

Hebrews 10: 24-25 – Exploration of Scripture...

One Tuesday morning we were a handful of women from all parts of the world. All of us were mothers. Some have grown-up children, some have babies, less than one year old. The background “music” when the women meet for prayer and Bible study is the laughing and babbling of the three or four kids who play happily on a blanket on the floor of the room. Some soft toys and books, bottles and dummies keep them happy and content. And: there is always a hand from one of the women to hold and care...

One morning we met to focus on a very “motherly” theme. We had planned to get to know Mary, and to find out where we can meet her in our own lives.

We started by reading a very short but beautiful poem.

Ann read it to us with her remarkable Kenyan accent that makes you listen even more intently. We collected all the images which came to us through the poems. We discovered a Mary who was visited by an angel who announced the birth of a son, and who set out into the unknown. In her life the ordinary things became miracles and out of the ordinary grew her great song of liberation. With Elizabeth Mary danced into her future... In a second poem Mary came to us in the women of the world, in all women who say YES, who live in difficult life situations, such as poverty, loneliness, hopelessness and violence. In the last poem Mary is a common, down to earth woman whose song changes the world and invites others to listen to its heavenly sounds.

From a collection of thoughts that we’d put together a week earlier of what we could remember of Mary, we drew a life line. We were surprised and proud, hadn’t thought that we’d be able to come up with so many details. With all this as a background we read the biblical texts about Mary from Luke chapter 1, and then set out to discover where we can meet Mary or be Mary in our own lives. And we had a most fascinating and surprisingly open and personal time of sharing about feelings and fears, life decisions, unexpected babies, hopes and dreams, our faith and our relationship to God, our friends and the joys and disappointments of friendship, and about being partners of God and trying to live our lives in a way that brings forth “the divine”. We were amazed at the depth and quality of our conversations, and we all felt extraordinarily blessed by our mutual sharing – not just for the sake of sharing but for the sake of a better world.

Sisters and brothers, this was just a tiny glimpse into the atmosphere of one of the Bible studies we offer here at church.

The last two sermons preached here in this pulpit were trying to focus on Robert Schnase’s book “Five practices of fruitful living”. The book is written by an American bishop who’s been inspiring some of us in Peace Church with his thoughts and texts for the last 2 years or so.

We decided to make some of his writing topics in our sermons, and here we are. The third chapter in Robert Schnase’s book to which we come today is called “Growing in grace – the practice of intentional faith development.” And as I did three weeks ago, I would like to start us off with a couple of questions from the end of the chapter.

So, please, lean back and allow yourselves some time to ponder over the questions which will now come:

When have you belonged to a Bible study group that was helping you? That sustained your faith? And helped you live a satisfying spiritual life? What made the Bible study a good experience?

What or who keeps you aware of the spiritual dimension in your daily life? How can you live with an awareness that God is with you at each step that you take? What helps you to see God in fresh ways?

Have you found friends by belonging to a Bible study group? What did you learn about Christian friendship by studying the Bible together?

What are you doing to explore faith more deeply? ...to get to know your Bible better?

Bishop Schnase begins with a quotation from the letter to the Hebrews.

Hebrews 10: 24-25

“Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging each other...”

In other words: let us support each other to be good Christians. Let us help each other to follow Jesus more nearly, to feel more comfortable with the Bible and to get to know and love the interesting and diverse mix of people who we inevitably meet when we go to church.

Schnase describes a typical Bible study situation. People come together, meet & pray & discuss a Bible text. They share and learn in community.

It is the community, Schnase says, that helps us to mature in faith and to follow Christ in our daily living (p 69). Going to a Bible study is like having an appointment with Jesus, making room in our lives for learning faith, learning how to believe and, as Robert Schnase expresses it, “how to grow in grace”.

As a role model and a teacher of how to learn faith and grow, Robert Schnase offers us Jesus.

It was Jesus, he writes, who taught his first disciples and friends to learn in community. “He weaved people into a community around him and taught them through stories, parables, examples, and by modelling behaviours.” (p 71).

After Jesus’ death and resurrection “the practice of learning in community continued during the beginnings of the early church. The 2nd chapter of Acts reports people gathering in home and temple to learn from the disciples. Before written Scriptures, they repeated the stories of Jesus, imprinting his teachings upon their hearts. The community provides a supportive network for testing ideas, gaining from other people’s experiences, sharing the love of Christ, and holding one another accountable to following Christ.” (p 71).

