

**FRUITFUL LIVING:
INTENTIONAL FAITH DEVELOPMENT**

Text: Philippians 3:12-16
Hebrews 10:23-25
LHUMC 10/21/12

I. Introduction

A. I've been saying that in Bishop Schnase's book that the adjectives are everything

1. We get these five practices of fruitful living, and the practices themselves seem fairly obvious—so far it's been hospitality, worship, and now today faith development.
2. And those seem to be things that I think we all try to do and be most of the time. If not, we wouldn't be here this morning.
3. And I've been saying that it's his adjectives that make all of this so challenging, that take fruitfulness to a new level.
4. And so at first glance, of all the adjectives he uses, today's seems fairly innocent. "Intentional" seems like a pretty innocuous word.

B. But as I read the chapter and pondered it, and looked at my own life, even in this role as pastor, I'm beginning to understand that maybe being intentional about developing my faith hasn't always been an obvious and easy as it may seem.

II. In that spirit, let me share a couple of images that came to my mind this week from the chapter and the scriptures that we heard today. The first image is what intentional faith development isn't like.

A. And it comes from another book that the VCI team is reading that refers to our Five Practices Book where that author uses a term—"osmosis" Which brought to my mind what we used to call "learning by osmosis". Have you heard that phrase?

1. Back in college, usually toward the end of the semester, when we were wondering if we'd ever get everything done and be ready for finals, we'd joke that it was time for a little "learning by osmosis".
2. "Osmosis" being a biological term that basically is when a fluid passes through a membrane to something on the other side.
3. For us, learning by osmosis meant that the night before the final exam, you'd put your textbook and maybe your notebook under your pillow and hope that some of what was in them would pass through to your brain. (Today, you'd probably put your laptop or I-

pad under your pillow). And sometimes, when you got really desperate, you did it only partly as a joke.

4. As I've read the chapter, it's pretty clear that we can't develop our faith by osmosis—we can't surround ourselves with our Christian friends, we can't put a Bible under our pillow, and I would also say we can't just go to church on Sunday morning alone and expect to kind of “soak it all in” and expect that that's all we need to grow in our faith and the level to which we really know God.
5. As our founder John Wesley would say (and I'm going to use a lot of Wesley today, because he could have written this chapter today), God offers us the gifts of grace and forgiveness and knowledge and faith, but it's up to us to consciously and intentionally reach out and take hold of them and do something with them. John Wesley was all about intentional faith development.

B. The second image comes from the lesson on Philippians that we heard, and it is the image of running a marathon.

1. In Philippians and in the chapter of our book, it is clear that this whole faith development thing is an ongoing race—where it is the slow and steady ones, the ones who realize that we never fully reach the finish line in this life at least, are the ones who get it.
2. It is the ones who know that progressing even just a little each day is what it means to truly be intentional.
3. What I've experienced in my own life and as I talk to others is that once again, here in worship is a great place to grow and to move ahead in the race, but if that's all we do, it's a little like jogging once a week—certainly not a bad thing to do, certainly better than nothing if we're trying to get in shape. But those who truly are in shape, who are truly growing, who are really running the race with real intentionality are those who do it every day—even just a little.

III. So if those images help a little with today's adjective, with understanding what Bishop Schnase means by being “intentional”, what about the second part of the practice—faith development? That is a loaded term, and as I read the chapter, it was clear that he meant a lot more than simply growing in our faith meaning just strengthening our belief and trust in God so that we're better equipped at handling what life throws at us. That's part of it, but not all of it.

A. What helped me understand a more all-encompassing definition of “faith development” was to read Philippians a little further.

1. If you read a few verses ahead of today's passage where Paul talks about how growing in faith is like running a really long race, in Philippians 3:10 he says why he runs the race—he says “all I want is to know Christ”.
2. “Know” being the key word. And you may be aware that to “know” someone in the Bible is always a deeper experience than what we think of when we “know” someone.
3. In the Bible, to know someone doesn't just mean to know all about them, it is to be in union with them, to be on the same wavelength with them.
4. Paul is clear that this kind of “knowing” only comes at the end of a long race.
5. Our book puts it like this—“The fruit of intentional faith development is not merely to know more **about** God, but to know God, to see through the idea of God to God himself... Knowing God, with time, mysteriously causes us to be a different kind of person, with more depth, peace, and courage. We become more hopeful, more thankful, less reactive, gentler, more patient, more resilient, less angry, better able to relate... knowing God changes us from the inside out.”
6. In other words, when we are intentional about knowing God more in our lives, our lives become more fruitful in all of those ways that he lists there.

