

Five Fruitful Practices: Intentional Faith Development

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We have been tracking the ways in which people sense the presence of God in their lives and find themselves in touch with God's spirit. This happens in different ways in each person's life certainly, but we have much in common. We can categorize much of these experiences into these five fruitful practices spoken of in Bishop Schnase's book by the same title. It also applies to churches. Churches that are well rounded and serving Christ and community are doing well in all five of these areas of ministry. And remember, the church is made up of people. The church can't be doing well in the area of hospitality if we as people are not hospitable...if we are not opening ourselves to welcoming new people and accepting people into the family of God regardless of where they are from or what they have or how they look. We can not as a church have passionate worship if we as individuals do not open ourselves to the overflowing passion of God who loves with an everlasting and overwhelming love that knows no limit nor end...and expresses itself in so many different cultures and peoples and expressions...who's artistic embodiment is as varied and beautiful as the flowers of the field and vibrant as the colors of a sunset! We can not contain the spirit of the living God who stirs within us the creative force of the passionate heart and creating mind of God who makes all things new. Worship is not one thing forever, but is always growing and changing and becoming new...expressing the heart of Christ within our hearts as we grow in faith and experience and understanding.

And today we come to being intentional about our faith development. We must begin by proclaiming that we are made in the image of God...to create and to be inquisitive and to grow and learn. The human mind and our free will is one of God's greatest gifts. But we are also made to be part of a community. We must acknowledge that we are made for each other...for community and family. it is difficult to live

alone, and more and more people are doing so. There is nothing wrong with this, and doing so does not mean you are less of a person or that something is wrong with you. Some 30% of adults are unmarried and live alone. But many in this category wish to be with someone...thus the great success of such sites like match.com and E-Harmony.com and others. People who are living alone meet their need for community in other places and ways...work, church, groups, clubs, etc. We know we need people. Without interaction and human touch, infants fail to thrive and don't grow and are in danger of death. But if someone holds them, touches them and talks to them, they put on weight and begin to thrive. We are made for each other. It is part of our make up.

We are not solitary creatures, but communal in our nature, and we are also made to be with God. We are by nature religious beings. As was said by St. Augustine, "my soul does not rest until it finds its rest in thee..." Or the Philosopher Aquinas, "there is within each person a God shaped vacuum that they are always seeking to fill."

We are made for God. We seek to fill that gap, that vacuum with all kinds of things...with work, with fame, with drugs, with other people, but ultimately all these disappoint. And we need to be intentional about our growing in our faith. It is important to note that our faith is not knowledge ABOUT God as much as experience WITH God. Remember, God seeks to connect with each of us personally, heart, mind and spirit... God is not passive in this process. God is not hiding somewhere in heaven, waiting for us to discover Him. Nor is there some secret knowledge in the Bible that will reveal God to us if we just study it enough. God has made himself known to us in the person of Jesus Christ...for the whole world to see. The Bible is the written revelation of that story. It contains the word of God, but Jesus is the word of God become flesh. God wants us to understand, and God seeks to meet us as we seek Him. God comes to be among us...as we worship and when we pray and as we seek to follow him.

The intentional faith development is really about both learning and following. Our goal is not to know a lot about God and the Bible, but to be a disciple. To be a disciple means to follow Jesus...to walk with him, or to follow after him. To listen to his Spirit and to seek to live as he calls us to live. A few years ago, there were bracelets and tee shirts and the like that asked the question: WHAT WOULD JESUS DO? The question was not new. It was central to a book a generation ago entitled "in his steps" that encouraged Christians to active discipleship by asking the question "what would Jesus do" in this or that circumstance and then seeking to live as Jesus would in modern situations.

Our faith development is about knowing the Bible, but also about following Christ. Sometimes the second is more important than the first. sometimes we can not understand the Bible until we are willing to surrender to it. We must be willing to submit to God before we can understand it all...if at all. We are not to surrender our intellect, far from it.

