

## **Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Intentional Faith Development**

**Deuteronomy 6:4-9 Colossians 3:12-17**

Practices of fruitful congregations... This could be interpreted as *practices of fruitful people who are part of congregations*. Because we engage our practices individually, *and* together. Speaking of “together” ...

New Testament scholar Gordon Fee pointed out, in one of his writings about the faith and practice of the early church, that the apostle Paul uses the phrase “one another” in his letters 60 times. He says things like “Love one another, pray for one another, encourage one another,” and so on. 60 times!

Gordon Fee turns it into a verb, wonderfully, and calls it “one anothering.” One of the marks of the church’s ministry is its “one anothering.”

We need this. In our highly individualistic time, with the emphasis on personal fulfillment, sometimes to the exclusion of the common good, God’s people, the Church, must return to “one anothering,” and an emphasis on “we” and not just “me.” Not only within the life of the church, but in our service to the community. And *with* the community, as we partner with others in doing the good work that enriches our world. The join the neighborhood is doing the good that benefits the neighborhood.

Here is a passage that contains this favorite word of Paul's. Listen for how many times it's used in this passage.

### **Colossians 3: 12-17**

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This is the word of the Lord.

In the book about the 5 practices of fruitful congregations, the author names the third practice as "Intentional faith development." With an emphasis on the word "intentional;" suggesting that growing in faith is purposeful, with an intention to develop our faith, and grow in it. And that's good. A life well lived, and a faith well developed, happens when we prioritize certain activities.

I'd like to reframe this just a little bit, though, lest we think there has to be a certain plan or a program put in place that produces certain outcomes, or we think that we are expected to grow our own faith—that it's all on us to develop it.

And, indeed, there was a time in recent decades when that was what we did, and what was expected. For example, in 1995 a book was published titled *The Purpose Driven Church*, which became wildly popular. And which led to a sequel titled *The Purpose Driven Life*. Which led to other books, programs and Bible studies that were meant to produce a certain type of church programming, and a certain type of mature Christian person. Even the Presbyterian Church had its denominational curriculum for adults called Kerygma (the NT Greek word for “teaching”). It’s good stuff. But I have a reaction to the word “driven” in some of the literature, because I don’t want to be driven by purposes or expectations; I’d rather be *led* by the Spirit. And even the word “intentional”—a word that I typically like because I like being thoughtful and intentional about things—that word can stress me out when it comes to tending to faith and a spiritual life.

So I’d like to reframe this, just a little bit, because as we read Paul’s letters, and particularly the gospels about Jesus and his ministry, and listen to his teaching, we notice that Jesus uses organic and dynamic language and illustrations to describe faith, and discipleship, and the Kingdom of God. He uses images of seeds, and plants and trees, and yeast, and the like. He tells stories about people who lose things, and then find them; or who themselves become lost and then found; other stories are about people who confront a grumpy God

figure in the story (we'll look at one of those parables next week), and other stories are about people who go on a journey, or are in search of treasure.

None of this describes a faith, or a set of beliefs, or discipleship that is static, or follows a system or program of development, but is rather dynamic and organic in nature, and sometimes produces unexpected outcomes.

On one occasion, when the disciples excitedly say to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" he does not respond by wheeling out a white board and a sharpie to give a lecture, with handouts and fill in the blank sheets to make sure they get the answers right. In fact, he doesn't give them answers at all. He responds to this request in a quizzical way by saying, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you could tell this rhododendron right here to be uprooted and planted in Puget Sound, and it would." Actually, he uses a mulberry bush and the sea of Galilee for his illustration, but I wanted to put this in PNW terms. Either way, wow. And, what does that mean? And, how does that work?

The point is, Jesus doesn't explain what faith is or tell them *how* to increase it. He simply suggests that it's good to have it. And, it only takes a little of it to have powerful effect. Jesus is saying, faith is dynamic, and comes in all shapes and sizes and produces all kinds of different outcomes. So, Jesus never says exactly what faith is. He invited people to follow him, and he told stories, mainly. And, as

I understand it, we don't grow our own faith. Faith grows in us as we respond to the invitation to follow Jesus, to know God, and learn to trust God.

It's also hard to succinctly define what faith is because every person's faith changes and evolves over the years. As it should. I'm sure each of us could tell our faith story that would reveal a growing, changing, emerging, wondering—and sometimes wandering—faith.

So, yes, there is an intentionality about this, but I'd like to reframe this as an intent to respond to an invitation, rather than an effort to try hard, or harder, to grow my own faith. In fact, that's another parable of Jesus, about a person who issues an invitation to a great banquet. And the point of that parable is, will those who receive the invitation respond to it and come to the party.

