As most of you know, we recently completed a 30-week series called *Believe* that explored the ten core beliefs, the ten core practices, and the ten core virtues of the Christian life. I will be forever grateful to my friend and colleague, Dr. Randy Frazee, who invited me and Colonial to journey through the *Believe* Series with him and Westside Family Church. The *Believe* series helped us review and walk through the essential components of the Christian life; and I, for one, am grateful…more than you might think.

You see, though I have been a Christian all of my life, I was never “discipled” per se. I never entered into a “discipling” relationship with someone who led me through the content that we learned in the *Believe* series; consequently, I’ve always felt a bit insecure when it came to “discipling” another person. But having completed the *Believe* series, I feel better equipped to disciple others, and I hope you do as well. If we are to be the light of Christ in a hurting culture…which is our mission…it will always require that we are growing as disciples of Jesus even as we reach others and lead them to become disciples of Jesus.

So, as we turn the page from *Believe* to what comes next, it is my desire as your pastor to help each member of this congregation, and all who come into our sphere of influence, to self-assess where you are in your faith and to help you grow. The question we have been wrestling with as elders and leaders is this: what model will we use to make disciples? What resource will be our “go to” resource? What assessment should we use to help people get some perspective on how they are doing in terms of growing into the likeness of Christ? To that end, I have been working with a team of leaders who have been diligently looking into resources and possible models for making disciples here at Colonial. The result of their work, along with much prayer and deliberation, is that which we will share with you in a new summer series that we are calling *The Tree of Life*. Let’s pray, and then we’ll jump in.

To get started, I want to take you back to the beginning.

In Genesis 2, as we read about creation, we first learn about the Tree of Life. Let’s pick up the story in Genesis 2:7, “...then the Lord formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” In this brief description of our creation, God reveals that mankind once had access to “the Tree of Life.” However, after Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God makes a painful decision. Let’s pick up the story in Genesis 3:22, “Then the LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—’ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.”
So…what do we know about the Tree of Life? We know God set it in the midst of the garden with the first sinless human beings who had unrestricted access to its fruit; and according to what we just read in Genesis 3, we know that the fruit of this tree gave eternal life to those who ate of it, right? However, sin corrupted God’s intent for creation, and particularly mankind, which is why Adam and Eve were ushered out of the garden, and as such they were unable to eat from the Tree of Life. In fact, God set up an angelic guard to keep sinful humans from accessing the Tree of Life.

Now, the Tree of Life referenced here in Genesis is only mentioned a few other times in the Bible, specifically in the book of Revelation. Revelation 2:7: 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.' And again in Revelation 22:14-15: Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city.

According to John’s revelation, the tree of life will be in the Paradise of God…it will be offered to those who are “washed”…for those who belong to God.

So, the biblical picture of the tree of life “bookends” the narrative of scripture. Man in his sinless state had access to the Tree of Life in prehistory; and when man is again sinless in heaven…he will have access to the Tree of Life once more in the Paradise of God.

As I mentioned, there are no other direct references to the Tree of Life in the Bible. However...as I read Jesus in the New Testament, I find multiple references that make me think about this Tree of Life as something that remains incredibly relevant to us as disciples of Jesus even now.

In John 15, Jesus uses a metaphor to describe who He is, who the Father is, and who we are. Jesus states, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Here we see Jesus using a “tree” like metaphor to describe Himself as the life-giving source to “branches” who then bear fruit...fruit that proves we are disciples of Jesus and brings glory to God. God the Father is at work on “the tree,” removing unproductive branches and pruning the productive branches in order to promote more fruit.

Now I know this is a stretch, but what if Jesus is, in some way, presenting Himself here as the Tree of Life? Have you ever thought of that?

Think about it: when man sinned against God, we were cast out…away from the Tree of Life. Apart from the Tree of Life, we were destined for destruction and death. But when Jesus enters into history, pays our debt with His perfect life, and conquers death by rising on the third day, those who believe and are forgiven have access to the life eternal once again. In John 3:16 Jesus states, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him
should not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus said of Himself in John 11:25-26, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” Is it possible that Jesus serves as the Tree of Life come down from heaven? Can you see that the eternal life is now available through Him for all who believe? Is that not what Jesus said over and over again?

