

Intentional Faith Development - Sermon

Sisters and brothers,
in a remote village a half-day's walk outside Jerusalem, a woman fed dried branches into a fire as she prepared to make bread for the day. She dipped her hands into the water of a small basin that sat beside the vase she had carried from the well before sunrise. She sighed deeply at the prospect of another day of unending work just to scrape enough food together to feed her daughters and herself.

Since her husband's sudden illness and death, she had felt abandoned and alone in ways she could barely fathom.

As she felt the cool water trickle through her fingers, she thought about the story she had heard the night before as she gathered with her neighbours for prayer and supper. It was a story about a woman who met Jesus at a well, where he talked about "living water". She also remembered the story someone told about Jesus touching the man who had been paralyzed for so long.

Then a stream of stories cascaded through her mind, tumbling one into another. She thought about a shepherd and his sheep and a woman and her coin, two women's tears of sorrow and joy before an empty tomb, and a poor widow giving more than all the rich people in the temple. She smiled to herself thinking about that last one.

She had heard about Jesus for the first time only a few months earlier, and now his stories were hers. Word spread about his horrible death, and then, amazingly, about his being alive and about his followers gathering first in Jerusalem and then here and there in other villages. There were stories of Jesus spoken in the temple that were retold in the streets and talked about in the homes of her friends. She began to listen, and what she heard amazed her. And the people who told the stories invited her into their homes. Her!? Into their homes! She could hardly believe it.

Everyone knew that without a husband, she was on her own, destitute. But these people treated her differently. She and her daughters ate with them, receiving more than they could ever repay. And they prayed for her and with her for her daughters.

This unexpected love changed everything in her life. Suddenly she didn't feel abandoned and alone; she felt connected and loved, like her life counted for something...

Then she couldn't get enough of the stories or of her friends, these followers of Jesus.

Whenever and wherever friends gathered to retell the stories, she was there, and then she retold them to her daughters and other neighbours. She loved learning more about Jesus, hearing about God, and building friendships with others. The stories carried her to the well and back each morning and sustained her through the daily task of feeding her family; and with the stories in her heart and friends at her side, the burdens felt lighter and the days more full of life.

Seventeen hundred and fifty years later, in a small cottage in a village an hour's ride from London, a man held his small journal closer to the lamp as he wrote his account of the evening's gathering. It had been a long day. He began working the fields before sunrise and laboured alongside other men from the village until after sunset. But unlike many of the others, his day did not end with his work in the field.

Instead, he washed up as best he could and ate a quick meal so that he could prepare his home, reread the scripture quietly himself, and pray for the spirit's guidance. As a Methodist class leader, he prayed for each person he expected to come, before they arrived. One by

one they began showing up until his home was filled with the welcome and laughter, the blessings and good-natured chatter of a dozen of his friends and brothers and sisters. Their friendship brought warmth beyond what his small stove could provide. These men and women had also spent the day working hard, some in stables and fields and others in shops and kitchens.

When everyone had arrived, he reminded them of Mr. Wesley's rules for classes and about the covenant they had made with each other in order to belong: to attend the public worship of God, including the reading and researching of the Bible and receiving communion, and to commit to private prayer every day. Leaning toward the lamp, he read to them of their promise to watch over the souls of one another, to do good in every way, and to be merciful as far as possible to all people.

Then he led them in singing and prayer, let them all share the week's experiences: joys and sorrows, trials and temptations, and times when they had felt really close to God. They all spoke of their lives and God's grace during the week past. They shared a Bible text that he had prepared, and talked about the thoughts that had come to their minds through reading and reflecting on it. They prayed together, gave a little offering and parted from one another after having said the grace together.

The class leader closed the door behind the last of his visitors and noted the attendance of each member. Then he snuffed the lamp and took his rest. It had been a long day, but he felt grateful beyond words for his life, his faith and his friends. He felt renewed, strengthened, and encouraged. By his work in the fields, he made a living. By this care of souls, he made a life.

