

## **Sermon Series: “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”**

### **III. The Practice of Intentional Faith Development**

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Acts 2:37-42

February 4, 2018

We continue with the third in our sermon series taken from a book by Robert Schnase *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. In the book, Schnase highlights actions he observes in congregations that create and sustain lively, faithful, and effective witness and service. Thus far in the series, we have looked at the practices of “radical hospitality” and “passionate worship.”

Radical hospitality in a community of faith focuses on the needs of those outside the life of the church rather than on the needs of those within the church. This practice reflects a servant-model of ministry that welcomes and provides for visitors in the life of the congregation and people in the community beyond the church.

Passionate worship in a community of faith reflects that in the very act of gathering in God’s presence something significant is at stake. An alternate perspective is offered to the church through its encounter with God in worship. The legitimacy of values and methods promoted by our culture and those in power may be called into question. Economic forces that dominate human life are weighed and evaluated. Social and

political philosophies are examined in light of an eternal truth.

Today we move to the third practice: the practice of intentional faith development. Faith development is growth within the individual and in the community of faith. It is growth or development in several areas: the knowledge of God and scripture, experience in the practice spiritual disciplines such as prayer and tithing and meditation, maturity and wisdom in applying insights and principles of the faith, actively engaging one's spiritual gifts for the benefit of others, and developing a deeper love of God and respect and care for the neighbor.

Often faith development is identified with Christian Education and Sunday School programs and Bible studies. Typically these are focused on children and youth. Children's religious education at church, along with early training in the home by parents, are the primary avenues by which most of us learned the stories of the Bible and the basics of the faith. Training of our children is critically important.

Unity is particularly blessed with a legacy of excellence in Christian Education and youth ministry. Kathryn McGregor and Lindsay White, along with their leadership teams, provide this congregation with vital programs that engage children, families, youth, and adults.

Leaders here at Unity are aware of the need to provide faith development opportunities to adults. At Unity, we speak, not merely of Christian education and religious training, but discipleship, spiritual formation, and faith development that extends through the life cycle of every person. I believe that is one of the reasons that Unity continues to grow and remains vibrant. Substantive teaching offered by Kathryn and Lindsay and Jeannie, as well as a team of fine lay teachers, provide a rich soil that members of his church can sink their roots in.

My observation in the church at large is that after the age of about 13 or so, faith development often ends. Not because the church no longer offers growth opportunities, but because life intervenes ~ other priorities take over. After the confirmation classes, kids and families are involved in sports and academics and the arts. Social events of high school intervene and then comes college. It is completely understandable.

The result is that many, including those born and raised in the faith, are stunted and impoverished in their faith. Yes, occasional Bible studies and series on different subjects may be attended. Yet systematic and intentional growth in knowledge and understanding and experience are no longer pursued.

Now imagine your vocation, your work, your business ~ in the medical field, in education, in law, in information technology, in sales, in engineering and manufacturing

~ imagine doing what you do today on the basis of what you knew in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. How adept and prepared would you be?

Many within the church function spiritually on the basis of the knowledge of a 13 year-old. Almost everyone I know says, "I wish I knew the Bible better." People yearn to know not only Bible content but how to pray and to experience transformation in their own life and among those within the faith community.

I have been in ministry nearly 38 years. I learned Bible and theology and history and pastoral care because my vocation demanded it. If I had been employed outside of the church, I am certain I would know much less about these subjects. Even though I am a "professional" in the faith community, the requirements of my profession never pushed me far enough. It was life itself ~ with its challenges and tragedies as well as its joys and hopes ~ it is life which drives me to encounter God more deeply in prayer and study and in the fellowship of the community of faith. Hasn't life pushed you as well?

Frederick Buechner, in his book *A Room Called Remember*, writes about such a time in his life. He was visiting a close friend in the hospital, a young woman he had known from her birth to this moment in her young adult life. She was at the point of death. There to be with her, he had a revelation. He writes:

When the worst finally happens, or almost happens, a kind of peace comes. I had passed beyond grief, beyond terror; all but beyond hope. It was there in that wilderness that for the first time in my life, I caught sight of what it must be like to love God, truly.

It was only a glimpse, but it was like stumbling on fresh water in the desert. Like remembering something so huge and extraordinary that my memory has been unable to contain it.