Think about John 6 when Jesus says, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.”

Clearly Jesus was not calling His followers to be cannibalistic, right? Jesus was pointing to something beyond the graphic description of his flesh and blood. We know Jesus was comparing Himself with the mana that God fed the Israelites, but He clearly says, “I am more than the mana that came from heaven. The mana fed the Israelites in body, but they died. The bread that fed the 5000 will only satisfy for a few hours. But if you eat of Me, you will live forever.” I think Jesus is pointing to Himself as the Tree of Life come down from heaven. Only from the Tree of Life is there fruit that provides eternal life.

I know this is pretty “out there,” but bear with me for just another minute. How many of you know that Jesus often spoke of the Kingdom of God as “seed?”

When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God in Matthew 13, he states, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

Now where does seed come from? Where does an acorn come from? It comes from the TREE, right?

Throughout the New Testament, the Gospel is regularly presented as a seed that is planted, it then grows into a plant or a tree that bears fruit…seed…and then that seed is harvested and it provides more seed to be sown.

For example, Jesus taught the parable of the sower in Luke 8, and then told the disciples in vs. 11, “The seed is the Word of God.” As you know, according to the parable, the “seed” is scattered by the sower, and the “seed” that finds fertile ground grows and eventually yields a crop a hundredfold.

This imagery of the human life as an organic tree that bears fruit is found again in Matthew 17. Jesus teaches that because of the fruit, the tree cannot hide its identity. Jesus says, “You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?” Not only can the identity of a tree be determined by its fruit; but also the health of the tree. Jesus states, “So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruit.”
This notion of a human life resembling that of a tree is not unique to the New Testament. The psalmist writes about the man who delights in the law of God in Psalm 1: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruits in its season, and its leaf does not wither.”

Now...why all this talk about a tree? Just over a year ago, I tasked a team of leaders in our church to identify a “picture” that would help us articulate the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus as well as a means of helping people assess where they are in the process of becoming a Jesus follower. Pictures are helpful for imagining discipleship. As we’ve already observed, Jesus used word pictures, and many churches use pictures to help people understand the discipleship process. Some churches use the picture of person climbing a mountain, others use a picture of a scale from -3 to +5...with -3 being a hardened atheist and +5 being a fully devoted follower of Jesus. Some of you will remember that Rick Warren used the image of a baseball diamond, whereas Willow Creek Community Church uses descriptors like seekers, those who are growing in their faith, and those who are fully devoted. Our team, led by Pastor Bob Lehleitner, looked at myriads of models used by other churches; they read copious books and considered many options.

After a year’s worth of work, the team landed on three recommendations. The first is that we utilize a small book written by Dana Allin called *Simple Discipleship* as our primary tool (other than the Bible) for discipling people and teaching others to disciple people. As much as we enjoyed the *Believe* book and the *Believe* series, our team was drawn to the simplicity of Allin’s book as well as the personal assessment tool that is available to all who purchase a copy of the book. Allin’s book tracks the eight qualities of a disciple, which, by the way, will serve as an outline for rest of this sermon series. Allin’s eight qualities of a disciples are as follows: 1) a Gospel-saturated life; 2) Connected to God; 3) Exhibiting the Fruit of the Spirit; 4) Understanding the Bible and Christian Theology; 5) Missional Living; 6) Engaging Others Towards Discipleship; 7) A Commitment to Christian Community; and 8) Fulfiling God’s Call On Our Lives. So, this summer we will unpack the eight qualities of the disciple as a way of establishing a common language for what a disciple looks like here at Colonial. We will also offer each person the opportunity to take a personal assessment at the end of the summer that we think is pretty special. The assessment tool not only asks you to evaluate your life in light of the eight qualities of a disciple, but you will also invite others in your relational world to take the survey on your behalf, so you will actually get a 365 degree evaluation that will help provide invaluable self-learning. By virtue of the personal assessment, you will then be in a position to create a personalized plan for growth in the areas that you and your friends identified through the assessment tool. More on that as we move through the summer.

