

Growing Together
January 26, 2014
Acts 2:42

This morning our Scripture reading comes from the 2nd chapter of Acts. A single verse reminds us that faith development should be an intentional activity.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these words.

Let us pray . . . Alpha and Omega – Holy One who was and is and is to come – help us to locate ourselves in the present and to find our way into the future moment by moment. Remind us this morning that you call us to grow and to keep growing in our faith all the days of our lives. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

I grew up in the church. More specifically, I was raised in the Presbyterian Church. As a child, I knew that there was one big hurdle between where I was and the world my parents and other adults inhabited: confirmation.

In order to become a member, I had to complete a lengthy educational experience led by a rather intimidating woman: The Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Johnson Pense. It didn't seem fair to me at the time that she taught religion to university students during the week before teaching junior high students about whatever it was one needed to know to get confirmed on weekends. At twelve years of age, I did not feel ready for any class led by a college professor – especially not one that met in the church library and included lectures on the Christian history or Presbyterian polity.

While the class was challenging, it was also interesting. I can't recall everything I learned, but I do remember a few things from the experience:

- my teacher wasn't as terrifying as I expected;
- Christianity was a far more diverse religion than I ever imagined; and
- Presbyterians pay close attention to three books: the Bible, the Book of Order, and the Book of Confessions.

If I skip ahead a few decades in my life story, then I can tell you that my next experience of confirmation was during seminary while serving as a youth director. In the years since then, I have helped shape many such programs. To an outsider observer these options look quite different in many ways, including format, learning objectives, and length. Whether these growth experiences lasted only eight weeks or more than three years, they all offered participants an opportunity to be confirmed. That end is really an opportunity for a new beginning. By publicly affirming their Christian faith, these young men and women become full members of the church.

At 12 or 13 or perhaps 14 years of age, they are every bit as much a member as their parents or even their grandparents. While one doesn't really graduate from confirmation, in some congregations you might think otherwise. In some traditions the number of teenagers actively involved in Christian education declines dramatically in the years following confirmation.

Since confirmation should be a starting point rather than a concluding moment, this doesn't make sense. As I look around our sacred space and see many parents and grandparents, I know that none of you would suggest that your child or grandchild drop out of school in 7th or 8th grade to enter the workforce. In like manner, I hope none of you will suggest that they have learned all they need to know about living out their faith when they are confirmed.

Lifelong learning is a discipline we all participate in. Just as learning in general should be something we are intentional about continuing for a lifetime, so also should be our commitment to learning about and growing in our faith.

I wonder if you looked at the cover of our worship bulletin this week or if you noticed what has appeared at the bottom of it the last few weeks. This sermon is a part of a series on the five practices of fruitful congregations. The idea originated with a book by the same title written by Robert Schnase, a United Methodist Bishop.

In the chapter on this morning's practice, he explains:

Intentional faith development describes the practice of churches that view the ministries of Christian education and formation, small group work, and Bible study as absolutely critical to their

mission and that consistently offer opportunities for all ages, interests, and faith experiences to learn in community . . . They support and maintain existing Sunday school classes, studies, choirs, and women's and men's organizations, but they also continually fill the gaps with short-term, long-term, and topical small group ministries and start new classes especially designed for visitors and new members.¹

As I read that definition, I suspect many of you who are quite involved in this congregation realized that we have some work ahead of us in this area. I believe we can and will make significant progress toward this goal in the months ahead. In fact, I am encouraged by the interest already being expressed in educational offerings for adults.

Did you know that over 20 people attended the class I taught earlier this week on the future of the church? Are you aware of opportunities that have already been planned? Have you committed to participate in them? What about

- the Women's Fellowship luncheon tomorrow to which both men and women are invited to hear The Rev. Vann Ellison; and
- Pastor Ron's Bible study on the book of Philippians, which begins on February 3; and
- our community event featuring The Rev. Dr. Charles McCullough who will share in sculpture and with words wisdom about Jesus' parables on February 25?

Did you know that this listing is far from complete? It lacks your contribution.

Perhaps you will share your subject matter expertise as a teacher or facilitator. Maybe you will get involved to help restart our dormant Education committee.

Certainly you will want to attend, and to invite your friends to join you in some of these opportunities for enrichment. Wherever you are on the journey of faith, you are welcome to fully participate in these experiences.

Several years ago, I developed a course I call "The Journey of Faith." The title is intended to remind prospective participants that no matter

¹ Robert Schnase. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (2011), p.67-8.

when they may have started, the journey is designed to continue for the rest of this life. David Benner, puts it this way:

To describe spirituality in terms of a journey is to employ a metaphor that connects us solidly with the biblical account of the nature of Christian faith. Both Old and New Testaments frequently present faith as a response to a call to a journey – a journey of following and trusting God as he leads us on the adventure God has planned for us. The essence of Christian spirituality is following Christ on a journey of personal transformation.²

I am glad to have you as my traveling companions at this stage on my journey. While we each have our own journey, we never travel alone.

Faith development is how one progresses or develops in her or his faith over the course of a life time. We must remember that this is an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

One of my seminary professors, Scott Walker, wrote a book on the topic of faith formation. To help readers visualize the varying components that contribute to faith formation, he portrayed each as a river. Walker notes that there are four universal rivers present in the lives of all religious people whether they happen to be Buddhists, Muslim, Christian or adherents of some other religion.³

When he moves from these general contributing factors to factors specific to those who follow the way of Jesus, he notes that the rivers change. He suggests that somehow “river water metaphorically turns into living water.”

Since Christian faith formation is a lifelong process, it is important for us to consider these 5 rivers of living water.⁴

1. The Testimony of Jesus. Christianity is a religion based on the teachings of Jesus. To call one’s self a Christian, one must welcome the person of Jesus and participate in his mission.

² David G. Benner. *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* (2004), p.25-6.

³ Scott Walker. *Where the Rivers Flow: Exploring the Sources of Faith Development* (2002), p.97-109.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.110-119.

2. The Spirit of God. An acceptance that the Spirit of God is a real presence that is different from intuition or emotion yet sometimes works cooperatively with them.
3. The Teachable Moment. "The teachable moment is that time in life when events converge that make us want to learn – indeed, enable us to learn – certain things we were unwilling or incapable of learning previously."⁵
4. The Fellowship of Faith. We need one another. By sharing our lives with other people of faith we engage in mutually enriching activity.
5. The Process of Following. This is the reminder that we are on a journey. It is an active and ongoing effort; each day we must choose again to follow the way of Jesus.

Maybe it would be easier if we all just dropped out after confirmation. I imagine that in recent years at least a few of my confirmation students have looked at me in the same way I once saw my teacher.

I am not here this morning, however, to suggest the simplest path for you or the easiest way forward for United Church. I intend, instead, to reorient us to the importance of the practice of intentional faith development as a critical part of our mission.

I believe that faith matters, and seek to contribute to the conversation about matters of faith that matter through my blog. Whether or not I am on here with you on Marco Island on any given day, you can still receive a daily dose of So What Faith by going online to www.sowhatfaith.com. I won't promise to provide you with answers, but will always invite you to consider the possibilities by responding to the questions I ask.

So what is this intentional faith formation thing really all about? The New Century Version of the Bible puts it this way: "They spent their time learning the apostles' teaching, sharing, breaking bread, and praying together."⁶

I invite you to be very intentional about spending your time doing the same. Amen.

⁵ Ibid., p.117.

⁶ Acts 2:42.