So, here is one way we can look at intentional faith development, which I have found useful over the years—incorporating the idea of responding to an invitation, with faith being dynamic: faith (development) is *taking steps toward God, in every circumstance of life, so that I might trust God more, over time*. Faith is taking steps toward God, in every circumstance of life, so that I might trust God more, over time.

I realize that isn't complete or fully adequate, but I have found it helpful, and have worked with it for myself because it suggests a journey, and a process,

over time, where I choose to follow Jesus, look to God in all things, and learn to trust God. It's about taking steps, most of the time *toward* God, sometimes *away* from God, or sometimes feeling stuck and not taking any steps at all, yet eventually getting my feet moving again, so to speak, as I trust that trusting in God's trustworthiness produces good results in me, through me, and in the company of other pilgrims who are on the same journey.

The goal isn't to learn more *information* about God or the Bible. But learning to trust God with our whole self. Learning to give more of what I know of myself, to more of what I know about God. *Learning to give more of what I know of myself, to more of what I know about God.*

And as I learn more that God is loving, and trustworthy, I can turn more of my life over to God as I take steps toward God. Someone described faith as trusting in God's trustworthiness—or, putting faith in God's faithfulness (which we will sing about shortly).

Again, it's not just cramming our heads with more information about God or the Bible. We have overemphasized that, to the exclusion of having experiences of God—the mystical—and learning the Way of Jesus in relationship to others, and to the world, through our experiences of God. So our learning is, for example, learning how to forgive and to be a reconciler, because I've

experienced God's forgiveness and reconciliation. It's learning how to serve and be generous, because I've experienced God's generosity. It's learning how to handle stresses and challenges and pain, because I've experienced God's peace, and comfort, and healing.

Again, there is no standard to achieve, no litmus test, no one standing at the door with a clipboard to make sure you have right answers, or all the answers. We are a community of *faith*, not a community of *certainty*, of people who have all the answers.

Which leads to the subject of doubt. If we are going to talk about faith, and faith development, it's necessary to talk about doubt. There are many good things that come with having faith. And one of them is doubt. Believe it or not.

If we have faith we are going to have doubts. Again, that's why it's called faith, and not "certainty." Doubts, as someone called them, are the ants in the pants of faith. Doubts and questions keep faith honest. Doubts can actually help grow our faith as we work through them. Pastor Paul Tillich, in writing about faith, said, "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. Sometimes I think it is my mission to bring faith to the faithless, and doubt to the faithful."

For you and for me, along the way, on this journey with Jesus, we will experience doubts. There are different kinds of doubts:

Intellectual doubt. There are questions I have about things I don't understand or that don't make sense to me intellectually.

Moral doubt. Moral doubt asks: does the gospel have a good effect on people and the world? Is God good? Or another version of that: What good is God? Especially while there is pain and suffering or evil in the world.

Experiential doubt (similar to moral doubt). A personal difficulty or struggle causes me to question whether or not God is present with me or if God really cares. This is David in the Psalms—a lot!

Internal doubt. Doubt of myself; I can believe that God is love, and that God loves others, but it's hard for me to believe that God loves *me*; I don't feel worthy of it, or qualified.

As we ponder our faith journeys, perhaps we have experienced one of more of these kinds of doubt. Which is normal. And good! Speaking of normalizing doubt...

There is one short line at the end of Matthew's gospel, related to this, in his post-resurrection account, when Jesus appears to the disciples. Here is what Matthew says: "When they saw Jesus, they worshipped him, but some doubted." When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted. I'm so grateful that statement is in there: "...but some doubted." This is one of those little details

which, years ago, helped me believe that Christianity must be true. Because, I thought, who would make this up? If this were propaganda then it would say everyone believed; they were convinced, 100%. No doubters. And all 4 gospel accounts in the Bible would say exactly the same thing; they would all agree on every detail. But they don't. We're told, quite honestly, that there were doubters among the disciples. I'm grateful for that detail of the account.

This normalizes doubt, in a way. It says, we will all experience doubts.

And here is something to notice in that account: the doubters did not isolate themselves, away from the community of faith; nor were they told to go away ("no doubters allowed here; come back when you've figured it out")—they stayed *with* the community, and, they were welcomed *by* the community. It meant that all kinds of people were gathered and welcomed, including those who had doubts.

