point us in a direction that discuss discipleship and instruction in the church. We have in the encouragement to Gaius that John is pleased by the way Gaius and others are living in the truth. Rather than following false teachers and ideas, they are sticking with the Gospel and the message of Christ, which is what we must do in our discipleship.

Our discipleship model will be simple yet it will require dedication on our part. The goal of a discipleship program is to take people who have not experienced the faith of Jesus Christ and transform them into serving believers of Jesus Christ. This has a biblical mandate from the

Great Commission, where we are not only to make believers of the world, but to teach them in the ways of faith.

John Wesley organized the people that would become Methodists into small groups, or class meetings as he called it. In these class meetings people would check on their accountability to God, Christ, and scripture. A famous question that would be asked is "how is it with your soul?" I plan on us diving into much of the same spirit of the early class meetings and hold ourselves accountable to faith and grow in that faith, so that others may have life.

Our model is based upon small groups. Small groups will be composed of about 6 to 8 people who will meet weekly in homes or in the church. In the small groups we will check in with each other on our faith, where we are in the week, and spend some time in bible study. While the idea of small groups seems to be a new idea in Christian circles, it really has roots going way back to John Wesley and the early Methodists.

Some groups will gather in specific types of people, while others will not. I plan on modeling small group leadership by leading two of my own. I plan on holding a small group for couples and one open group. Now, those are not the only two small groups that will meet. It is my prayer that some people will feel called to be hosts of other small groups.

Ideally, I would like three more groups to meet. One group for singles, and two other open groups. We will determine when these groups will meet, but they can meet anytime people can get together. There is no reason why a group for retired people could meet during the day, while those who have work commitments during the day can meet in the evenings. We'll get into the planning details, but it is my prayer and hope that all of us will find some way to get plugged into a small group.

Some of you may be thinking, "well, I'm already on a committee, doesn't that count as a small group?" To be honest, it does not. Discipleship does not occur in committees. When was the last time you grew in your faith by serving on a committee? Serving on a committee is a way of giving back to the church, like a tithe. Discipleship occurs in settings where we can explore scripture and understand what it means to be a Christian in the world that we live in.

It is my plan with the small groups to practice this model starting in January, and then we open it up to the community in the fall. We'll be working in the outreach committee to find ways of spreading the news of the small groups and our church so that new people will be attracted to the church. Outreach will take a lot of work and prayer, but we have to prepare ourselves for new people.

The growth of believers will play out this way once we get the groups going. Say a new person joins the church. In order for a person to feel like they are a part of the church, we find a small group that meets at a time and we plug that new person in the group. That way, a new person has a group where they can develop their faith with other believers and they can form relationships with others. It's a place to get connected with your God and your fellow believers.

Now this is the exciting part of teaching of others in truth like that of 3 John. We have our Spirit-filled and scripturally based groups, and we feel that we need to include other people in the mix. We invite our friends, and they connected in a group. We invite our neighbors to a group, and they get connected. Groups will grow, and then from those groups they birth new groups. It keeps growing.

This model works. Many churches have grown significantly through the model of small groups. I know of a church that implemented this model, and within three years they had to add a second worship service because of the growth that came through the discipleship and

transformation that occurred in the groups. It can happen. It can happen at Faith Church as long as we committed to prayer and the truth.

Yes, I am proposing changes for the church, but it is important that we engage in changes that will bring others to Christ. We have to become focused outside of these four walls. We cannot continue to be focused on ourselves or stay on our current path. Churches do two things in their membership, they are either growing or declining. What may be perceived as stability, is actually slow erosion of the congregation. I love Christ enough and I love this church enough that I am not content with staying on our current path, but forging a new path so that others many know the gospel.

3 John 3 says that "I was overjoyed when the brothers and sisters arrived and spoke highly of your faithfulness to the truth, shown by how you live according to the truth." We can be like the person this is written to, and be faithful to the truth and live according to the truth.

We have a lot of work ahead of us, but we have God on our side. I believe in a God and Savior of resurrection, and I know that we can grow and deepen our faith at the same time. It is my prayer that we all can find a way to grow in our discipleship and faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.