But at the same time, we don't get to decide who God is or what God does or what God is like.

Who are we to do that? I have heard people say "I can't believe in a God like this or that" I am tempted to ask them "who are you to decide what God is like...who made you God...in all our cosmic understanding and unlimited wisdom, in your eternal perspective and all loving and all knowing understanding you can decide this how?..." But I hold my tongue. But God doesn't. In several of the Old Testament prophets he challenges this type of thinking head on "Isaiah 40: Who will give me advice ask God or instruct me in the way to Go, ask God..." Where were you when I laid the foundations of the universe or set the galaxies spinning or made the cosmos dance to its own music?" can you direct my path?"

Although we may not understand and may even object, to something say Jesus said, we should at least do a thorough research on it: in context here, in relations to all of Jesus' teachings on this subject and all of his sayings generally...then all of the Gospels, all of the New Testament, the whole Bible, the teaching of the early church as those closest to Jesus...what did they understand it to mean? What do scholars say about it? what do the various scholars say about it? what do various schools of Christian thought say about it and how important is it in the scope of all Jesus thought and did?

Our objections are often excuses for intellectual laziness...and a reason for dismissing a faith that would otherwise challenge the very foundations of our philosophical systems. For many I have talked to, theirs is a straw dog theological objection that helps them justify their rejection...they create a straw dog...not a real one and then tear it apart. If you point out that their suppositions about the faith are not correct, they have somewhere else to be and have to run! They don't want to talk about it...don't confuse me with the truth, my mind is made up.

And remember, now we see in part, we know in part and we understand in part...as though we are looking through a mirror dimly...as though we are looking in one of those terrible mirrors in the porti-pottys in the state campgrounds!

Now we are like a 5 year old who objects to the rules laid down by our parents. They are mean and arbitrary and we can't accept them or understand them.

Remember, God has demonstrated his great love for us and he asks us to trust him...even when we don't understand what is happening right now. That does not mean we have to like it. we still struggle. But it means we don't quit. We and know that someday we will see clearly...through the crystal clear glass...we will know fully and

completely even as we have been completely and fully known all these years.

Our faith is a journey and we must be intentional about walking it. Elton Trueblood said “faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservation.” (www.brainyquotes.com). We are intentional about trusting God and intentional about being part of a fellowship of believers.

That means being part of a worshipping community. We must be careful to not forsake being together...and as St. Paul says, shipwrecking our faith. Without being together, folks lose their way and run aground or run afoul of the rocks and wreck. We need one another.

Being in worship lifts us up and strengthens our faith and helps us grow deeper in our faith. But I want to challenge you to go deeper. Open up. Have the courage to share the journey with someone...or with everyone. Ask someone to be your prayer partner and to pray with you as you pray for them. Share your joys and concerns with each other. Befriend each other. Support one another. share your concerns as we pray together. Let us pray for you...let us be the body for you.

And we are intentional about growing in our faith. About taking time to learn and to grow in our understanding. To step out in faith. Where and how this is, only you can know. But there comes a time, a moment when we follow Christ when we are open the Bible and when we pray when we sense a call to something greater, something beyond ourselves...when we feel like we are challenged or called to serve in some small way...sometimes the call comes through other people encouraging us, sometimes it is in our own souls...sometimes we are pushed but however it comes we sense we are supposed to do something...

Perhaps it is talking to our neighbor, helping a friend, volunteering for a program, starting a ministry, helping with kids, calling an estranged family member, making peace at work, working with youth, singing, or something I can't even imagine...remember, God can't help you until you try.

To be a disciple is the goal of the Christian life. A believe is not just to think something is true, but to trust Christ and to follow him and to live in communion with Him...to follow the leading of his Spirit daily...day by day.

Day by day, Day by Day, O sweet Lord, three things I pray....
To see thee more clearly, to love thee more dearly, to follow thee more nearly....day by day....

To be a disciple is to be intentional about our faith development. Day by Day.