

## Intentional Faith Development©

Deuteronomy 6:1-9; John 15:1-8

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I'd like for you to take a moment to just sit in silence and breathe in the wonderful presence of the Holy Spirit right here among us. Let yourself experience the calm peace that surrounds you as you sit in the midst of the family of God.

Take some deep breaths in. This is the place – a house of prayer – a place where souls and spirits are renewed, refreshed ... where we find grace and comfort. This is where we find that “balm in Gilead.”

And as you breathe out, let it be an intentional releasing of worries and frustrations or anything that is causing you to be irritated. We are here to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Let's take a moment to really focus on that. ***Moment of silence.***

Now, I want you to think as far back as you can to a time when you first knew that you were loved by God, that you are a child of God. How old were you? Where were you? Who was the person or people most instrumental in helping you to know that love and to help you develop your faith? Was it your mother or father? A grandparent?

Did it happen at the dinner table as your family said grace before you ate? Or at bedtime as you said your evening prayers with your mother or father listening and guiding? Or was it a Sunday School teacher, or a pastor? Or maybe a friend? Perhaps you were a teenager, invited to a youth group with a friend? Maybe you were grown and someone invited you to church. I invite you to remember and take a moment to give thanks for those who were instrumental in your faith development. *(Pause)*

Now, while you are still in this quiet, thoughtful space, consider what you do to continue developing your faith. Do you intentionally have a time set aside each day to read a daily devotional, a Scripture, and have a prayer time? Do you do that when you first rise in the morning or before you turn out the light at night?

Do you pause during the day to thank God or to ask for wisdom or help? Do you take a moment to ask a blessing over your meal? Do you make an effort to participate in a Bible Study in a class or with a small group so you are learning and growing with people who hold each other accountable for sticking with the commitment?

The summer before I came here as your pastor, I was on a weeklong personal retreat with Benedictine Sisters in Iowa. What a blessing to find solace and quiet on their farm, to go for long walks, to sit on the screened in porch and to just be in the presence of the One who loves me just as I am.

And to hear the bell ring and come to know that at those times all the sisters were leaving what they were doing and were going to chapel where they sang the Psalms and

prayed. I was welcome to attend any of those pauses – there were seven of them – and I did go to one or two a day.

I never made it to the Night Watch at 3 or 4 in the morning, nor did I go to the one after dark, called “compline” (which is a Latin word for “complete.” But I’ve wished that I would have because I think there is something valuable in answering that call to rise out of your comfort to go intentionally to that place of prayer.

Macrina Wiederkehr, writes in her book, ***Seven Sacred Pauses***: “Compline begins with an invitation to be vigilant and strong in faith. We are to be ever watchful so that the enemies of the soul will not find us careless and unaware.

Listening to this plea for vigilance, we apply it to our personal lives. The enemies of the soul are all around us. Who among us is not acquainted with these undesired guests that visit us on a daily basis: apathy, indifference, self-righteousness, greed, control, selfishness, lust, resentments, bitterness ... only you can finish the list. Most of us are quite familiar with those things that detain us on our day’s journey.

Assistance for our spiritual and human growth is also available. As we become more faithful in pausing for reflection, these spiritual resources will reveal themselves to us.”<sup>1</sup>

And that is where we, the Church, enter in to this important subject today. This week, you have, hopefully, been reading your daily devotions from ***Cultivating Fruitfulness***. Intentional Faith Development is the 3<sup>rd</sup> thing that Robert Schnase says that vital, fruitful congregations practice.

We read from his book, and even more importantly, from the Bible, that it is absolutely essential that we stay close to Jesus, that we study and learn from him, that we remain in communion with Jesus – having the same mind as him; that is, thinking like him and imitating his characteristics.

Jesus said “Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can’t bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can’t bear fruit unless you are joined with me.”

The word *fruitful* – means (from the dictionary) to be productive, fertile, successful, rich, abundant ... so what does a fruitful congregation look like?

We are fruitful if we are growing – if our faith becomes stronger and more mature. As it does, we begin to exhibit those 9 fruits of the Spirit that Paul said we believers should have: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-

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<sup>1</sup> Macrina Wiederkehr, *Seven Sacred Pauses: Living Mindfully Through the Hours of the Day*, Sorin Books, 2008, p. 157-158

control! (Those are the opposites of the enemies of the soul that Wiederkehr wrote about!)