I told you our discipleship team came up with three recommendations. The first was using Allin’s book and assessment tool as our primary source for discipling others and teaching people to disciple others.

The second recommendation was the picture that I had been asking for. So what’s the picture? You guessed it...the Tree of Life!
So…here’s the picture (show picture): As I mentioned earlier, Jesus is the original Tree of Life in the NT. He is the supplier of the eternal life. The “seed” of the Tree of Life is the Gospel. Wherever the seed finds fertile soil in the human heart, a new “tree of life” begins to form…one that has within it the eternal life of Jesus Himself, and that “tree” will bear fruit that proves its identity as that which belongs to Jesus. The fruit of that new tree in Christ has within it the “seed” of the Gospel, so once again the seed will be re-distributed and more trees will take root.

We love this picture of a tree because, as you can see, the complex, fruit-bearing tree above is established and supported by the vast network of roots that make the tree viable, though these roots for the most part remain hidden. Such is the life of a Jesus follower: what happens in our private, hidden life with Christ serves as the “roots” that predict and determine the health and the fruit of our visible tree in the world. So, when we talk about discipleship here at Colonial, we must always give close attention to our hidden life in Christ as well as those things that are very public. We’ll talk more about that this summer as well.

I don’t know about you, but I like pictures, and I really like this picture of a tree as a way of understanding my own growth as a Jesus-follower. As a pastor, you see me on the stage each week, and the quality of my fruit is measured in what I say, in what I write, and how I handle myself publicly. But I know…and you probably do as well…that the quality of what I can produce publicly is completely dependent upon the roots of my life…my hidden life with Christ. I can tell you right now that when my hidden life suffers from drought or neglect, the public produce of my ministry suffers as well. So this picture speaks to my life and my experience, and I hope it will speak to your life and our life together as well.

I told you our discipleship team made three recommendations. The first was to use Allin’s book and assessment tool. The second was to use the tree of life as our “picture” of discipleship.

The third recommendation was that we anchor our new discipleship model in Matthew 22:34-40. In Matthew 22, Jesus is questioned by a lawyer, a member of the Pharisee party. The lawyer’s question is found in vs. 36, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?” To which Jesus replies in vss. 37-40, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

In His response, Jesus reveals the essence of God’s desire for all human beings: that we would love God with all of our heart, mind and strength, and that we would love our neighbors as ourselves. As our pastoral team teaches through the Tree of Life series, we will unpack the eight qualities of a disciple within the context of heart, head, and hand…and we hope that in so doing, we will practically touch on the wholistic journey that we undergo as those who are being made into the likeness of Christ.

So…that’s where we’re going this summer, and I hope that you will make every effort to join us, to invite a friend, and to tune in online if you are travelling. It is my hope and that our team that we will be able to draw upon this series, Allin’s book, and the picture of the tree of life as a means of growing disciples for many years to come here at Colonial.
Now, before I close, let me simply remind you of something that you already know: all of our
efforts at teaching, training, and growing you into disciples of Jesus will fall short if you…the
church…are not actively seeking to BLESS your neighbors, co-workers, and classmates out there
in the real world where you live, work, and play. Summer is the very best time to pray for your
neighbors, to listen to them and engage in their lives, to invite them to share a meal, to serve
them in some way, and to share your story about how Jesus has changed your life. Summer is an
awesome time to serve in our Garden Ministry where you will meet dozens of neighbors who do
not attend our church or any church. Summer is a wonderful time to volunteer downtown with
Freedom Fire, the Healing House, or a dozen other ministries that we partner with. I cannot
emphasize enough that our intentionality of BLESSing others is imperative to accomplishing our
mission to be the light of Christ in a hurting culture. So church, let’s keep growing as disciples,
and let’s commit to BLESS our neighbors in Jesus’ name, amen? Let’s pray.