

[PRAYER] It's great to see all of you here, and great to be getting ready for a new season of ministry here in South Meriden! Whether you're a longtime member, just walking in the door, or returning to our church, you are welcome, and a vital part of why we are here. Why ARE we here? Our mission is simple: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. That's simple, but not always easy, and so I want to thank all of you who have been so committed to the mission of this church throughout your lives, and all of you who are considering how a deeper commitment to Christian discipleship can transform your life, and the lives of others.

What I think that we're all seeking here today is something that will last in our lives, and even beyond our lives. Look at this beautiful church building, for example. It's inspired generations of believers in South Meriden. How this church has helped people sticks in our hearts. [WINDOW SLIDE] Recently I shared a photo of our beautiful stained glass window in the front of our church, lit up at night. This photo touched many hearts, I know. Linda Kirk shared with us on Facebook how the memory of this beautiful window helped her father to endure the hardships and sacrifice of military service in World War II. This church is not just a pretty place to worship, or a place for warm friendships. This church is about creating something in our hearts that endures, something that really does transform the world one person at a time. That takes a faith that is deeper than simply being happy: it's about living in the joy that can come only from the living God, a joy that can change lives for generations to come. [BLANK]

And so, as we enter into our new season of discipleship at our church, I want us to focus on how we can be a church that brings the living God's joy into your life, and the life of this church, in abundance. I want us to grow in the joy that is so powerful, so deep, so wide, that it cannot possibly be killed by the tragedies of this world, or our own personal tragedies. This is what we really want from God: a joy that can conquer our worst fears, our worst pains, our worst limitations, our worst sense of helplessness and hopelessness, a joy that allows us, our families, and our world, to be peaceful, healing, abundant, and fruitful.

Well, this is good stuff, that's pretty clear. The only question is, what are we willing to do to have it? What are we willing to do to have not just happiness, but actual joy, a sense of well being that is truly lasting? In our United Methodist traditions, there is only one way to find that joy, and it's called: discipleship. It's this simple-but-not-easy way to find the God's joy that brings us here. To find God's true joy means finding the discipline to depend on God's love above all else, and to help others to depend on it, for their sake, for our sake, and for the world's sake.

Discipline. It's not a popular word, I know. It sounds like a party-killing word, taking all the fun out of life. It's like our children's sermon today, like opening a Happy Meal box and getting healthy food instead of good old junk food. But here's the thing: if we want joy, real joy, we don't get it from spiritual junk food. Feed yourself on the good stuff that God offers us, and surround yourself with people who want the good stuff, and learn how to give the good stuff to others, and what do you get? Joy. It's that simple. Why

settle for a happy meal that is bad for you, and only make you hungry for more junk, when you can have a joyful meal that will make you feel great, and last forever?

This is what God taught the people of Israel one night in Egypt, and the people of Israel have been wise enough to keep the joy of that night alive every year, for more than three thousand years. [SEDER MEAL] Jewish families celebrate the Passover meal in their homes to this very day every single year. It's part of what makes them Jewish. And what they celebrate is not a great hero, or a great abundance of happiness, or anything else that you could put in a box and sell at McDonalds. What they are celebrating in their Passover meal is the joy of having a God who delivered them from death on the darkest night of their existence. Like Linda's father remembering our stained glass window, Passover is a memory of what the power of God's steadfast love does to deliver us from the worst evils that the world can imagine, evils that threaten to consume all the hope that we have for the world in our own lives. God's love delivers us from them all, saving us and our families for generations to come. [BLANK]

God delivered Israel's firstborn children and firstborn animals from death that dark night in Egypt, because they were disciplined, ready to receive God's grace. They obeyed God's commandments. Each family or neighborhood killed a young sheep or goat, whatever they could afford - a costly meal. They cooked it in a simple fire, and shared it equally with everyone at the table. They provided nourishment and justice to people fairly, in their time of greatest fear and need. [DOOR LINTEL] They marked the doorways with the blood of these animals, declaring to the world their faith in God's power, a public defiance of Pharaoh's power. They didn't hide their faith when their lives were on the line for that faith, or flaunt it with a piece of jewelry, or empty words. They laid their lives and their children's lives on the line, for the sake of the joy that only the living God could provide. [BLANK]

God delivers us from death through a life that is disciplined through faith. God saves us through faith, but faith is not just about declaring a belief; it's the willingness to stake your life on those beliefs, making your beliefs life itself. That's a life that requires dedication, a community of people dedicated to it, and a willingness to grow that community for generations to come.

And as Christians, it's not our blood, or an animal's blood, that can deliver us. What delivers us is the discipline of faith to accept the blood of Christ, the lamb of God, God's humble sacrifice on the cross, as the only source of obedience to God's promise of grace that can save us. It is a promise from God that God has given not just to Israel, but to the whole world, so that you, and everyone in the world, can be a part of God's family. [WINDOW SLIDE] It's the promise from God that was sealed for us when Jesus stood up from kneeling in a garden, where he prayed on the night of his Last Supper, the scene that we see in our window, as Jesus went to his death on the cross, and delivered all of Creation from sin and death forever, through faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Put simply, faith that Jesus saves us brings us joy. [BLANK]

So I welcome you all to a new season of discipleship at our church, in service to

our community, and the world. It is a season when I will be challenging you to think about what it really takes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ who is dedicated to transforming the world in the image of our loving and saving God. If this is the one defining purpose of our church, then I can do no other thing greater for the sake of your salvation, and the world's salvation, than to call you to true Christian discipleship.

What I will call you to will be basic, but very important. You cannot grow in the grace of a saving God until you are willing to follow God's discipline of love and service. I will ask you to call upon God in all of your thoughts and words and deeds, for this church, for your home, for our community, and for our world. In the process of doing this, we may all have to leave some things behind, just as the Israelites left much behind in Egypt, and just as Jesus' disciples left much behind to proclaim the gospel to the world. God's priceless joy is costly joy, if it is to be the joy that liberates us from sin and death.

What this means is that we will prepare for a journey of faith, a journey towards God's joy, a journey that will mean traveling light, paying attention to God's signs around us, learning to rely on strangers, and even helping them to be one of us. It will also mean that we will prepare new generations of Christians to become God's story on earth.

[FAMILY PASSOVER] When Jewish families celebrate Passover, the whole family participates in telling the story of the time when God saved the children of Israel. The children in their families play a key role in this story-telling: it is not just reciting words about Israel, but enacting the story of Israel. [GOD BAGS] So when you see our God Bags for our children, those are not just for keeping them busy; they are there to help them to become the new generation of God's story-tellers, to enact the life of Christ on earth. As parents, Sunday school teachers, and church members, we must all work together to help our children to be genuine Christians, as we try to be genuine Christians who show them the way. Every place our children go, including our own homes, must be a place where our children see, hear, speak, and act out the Word of God. [BLANK]

In other words, if you want real joy, fulfilling joy, liberating joy, joy that is beyond all measure, beyond all time, joy for generations to come, then your life will never be the same. You will be committed to a path towards God's excellence in Christ. And once you're on that path, nothing else will matter but God's excellence. We will all do it in our own way, to the degree that God has given us gifts to do it, and we must do it together, if we are to be God's excellence on earth in Christ. But through God's grace in Christ, we CAN do it! In this season of faith, skip the happy meal; go for God's excellent meal of joy in Christ. Share it with your family, your community, and the world. And then, watch what happens. You'll be glad forever that you did. Amen.