And when we are experiencing doubts, we need to continue to hang around the community of faith. It's good for us to stay with the community, to ask questions, to listen, even pray, and have others pray for us. And it's good for the community to welcome those who have questions and doubts—it helps keep everyone's faith honest and sincere. In time, Jesus will reveal himself to us when we have doubts. Like he did to "doubting" Thomas—Jesus didn't scold him for his

doubts; just the opposite, actually. Jesus was patient and understanding with him. Thomas stayed with the community and eventually Jesus helped resolve his doubts.

Everyone experiences doubt. And even goes through periods of dark, difficulty, or despair. After Mother Teresa died and her journals and letters were published, we found out that she experienced deep doubt, and even anguish at God's seeming absence at times during her life. For example, in a letter she wrote to a friend, she says: "Jesus has a very special love for you; but as for me, the darkness and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear—the tongue moves (in attempted prayer) but does not speak ... I want you to pray for me." Mother Teresa! Asking for prayer! Even she experienced doubt and despair. A woman who seemed as close to God as anyone, and who was so filled with joy and love. Whose life was, shall we say, fruitful.

She went through experiential doubt, but she stayed with her community in Calcutta, and continued to do her good work, in faith. As I like to say, she trusted, in the dark, what she knew to be true in the light. She took steps toward God, in every circumstance, and learned to trust God more.

How do we grow in faith? How can we choose to take steps toward God, in every circumstance of life?

First, to put it in Jesus' terms, we need to ask ourselves: do I *want* to respond to his invitation to follow? Perhaps that's where we begin, or begin again. Maybe right this moment you're not so sure you want to respond with a wholehearted yes, but perhaps you can say the prayer (from Thomas Merton), "I'm not sure that I am willing at this moment, but I'm willing to be made willing."

Then, there are some things we can do.

We can take steps toward God and grow through a small group of fellow pilgrims where we share and listen to each other's stories, and become enriched. As part of that we can reflect on Scripture together, read a book together.

Faith can be developed through experiences (and often those are the best ways to learn and grow). Even taking risks (that's next week's message!).

Similarly, taking steps toward God, and growing, can happen through experimentation, trial and error, and failure.

It can come through an insight, and simple observation, which Jesus often recommended; for example, "consider the birds of the air... the lilies of the field" and so forth. Simply pay attention! With the intention of being open to God.

Sometimes it's by simply placing reminders around ourselves in our day-to-day life, our comings and goings. This is one of the things I like to do. Because I tend to forget, or wander, or get distracted.

This is basically what is taught in Deuteronomy 6. God invites them to pay attention (“Hear/listen”), and what follows is an invitation to take steps toward God *in love*, and then God gives instructions to keep all of what God tells us in us, and in front of us, wherever we go on a daily basis. God tells the Israelites to put these instructions here, there and everywhere—from our doorposts to our bedposts to our foreheads. My playful way of interpreting this is: Take God’s promises and instructions and put them on sticky notes, and place them on your bathroom mirror, your front door or side door, on your car steering wheel, and your computer monitor; put it as your home screen on your phone, and (if you’re a list maker like I am) put them on your list. Sometimes all we need are simple reminders.

Finally, sometimes faith development requires *rest*. Non-doing. This seems counterintuitive and paradoxical, but that’s exactly what the gospel is sometimes—a paradox. We grow when we rest. In creation we are given this weekly rhythm of 6 days for labor, and 1 day of rest. Rest is built into the rhythm of creation, and life. And, Jesus said, “Come unto me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you...” more things to do? No. I will give you... rest. He says, “Take my yoke upon you and *learn* from me, and you will find rest for your souls.”

So, in addition to these other things we can do to take steps toward God, and develop faith, one other thing we can do is... nothing. Our non-doing is our doing, and as long as our hearts are open and we engage our rest as gift and nurture from Jesus, we'll be in good hands, faith formation-wise. Because that is part of his invitation, to rest.

You know I'm fond of saying, when you don't know what to do, do the next right thing right in front of you. Sometimes the next right thing right in front of us is... a nap. Or a good book. Or staring out the window at plants and trees and birds.

These are some things we can do (or not do). And these can be done by each of us on our own, however, learning is often best done *together*. This is what Paul is getting at in Colossians 3: "Teach... *one another*... Let the word of Christ dwell in *you* (plural in Greek; *y'all*) richly..." This is where the fruitfulness is manifested, in journeying together, taking steps toward God together, learning together. Sharing our stories together, experimenting together, meeting together to share our experiences, insights and observations.

Learning in community generates greater insight, and it can provide checks and balances. This is why Jesus called a group together to follow him, who would,

in turn, create communities (churches) of faith. Pilgrims who are taking steps toward God, learning to trust more in God's trustworthiness.

Of which we now sing...