Two hundred and fifty years later, a young woman pulls into the church parking lot, just before the session begins. She's running a little late. Like most Tuesdays she is still wearing her suit from work, going through her evening marathon of leaving the office, taking her son to the football club, stopping somewhere for some food and drink and then driving to church. Her son throws the wrappings of his Hamburger into the rubbish bin next to the church door and grabs the bag with his school books. He will work on some homework, while his mother does her "Bible thing", as he calls it.

She slips into a room as prayer just begins. Her best friend welcomes her to sit next to her during this precious hour of Bible study with other believers...

"From the first generation of Christians to the earliest Methodists to the youngest generation of faithful church members today, the followers of Jesus mature in faith by learning together in community." This is how the third chapter in Robert Schnase's book **"Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations"** starts to reflect on the faith development and the deepening of the biblical knowledge of those who want to live a Christian life.

We all know how important it is and how precious it can be to read our Bible. And we all know that discovering biblical texts and characters in a group Bible study can open our eyes and reveal things to us that we alone would have never discovered.

Some of my most interesting sermons have been the outcome of discussions with the women's group on Tuesday morning, or came into shape after a Bible Sharing session on a Thursday night. This is no surprise to me at all!

Bishop Schnase whose book we are preaching on, these Sundays in January and February, writes about Intentional Faith Development, as he calls it: **By offering opportunities for Bible study churches help people to discover God's will for their lives and for the world,**

and bring people together to strengthen the body of Christ by building friendships and relationships. Christian disciples strive to develop faith and grow in Christ-likeness through study and learning. And God is best able to form disciples when people study the Bible together and not by themselves.

And a passage later in chapter 3 of his book, he relates it all to the whole idea of his book, and the chapters that came first: Radical Hospitality and Passionate Worship. Schnase writes: **Christ’s gracious invitation through Radical Hospitality invites and welcomes us, and God’s transforming presence in Passionate Worship opens our hearts to Christ’s pardon, love and grace. It creates in us a desire to follow and learn more. Growing in Christ requires more than weekly worship. It is through Intentional Faith Development, studying and discussing the word of God that God’s spirit works in us, perfects us in the practice of love and lets us grow in the knowledge and love of God.**

And learning in community, Bishop Schnase claims, is exactly the form of learning that Jesus had shown and taught to his disciples. Jesus’ followers grew in their understanding of God and matured in their awareness of God’s will for their lives as they listened to Jesus’ stories, instructions and lessons while gathering around dinner tables, on hillsides, and at the temple. Jesus taught us to learn our faith this way: together with others, and in a long line of tradition of those who lived and believed before us, who live and believe with us now, and who will live and believe way into the future and long after us...

When Luke describes the early church after Jesus’ death, he writes: “...they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42). They started in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, and continued in the home of Mary and Rhoda. Little house groups and fellowships began all over the place and eventually the stories of Jesus and the way his followers lived and believed even after his cruel death made their way into the whole world known then – in Luke’s day.

And if you read this sentence by Luke carefully, you will notice that there is a dual reference to both: to learning and to community.

The apostle Paul follows these early words from Luke, when he encourages the disciples of Christ to learn, grow, teach, and mature. Paul presents faith not as something static, a possession, or an all or nothing proposition, but rather as something we grow into and strive toward. He has these famous words of putting away one’s former way of life and clothing oneself with the new self that we can find when we become Christians. (Eph 4: 22 & 24). And once we have started falling in love with the way Jesus lived and loved and gave himself for people and the world, we seem to seek to get ever closer to this way of life. We would like to bear in us the mind that was in Jesus, allowing God’s spirit to shape our thoughts, our attitudes, our values, our behaviour, our decision-making, our everything... Growing in Christ-likeness is the big goal of those Christians who really mean it! And none of us can achieve this on his or her own. We need friends and soul relatives. We need the community – with all its challenges and enrichments.

The growth in Christ, as Paul also says, is something that does not happen once and for all. It takes a life time. To the Christians in Philippi Paul writes at some point: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own...” (Phil 3:12). In other words: faith moves, grows,

changes, matures. It is dynamic, and therefore John Wesley, one of our great church fathers, called people to practice faith through learning in community, so that we all (with the help and corrective of others) can see God more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly.