IV. So if that's what intentional-faith-development is, how do we get there? What does it take?

- A. Bishop Schnase's major point is that we can't do it alone. Just like it's hard to train and run a marathon without a support system alongside of us, so it is to grow in our knowing of God.
- B. So it has to be done in community, and preferably in small communities. You could call them small groups.
- C. So let's talk small groups for a minute.
- D. And you may be aware that there is no more appropriate place to talk about the value of small groups as places where intentional faith development happens than in a United Methodist Church.
 1. As the book explains, we wouldn't be here today in this place if John Wesley hadn't had the vision for forming some small learning and accountability groups within the Church of England.
 2. For him, it was all about “sanctification”, the term he used for growing more saintly as we grow together in our faith.

3. And he knew that it was in small groups of believers where that was more likely to happen.
 4. And what is really interesting is that if John Wesley had had his way, Methodism would have stayed a small group movement.
 5. It wasn't until Methodism came to this country in the late 1700's that it became the denomination it is today. And his letters of the time that he sent to those Methodists here in this country make it clear that he wasn't wild about the idea of his Methodist movement becoming a denomination.
- E. Our book says that when we gather in small groups, whether they be specifically Bible studies, or interest groups, or accountability groups, whether they be long-term or short-term, what we get from them are (six things):
1. Perspective—as we hear of other people's views and experiences, it gives us a more universal perspective of God and ourselves.
 2. Spiritual Awareness—As we study God and God's word with others, we can't help but start to see and know God in new places and situations.
 3. Spiritual Sustenance—It's simple—he says that “belonging to a learning faith community provides companionship that sustains us through difficult experiences.” To be able to share our struggles with people who know us and love us, people that we trust, is a powerful thing.
 4. Moral Resolve—He says our small communities can save us from ourselves. You can also call it “accountability”. We all need people around us who help us make the right choices.
 5. Spiritual Encouragement—You ever need some encouragement? We all need it! And who better to build us up than a group of people who know us and have seen and experienced God's gifts in us that we may not see ourselves.
 6. Mutual Care—He says that in small groups we “learn what it's like to be genuinely prayed for” and the power to have others who can help us bear our burdens in very real ways.
- F. Watch this little video about the power of small groups (and this is where the chairs come in again.)
1. Do you have a small group story? Some group here or elsewhere where you were this person and you experienced something that changed you, that brought you closer to God? Having been a part of a number of small groups, I've experienced a lot of your stories, and I have my own stories from every group I've been a part of.

And there are plenty of opportunities for all of us already here at Lake Harbor and we are looking forward to adding more (green posterboard)

2. The one addition I would make to their circle of chairs would be to put our God chair in the middle—for every small group I've been a part of here has very clearly had God in the middle as the focus of all that is done.

V. Finally he talks about why we resist these opportunities to intentionally grow in our faith.

A. He says that sometimes we feel inadequate—that we don't know enough about God or the Bible or whatever to become a part of a group.

1. Let me speak from personal experience on this one as one who has been a part of and led countless Bible studies over the years.
2. There has never been an occasion or a class in which I haven't learned as much if not more than I have taught.
3. And I typically learn as much if not more from the beginners—they tend to bring a fresh insight and fresh questions and fresh answers to whatever it is we are talking about. I love being around Biblical newbies, because they always force me to re-examine what I believe.
4. And remember—if you ever are going to run the marathon, you've got to begin the race sometime!

B. Also, there are times when we worry that we won't know anyone in the group.

1. And that's where the responsibility falls on us who are already a part of groups to invite people we know to join us.
2. Because that way, that new person will know at least one in the group, and that makes a huge difference.

C. And then the third reason we give is that it's hard to find time to be a part of a group.

1. I can help you with that one—some of the best small groups we have here are our Sunday School classes.
2. And they meet today!
3. And you are already here!
4. How easy is that!
5. As Bishop Schnase says, “no one ever finds time, they make time.” In other words, it's all about priorities.
6. And as for priorities, I can't think of any priority that's more important than growing in our faith.

7. Because if you begin to bear more fruit in that area of your life, as you become more intentional in the development of your faith and in your knowing of God, it's amazing how you begin to bear more fruit in all the other areas of life.

VI. Conclusion

- A. So the call is to be more intentional so that we are more fruitful.
- B. To mix the metaphors that I began with, to do that, we have to take the Bible out from under our pillow and run the race—not by ourselves, but in community, especially in small communities.
- C. It's about stretching ourselves and each other, challenging ourselves and each other, and through all of that, growing in our knowing—not about God, but truly knowing God in all of his grace and glory.
- D. It's about supporting and loving and praying for each other so that together we grow more fruitful.
- E. So I hope that each of us will find new ways and places and groups in which we find ourselves in the red chair, surrounded by other people who know and love God, and who know and love us as we run the race together.