

Sermon Series: “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”
III. The Practice of Intentional Faith Development

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

May 10, 2020

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 in congregations that create and sustain lively, faithful, and effective witness and service. So 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 engages the needs of people beyond the membership of the congregation.

Passionate worship reflects the expectation that something significant is at stake for the community as it gathers in God’s presence. An alternate perspective is given to people of faith in contrast to what is popularly advocated in the world; and this alternative vision is found by the church through its encounter with God in worship. The legitimacy of values and methods promoted by our culture and those in power are questioned. 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 toward maturity within individuals and within the community of faith. This growth or development can be measured in several areas: the knowledge of God and scripture, experience in the practice of 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 as programs of Christian Education and Sunday School and Bible study. In many congregations, these are intentionally targeted to children and youth. Children's religious education at church, along with early training in the home by parents, are primary avenues by which most of us learned the stories of the Bible and the basics of the faith. Training of our children is essential.

Memorial is particularly blessed with a legacy of excellence in Christian Education and youth ministry. Lisa Turner and Sarah Godbehere, along with their leadership teams and councils, provide Grosse Pointe Memorial with vital programs that engage children, families, and youth.

As is true of many congregations, leaders at GPMC are aware of the need to provide faith development opportunities to adults as well. Here, we speak not merely of Christian education and religious training but of discipleship, spiritual formation, and faith development that extends through the life cycle of every person. Susan Mozena provides excellent leadership in this arena, and our adult programs of education are a primary reason why this congregation continues to grow and remain vibrant. Substantive teaching offered by Lisa and Sarah and Susan, as well as a team of fine lay teachers, provides a rich soil into which members of his church can sink their roots.

My general observation in the church at large is that after the age of about 13 or so, faith development stops. This is not because the church no longer offers opportunities to grow, but because life intervenes, other priorities take over. After 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 raised in the faith since birth, may be stunted and impoverished in their faith. Yes, a small number of adults attend occasional Bible studies and series on a variety of subjects. Yet systematic and intentional growth in knowledge and understanding and experience are neglected and 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 7th or 8th grade. How prepared and competent would you be in your vocation?

Many within the church function spiritually on the basis of a 13 year-old's knowledge of the faith. I hear it said universally by people in the church, "I wish I knew the Bible better." People yearn to know not only Bible content but how to pray, how to nurture transformation in their own life and among those within the faith community. They are frustrated because the same character flaws that triggered them in their twenties still dog them in their sixties and seventies.

I have been in ministry for 40 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. Present at her bedside to be with her, Beuckner 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 or knee-jerk reactions, 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, situations that you and I encounter as well, we need more than 8th 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.

Moses gave final instructions to the nation of Israel poised to enter the Promised Land after 40 years in the wilderness. Moses repeated for the people the Torah sermon originally given on Mount Sinai. That is why this book of the Bible is called Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy means “the second reading of the Law.”

Deuteronomy 6 is essential in both Jewish and Christian faith and practice. So fundamental is this teaching that Jesus quotes Deut. 6 in his 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. The heart represents what is most personal; the gate represents what is most public. 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 practice.

I believe the Christian church today could learn from such an intentional practice of living with and into the faith, and living out the faith between the heart and the gate, just as 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 when Jewish Christians were thrown out of the Temple and synagogue and 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 suddenly is transformed into a moral and ethical saint the next.

The reality the Bible teaches it is far from that. Faith typically grows at the knee of parents and family and gathered community. It is nurtured over time. Dramatic conversion grabs attention and the church often obsesses on the spectacular and instantaneous rather than the day by day discipline of learning.

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 at least a decade in preparation before entering ministry! (Galatians 1:13-2:1)

What was Paul doing during those years? Maybe he was learning what it meant to follow Jesus Christ. Maybe Paul was learning what it meant to love his neighbor, even those with whom he disagreed. Maybe Paul was coming to terms with the way he was to live his life in the marketplace as a disciple of Jesus. Maybe Paul was expanding his view that faith wasn't only for the Jews but for the entire world! Perhaps Paul came to a realization that there no longer is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female but all are one in Christ Jesus! When we stretch beyond the limits of an 8th grade spiritual education, we have opportunity to mature.

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 the image of Christ is formed in us and we are transformed into the body of Christ.

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