

Growing Deeper; Growing Stronger

John 15:1-8

1) A principal of a Catholic high school received a call from an inmate in a nearby prison. The man was known to be wealthy, but had acquired his wealth by fraudulent means. Now the man was offering to make a significant donation to the school. In return for this donation, the inmate wanted the high school to make it possible for his adult son, a high school drop out, to receive a high school diploma.

As the principal inquired further, it became apparent that the inmate did not want the son to have to do anything to earn the diploma. He simply wanted the son to be sent a diploma. The principal was flabbergasted. "Why," she asked the inmate, "did he care so much that his son, now in business for himself, receive his diploma?" "Because education is important," replied the inmate.

a. The story is humorous and tragic at the same time. Education is a process, not a piece of paper. Education is a lifelong adventure, not something to be checked off the list as accomplished. A diploma, especially one received fraudulently, doesn't mean you are educated any more than –

- Getting a few speeding tickets makes you a NASCAR driver.

b. Faith is similar. Faith is not simply something inherited from our ancestors, like fine china. Nor can faith be bought in a onetime transaction. Faith is developing a relationship of trust with the living God. Like all relationships, faith needs to be cultivated with time, attention, and effort. Yet, many folk expect that their faith will pop full-blown out of a box with no effort on their part at all.

2) We are focusing this morning on Intentional Faith Development – the 3rd practice of fruitful congregations. This is a spiritual practice. It is the way by which we appropriate God's grace, fully receive God's gift to become all that He wants us to be, and whereby we enter into the life God has always wanted for us.

Intentional faith development is –

- Intentional in that we are on a road, a path.
- Faith because it is not obvious. It is something we cannot see, but we know it is real.
- Development in that we need to take the gift we have been given and exercise it, sharpen it, and make it stronger.

3) This idea of intentional faith development is why there is a Methodist Church today. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was one of the field preachers of 18th century England. Wesley and some other men were called field preachers because they left the pulpits of the church buildings and went to where the people were – the entrance to a coal mine, or a brick factory. There they preached to the people, and many came to the Christian faith as a result of the spiritual awakening that swept across England.

There was another great field preacher that some say was even more effective than Wesley. His name was George Whitfield. It is said that he was more eloquent, more forceful, and brought more people to Christ than did Wesley. Whitfield preached extensively on both sides of the ocean. He preached before royalty, and it was reported that Benjamin Franklin went to hear Whitfield when he preached in Philadelphia.

There was, however, a main difference between the way Wesley went about his ministry, and the way Whitfield did. Whitfield preached and went on to the next place. He very seldom ever returned to a place where he had preached before. Wesley preached and then organized his converts into small groups so their faith could grow, and he would return periodically to check up on the new converts in the groups.

Whitfield, when he died, said, “Where are my converts?” But, Wesley’s method of organizing his followers into classes and societies is the reason there is a Methodist church today. There were actually more conversions in the small groups than there were from field preaching, and the Methodist movement grew even faster after Wesley died, because of the classes and societies.

4) Some folk have speculated as to where Wesley came up with this method, and have suggested he had a gift for organization that he inherited from his mother – Susannah. That may well be, but I think it more probable that he was just continuing the practice that Jesus pursued.

a. Jesus first saw the value in small groups. How many disciples did he choose? 12,000? 1,200? No, just 12! Jesus wanted to begin with a small group of people who would put roots down in His teaching and make it the center of their lives. He knew that people grow best in small intentional spiritual growth groups.

b. Jesus plainly said to His disciples –

"I am the vine, and you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me." (John 15:5)

And, He gave them a clear picture of what is expected if we are to be His disciples.

"My Father's glory is shown by your bearing much fruit; and in this way you become my disciples." (John 15:8)

5) The early church continued the practice of intentional faith development. Acts 2 gives us a picture of that early church, which had just come together after the Holy Spirit descended on the Day of Pentecost and Peter preached to the crowds adding over 3,000 to the church in one day. Following that experience we are told:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."
(Acts 2:42)

Notice what these early followers were doing – devoting themselves to the teachings. They were a community growing together in their faith.

What does all of this teach us?

6) First, a maturing faith happens in **community**. It takes place not just by reading books or studying the Word of God. It becomes real in our lives as we love and give and receive from others. Jesus said,

"Where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20)

a. You see athletes alone on a balance beam, or in a swimming lane, or on the diving board, but they are always surrounded by mentors and coaches and teammates, by parents and brothers and sisters, by encouragers of all kinds.

- Yes, you might read the Bible on your own, in a given year, but it is more likely that you will do it if you are in a small group.
- Yes, you might pray, on a regular basis on your own, but it is more likely that you will do it if you know others are praying with you.
- Yes, you might worship God alone on a weekly basis, but it is more likely that you will do it if you are joining together with others.

b. Learning in community provides accountability for our spiritual growth. Covenanting together keeps us strong in our convictions and habits. That's why Jesus sent the disciples out two by two. In pairs the disciples could build each other up for the task; pray for one another; and support one another.

c. As parents we tend to follow our children and their activities. And yet it is also true that children follow their parents, and value what their parents value.

- If a child sees his father praying, he will pray.
- If a child sees her mother reading the Bible, she will read the Bible.

Intentional Faith Development happens best in community with others.

7) Also, growing in Christ is **not a onetime event** – it is not something that can happen one hour a week. It takes a lifetime. Paul writes:

"Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:12-14)

a. In American culture we are inclined toward instant gratification. But, intentional faith development is a lifelong process. It takes time.

- If children will attend Sunday School on a regular basis, they will be exposed to the major stories of the Bible, from Moses being placed in the water to Jesus being raised from the dead at Easter. If children will sing in choirs, they will learn to praise God, to use their gifts, and to become leaders in worship.
- When youth participate in confirmation, and then youth fellowship and youth retreats and youth mission trips – something happens – faith develops.

b. And what is true for children and youth is just as essential for adults. But it does not happen in an instant. It is a process, and it is all about showing up in Sunday School, or at Bible Study, or a worship service, week after week. 90% of life is showing up. Intentional faith development is a process. It is not instantaneous.

c. Let me say this as honestly and plainly as I can. The only reason there is for becoming a member of the church is that you have made a basic policy decision to live your life for God who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus the Christ, and you believe you have found a group of people that you would enjoy growing in that relationship with God together.

8) So, here is the invitation. I am not standing before you this morning pitching a program. I am asking that you take the practice of intentional faith development very seriously. How that happens is a conversation between you and the Lord. But, if every person in our congregation takes one step forward in this area, the effect within our congregation would be astounding. Call it whatever you desire – call it discipleship, or the pursuit of holiness, or the invitation to follow Jesus, or the desire to become the person God created you to be.

If you watched any of the Winter Olympics, you realize that those athletes were compelled to pursue their dreams by an inner fire. Our lifelong calling is to become more like Christ, to be the light of the world. This happens as we are changed from the inside out.

We have been given a gift – the gift of salvation. What do we do with it? We claim it and live into it, by faith. Intentional Faith Development will not happen by accident, but it can happen.

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2)