Though God was no where to be seen clearly, no place to be clearly heard; I had to be near him. I loved him because there was nothing else left. I loved him because he seemed to have made himself as helpless in his might as I was in my helplessness.

I loved him not-so-much in spite of there being nothing in it for me, but almost because there was nothing in it for me.

For the first time in my life, there in that wilderness, I caught a glimpse of what it must be like to love God truly, for his own sake. To love him, no matter what.

Life pushes us to know more, to understand more deeply, to engage the questions beyond simplistic responses, to struggle with unfulfilled promises and personal failures and disappointments with God and the church.

To properly engage situations like those that Buechner speaks of, and that we encounter on our own, requires more than 8<sup>th</sup> grade religious training.

Our scriptures this morning speak of a holistic, intentional engagement with the faith embraced by both Jews and Christians. That engagement did not exclude children, but it was primarily focused on adults.

In Deuteronomy, Moses provided final instructions to the nation of Israel as they are poised to enter the Promised Land after 40 years wandering in the wilderness. Moses repeats for the people the Torah sermon originally given on Mount Sinai. That is why this particular book of the Bible is called Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy means “the second reading of the Law.”

Deuteronomy 6 is a pivotal passage in both Jewish and Christian faith and practice. So fundamental is this teaching for daily life that Jesus quotes Deut. 6 in his own temptation experience. He quotes it again in response to the question, “What is the greatest commandment?” The essential task of Jew and Christian has been and always will be that found in chapter 6 verse 5: “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your might.”

Moses proposed a particular way for the community of faith to engage this task seriously and comprehensively. “These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit by your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

The key to faith development as Moses proposed it, is that faith be applied in all the places between the heart and the city gate. From the door of our house to the place where the community gathers and conducts its business; from the earliest morning until we get into bed at night; from the intimacy of our heart and home to the rigors of commerce ~ people of faith are to be addressed by, and meditate upon, God’s instruction which lights our path. Every person and the entire community are engaged by it. It is an interior practice but it is not private.

I believe the Christian church today could learn from such an intentional practice of living with and living out the faith between the heart and the gate that Moses encouraged.

In the passage from Acts 2, we see a glimpse of the earliest practice in the Christian church of faith

development. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” This became a pattern for the church, and when Jewish Christians were thrown out of the Temple or synagogue, they gathered in homes to learn the faith.

Many Christians assume that faith is instantaneously obtained, that one either has it or doesn’t. For many in the church, the standard of faith development is “conversion,” where a person is an unbelieving reprobate at one moment and is suddenly transformed into a moral and ethical saint the next.

The reality as the Bible teaches it is far from that. Faith typically grows at the knee of parents and family. It is nurtured over time. Yet dramatic conversion is far more impressive and flashy. So the church focuses on the spectacular rather than the ordinary, learning day by day, from the time you get up until you go to bed.

The Apostle Paul is one of those we think of as a dramatic convert. On the road to Damascus, he was persecuting the church one moment and then converting Gentiles the next. Nothing could be further from the truth. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul says he spent fourteen years in preparation before entering ministry. Fourteen years! (Galatians 1:13-2:1)

What was Paul doing during those years?

Maybe he was learning what it meant to follow Jesus Christ; perhaps he was learning what it meant to love God and neighbor, even those with whom he disagreed. Maybe Paul was clarifying the message and life of Jesus Christ in his heart and in his mind and in his way of life lived out in the marketplace. Maybe Paul was expanding his understanding that faith wasn't only for the Jews but for the entire world! That there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female but all are one in Christ Jesus! That is possible when we stretch beyond the limits of an 8<sup>th</sup> grade spiritual education!

Fruitful congregations implement practices where two or three, or ten or twelve, gather in Jesus' name and discover his presence among them. This leads and guides and deepens our faith and our love of neighbor. Bible studies and prayer groups, mission endeavors and fellowship, whether it is two or eighty-two, we build our faith bit by bit, block by block, encounter by encounter, until at last we are fully formed into the image of Christ and the body of Christ.

Are you interested? Do you want to intentionally grow and mature in your faith? Talk to me, talk to other pastors or staff, talk to the person next to you. Now is the time to more fully and fruitfully engage real life as we live out our faith between the heart and the gate.

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