

Growing Together

January 18, 2015

Acts 2:42

This morning our Scripture reading comes from the second chapter of Acts. It is a single verse that reminds us 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, remind us this morning that you call us 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 Christian history and 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.

Skipping ahead in my life story . . . my next experience of confirmation came while I was in seminary. I was asked to teach confirmation in, of all places, a Presbyterian church.

Since that initial experience as a teacher, I have helped shape confirmation programs in congregations affiliated with multiple traditions. They have differed rather dramatically in format and learning objectives. While the shortest such experience took only eight weeks, the longest required a three year commitment. Despite these variances the culminating event was always confirmation: an opportunity for young people to claim the faith of their parents as their own.

Those students who chose to share their faith statements were confirmed, and became full members of their congregation. At 12 or 13 or perhaps 14 years of age, they were every bit as much a member as their parents, grandparents, or even their great grandparents.

While one doesn't really graduate from confirmation, in some congregations a casual observer might think otherwise. In many denominations the number of teenagers actively involved in Christian education declines dramatically following confirmation.

Since confirmation should be a starting point rather than a concluding event, this doesn't make sense. As I look around our sacred space, I doubt that any 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 or we have learned all that is needed by the time of confirmation.

Lifelong learning is as popular a phrase in Southwest Florida as anywhere in our country. For the last few years I taught at a University that has an active Center for Lifelong Learning and I have been on staff at a large congregation that provides numerous general education events that fit within the framework of lifelong learning.

This is all well and good, but is not enough for us as those who follow the Way of Jesus. As disciples, we must be intentional in seeking out lifelong spiritual learning opportunities.

Intentional faith formation is one of the five key practices of fruitful congregations. Robert Schnase, the United Methodist Bishop who wrote a book on the topic explains the practice in this way:

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.¹

As I read that definition, I suspect many of you who are quite involved in this congregation were trying to determine how we measure up. This past Tuesday a group gathered in my office for the first Topical Tuesday. They shared some of the ways they see us excelling in intentional faith formation, including

- caring and nurturing neighborhood groups,
- prayer groups and friends who pray for one another,
- occasional intergenerational gatherings,
- the most recent confirmation class,
- Bible studies, book studies, and the adult forum.

They also shared some wonderfully enriching experiences from other congregations alongside some hopes for what we might do together here in the future.

Their list is far from complete. It lacks your contribution. We need to hear your stories. We need to listen to your dreams.

Whether you have been here faithfully for many years or are a newcomer, let me assure you that wherever you are on the journey of faith you are most welcome to participate in any and all of our congregation's enrichment opportunities.

Several years ago, I developed a course I call "The Journey of Faith." The title is intended to suggest to prospective participants that no matter when they may have started, this is one journey that is designed to continue for the rest of life. David Benner, a psychologist who focuses on spiritual matters, puts it this way:

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

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 . . . Testaments frequently present faith as a response to a call to a journey – a journey of following and trusting God as (God) 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 of my journey. And, while we each have our own journey, I thank God that we never travel alone.

While we know that faith development unfolds over a lifetime, it is less clear how it occurs. Some time ago one of my seminary professors wrote a book on faith formation. To help readers visualize the varying components that contribute to faith formation, Dr. Scott Walker portrayed each as a river.

He suggests that there are four universal rivers present in the lives of all religious people whether they happen to be Buddhist, Muslim, Christian or adherents of some other religion. These shared rivers are tradition, intuition, reason, and emotion. They exist in all people of faith, but each person has her or his own unique blend.³

In transitioning from these general elements to factors specific to those who follow the Way of Jesus, Professor Walker notes that somehow “river water metaphorically turns into living water.” This living water is made up of five distinct rivers: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. The Spirit of God. The Spirit is a real presence that is different from intuition or emotion yet often works cooperatively with them.

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.

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 Fort Myers Congregational United Church of Christ. Instead, I seek to reorient us to the importance of the practice of intentional faith development as a critical part of our common life.

So what is this intentional faith formation thing really all about? One contemporary 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, *New Century Version*