“The spiritual life is never a solitary affair,” says Schnase.

Faith is a growing process that happens in community, - back in Jesus' time, all the way through church history, in the early days of Methodism, and among us today.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church intentionally organized people into small groups for the study of scripture, for prayer, and to “watch after one another in love.” Early Methodists met in societies, classes and bands. They gathered in homes, and workplaces and schools. They inquired after one another's spiritual progress with supportive intimacy. They shared their doubts and hopes and talked about how they'd seen God's grace at work in their lives. They learned to encourage each other (p 71) ... to care for each other, to love each other.

“A congregation”, we read in Schnase's book, “or a community of Christ, such as a Bible study, Sunday School class, or prayer group becomes a “school for love”, as we learn to give and receive love, to serve others and to follow Christ. (p 72) And I think, we all agree, when Bishop Schnase says: “We learn faith in community, not only because Jesus and the New Testament have taught us to learn this way, but also because spirituality cannot be learned alone. Peace, forgiveness, mercy, compassion, hope, gentleness, love, grace, serving – these and many other components of belief are communal in nature. They are social and cannot be learned merely from a book. We learn them with friends, teachers, mentors, and fellow travellers on the path with Christ”. (p 22)

We are inspired and encouraged through others who believe. We are given new ideas, sometimes answers to our doubts and questions when we share with other Christians. We are made stronger and more determined when we do not walk our path alone but have companions on our life and faith journey!

It is other people who help me stay committed, who remind me of my intentions and strengthen me to keep my promises and follow my dreams.

It is other people who pull me out of my immediate situation and give me a larger view! It is the experiences of others, of many different and diverse sisters and brothers that give me inspiration and often purpose. It is those around me in my faith community who keep me on track and so often become the voice of Christ to me.

Robert Schnase who invites us in his book to develop our faith through studying the Bible with others, opens our eyes to the wider perspective which we get on the world, when we read and discuss our Bible not alone but with as many others as possible. The benefit, he says, is that we grow stronger, develop more courage, more patience, greater compassion, a deeper sense of fairness, a higher commitment to justice and peace... - and in all that God gently shapes us... changes us... forms us and sustains us.

The impact which studying the Bible on a regular basis has on us, can make us a different person... a person with more depth, more peace, and more courage. Who wouldn't want to partake in that? 😊

The better we know our God and our Bible, the more closely we walk with Jesus, the more hopeful we can become... more thankful, gentler, more patient, less angry and much, much more compassionate and sympathetic.

Again: who wouldn't want to experience all that?!

It is the life in community that shapes me and can make me a better Christian. This is one of the most important experiences of the last 25 years or so of my life! And nothing, nothing is as disheartening as a lonely struggle. We need others; we need the intimacy of a church family, or the friendship in small groups. We need to know each others' names, learn each others' stories, pray for one another, and walk parts of our journeys together.

"Christian companions", writes Bishop Schnase, "become the people God uses to sustain us through the ordinary ups and downs of living, and also through those times of extraordinary darkness and grief.

Belonging makes life so much easier... being interwoven into a community where we discover acceptance, love and support, can be worth much more than all the riches the world can offer...

Being connected makes all the difference during times of doubt, suffering or pain!

Belonging deepens hope; love creates trust; prayer lends strength.

And God, God reaches us through the people who love us.

We often underestimate the power of sharing and the power of community. We too often think we have to deal with so many aspects of life alone...

Let us discover the unfathomable and surprising value of community.

Let us come together on as many occasions as we need and become for each other a source of sustenance and hope.

Our faith can only grow and develop if we share it with others. If we let others question it and challenge it. If we let them enrich and enhance it... if we talk about it, cultivate it and nurture it...

If we invite other people in, we let God in, and together we connect God to life – over and over again.

Faith development is no quick course which you leave with a degree after a couple of weeks. Faith development is a life long journey with the living God and the people he brings into your life... Going down this road can be healing to ourselves and to the others, believe me.

And every gathering round the table in communion, as we are doing it today, is a station on a journey which connects us constantly with each other and the great loving parent of humankind.

God is calling us forever to make a difference – and we can only follow his call and fulfil his mission if we support each other to learn the faith and grow in grace. Amen.

Let me again ask the questions from the beginning:

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Have you found friends by belonging to a Bible study group? What did you learn about Christian friendship by studying the Bible together?

What are you doing to explore faith more deeply? ...to get to know your Bible better?

Let us remain a few moments in silence...