Early Christians, first Methodists, Christians of all times and places, you and I are experiencing for ourselves that faith can be learnt best with others.

Bishop Schnase writes about learning with others, about Bible study. Bible study is not just about self-improvement, but about setting ourselves where God can shape us, intentionally opening ourselves to God's word and call. God uses faith-to-faith relationships to change us. ...which means: God uses other people and their faith, their strengths and weaknesses, their doubts and fears, their big questions in life, their strong convictions to shape me and change me. I bet we all have a story to tell here. We all have a story of somebody else's faith making a difference in our life, don't we?

Just try to reflect and remember for a second or so...

When Linda was still here sharing the work at Peace Church with me, it was not just that I had a great and faithful co-worker. No, in her I had a real role model for my faith development, for my life journey and my living out my call between being a pastor, a mother and a wife. Linda being ten odd years older than me, with sons ten odd years older than mine, with her husband kind of ten odd years older than mine, with their marriage being the ten odd years older than ours, Linda with her faith being more mature and more experienced than mine and so on, was a great help to me! She helped me see things, discuss and understand and question them. She helped me to try out different ways, evaluate them and find solutions. She helped me trust in God's plan for me, and put the lives of my children in his hands, pray for them, for myself, for the church and the path we should take... With her and many other dear Christian friends I discovered that my questions, doubts, temptations, and missteps are not unusual at all, but are part of the journey. Such things cannot be learnt apart from a network of relationships. Such things can only be learnt with other Christians.

Robert Schnase writes at one point in his book that living in community keeps us strong... Sharing, having friends, walking paths together really does make us strong. It makes us more courageous and brave than we'd be on our own, don't you agree. Think of a time when it was only through the presence and the encouragement of a friend that you dared to do something that otherwise you would never have done. Think of someone who believed in you more than you did at that time, and helped you stretch to a greatness that you would otherwise not have reached... Can you see what I mean?

I'm sure you do, without my telling too many stories of such encounters.

This is why Jesus sent the disciples out two by two to go to every town and place... (Luke 10:1), Robert Schnase explains.

Can you now see with me the importance of community in the first place, and of studying and learning in community in the second? Meeting as a church family has not only got to do with having a good and fun time together. Meeting as a church family has much to do with making the most of the time we are given together. And that is not meant in terms of pressure, but in terms of receiving a gift: receiving the gift God's offering to us – time

together, people on the same journey, and love that wants to be expressed because it is not our own small portion of it but the great love that God can fill us with, and that he's shown us in Jesus... and that we can always find out more about when we read the Bible, share our impressions and observations and listen to the impressions and observations of others.

Bible study changes churches, Bishop Schnase writes. Yes! I agree. Peace Church has changed since we have been offering more opportunities to study the Bible together. We have all changed since we have started reading the same study books or sharing the same meditations – just as we did in Advent. Hold on a minute and remember. What did it mean to you in Advent that you knew that what you were reading in our handmade Advent book was read by almost every church member and friend on that day, too?

And when we met for an evening meeting, we smiled at each other and say: I so loved what so and so wrote about the crackpot in the desert.

Or I would walk into Reiner's office and ask: have you already read the text for today? Didn't she do a beautiful job? ...and some of the thoughts went with me all day, and actually often made my day! That is a great experience for an individual, but it is even greater when you know that it may have similar meaning to those you share your faith with and whose faith you care about.

Wherever people meet, and read and write and share each other's faith, God will make use of the time and bless those who take seriously the care and nurture of their sisters and brothers in Christ. I hope and pray that we can find many more ways than we already have to help people grow in the knowledge and love of God.

Because, as Robert Schnase writes: **Ideas change people, and people change people; and God uses both together to work on our behalf and to shape our lives in the image of Christ. Transformation comes through learning in community!**

And I believe there is not a single person in this church who could not say "yes" to that.

Ideas change people, and people change people; and God uses both...

Let us allow God to use us and our ideas...

Let us share and let us celebrate!

Amen.