And as those fruits become evident and are naturally practiced, those seeds are spread and other fruits grow – other people want to be with us and learn what we have to offer, and they too begin to grow and spread. Like an orchard, fruit trees - laden with fruit - start growing all over the place!

My Old Testament professor, Dr. Elizabeth Platt, told a parable once that went something like this: “Imagine that you and your sweetheart go on a picnic in a lovely place. You sit on the blanket and talk and smile at one another and dream of your future life together.

You eat your delicious lunch and finish it off with a nice, juicy peach. And when you have eaten it all, you see who can throw your peach seed the furthest. On that romantic day, in that very special place, you become engaged to be married.

And you leave, taking the memory of that place and your wonderful day with you. You get married, have children, raise your family, and you grow old. And then your grandchildren want to know about how you first became engaged. What were you doing? Where were you at the time?

So, you pack a picnic lunch and you have them drive you to that old spot that, for some reason, you had never gone back to. But when you arrive, you were amazed!

At first, you aren't really sure it is the right place. Yet, there are all the markers. You knew your memory wasn't that far gone! But over in the near distance there were all these trees! An orchard, full of peach trees! Lots and lots of peach trees! And it causes you to remember the peaches you ate on your picnic so long ago and the contest to see how far you could throw the seeds.

Could it be?”

Dr. Platt called that story a “Peach Tree Theology.” You scatter the seeds and if the soil is fertile, they grow and spread out. But that is important – the soil being fertile. And the soil – the congregation in our case – is fertile when the people study and pray and listen to what the Spirit is saying.

I have been impressed with the fertile soil of our young people, here at Holly Presbyterian Church. The Christian Education program, the things you've provided and taught, has caused them to be so fertile, so ready to produce the fruits of the Spirit.

I have been pleased to see the spiritual depth of many of you in this congregation – your eagerness to learn and grow; your willingness to serve as a leader, to lead people in

prayer, your compassion, and your concern for others demonstrates that you are a fertile, fruitful congregation already!

Yet, as mature as we might be, there is always room for new ideas and new ways of learning and doing things.

Robert Schnase, the author of our study, *The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* writes: “Churches that practice Intentional Faith Development know that maturation in Christ is always about content and relationship. 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.”<sup>2</sup>

Schnase talks about considering every person in the congregation. How can we be more intentional about providing ways to continue with faith development and growth at every age and turn of life?

Creating small groups where people meet together, either in the church, or a home, or even a café, is meeting the needs of many people these days.

Churches that have small group ministries are growing. People love to have a small group of close friends in Christ whom they trust and have deep bonds with.

Going outside of the walls of the church, taking the 9 fruits of the Spirit and spreading those seeds in other places is a very effective way of helping others in natural settings to grow in their faith.

It is always important to provide the highest quality of Christian education that we possibly can for our children, youth and adults who are here in this place every week. But churches today who are growing are reaching outside the box of what is typical. Instead of staying inside the walls of the church building, they are taking the church out to the people who for whatever reason, are not able to come in.

As Wiederkehr said, “Assistance for our spiritual and human growth is available.” We are the assistance to many. We are the resource for others to find spiritual strength and growth. It is what the church is charged with – to be a place of renewal for our own souls – and to be seed planters for the spiritual growth of others.

If you have not been practicing a life of prayer and meditation, of study and reflection – isn’t it time to start? There are so many different things to read that are short, daily reflections. There are journals to write your prayers or thoughts in.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Abingdon Press, 2007, p. 77

There are guides for reading the Scriptures and we Presbyterians have a great little book called, “Daily Prayer” with Scriptures and prayers for different times of the day, for mealtime, for special times in the season.

I would love to help anyone who is interested in getting started with these spiritual practices. We, the congregation, must abide in Christ, must keep ourselves connected to him so that we can be fruit-bearers to those who are searching for spiritual food.

Someday, someone else might be asked, “who helped you to first know God loves you; who helped your faith to grow?” You never know who might say your name as the answer to that question.

Intentional Faith Development is a vital practice for us individually and together as a congregation who clings to the vine – to Jesus our Savior.

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