Intentional Faith Development

Colossians 1:1-10

This morning is week four in our series on the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. The first week we talked about Radical Hospitality and in week two we explored Passionate Worship. In week three, we affirmed West Richmond's congregation's commitment to Extravagant Generosity. This morning we are diving into Intentional Faith Development.

Think with for a minute about your own faith development. Where did it occur? Was it in Sunday School as a child? In youth group or at weeks at Camp Bethel or other similar retreat centers? When you think about these times, does an image of a beloved Sunday School teacher, youth leader, or camp counselor come to mind? Or did most of your faith formation occur in worship on Sunday mornings under the preaching and teaching of a trusted pastor? How did these experiences shape who you are as a Christ follower today? In turn, did you become a Sunday School teacher, youth leader,

or camp counselor? Did your faith formation lead to other acts of service?

Reflecting on our own experiences illustrates why intentional faith development is so important, and we see the importance of faith development reflected in the experiences of the earliest churches as well. Our Scripture reading that Ann read for us a few moments ago illustrates this. Like most of the New Testament letters, the letter to the Colossian church was written to address some problems in this young, developing church. But before the author starts correcting his mentees, he begins with words of affirmation and encouragement. He begins by reminding them that they are prayed for regularly – what an encouragement – and he affirms them: we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven." He affirms that faithful churches grow in the knowledge of Christ that they have received.

In our day, intentional faith development - growing in the knowledge of Christ and God's will for

us, requires creativity, just like I imagine it did in Paul's day. And it requires more than an hour in worship and an hour in Sunday school on Sunday morning to transform us from new believers or casual church goers into faithful and devoted followers of Christ. Deeply rooted and formed disciples are key to our identity here at WRCOB. I keep pointing us back to our mission statement - Continuing the work of Jesus, simply, peacefully, together. In our crazy world today, we need faithful and devoted followers of Christ to carry out God's mission.

As we think about the practice of intentional faith formation this morning, I want to acknowledge how difficult this is in congregations everywhere right now. As with every other area of church life, COVID has accelerated some discouraging trends. (PAUSE) Folks who are older, life- long members of here at West Richmond, think back to the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's. If someone asked you to describe an "active" church member at that time, what would you say? In the Baptist world where I spent those years, an active church member was someone who attended Sunday School and

worship on Sunday mornings, training union (which is what we called faith formation) and a second worship service on Sunday evenings, then supper and prayer meeting (which included a bible study or devotion) or youth group on Wednesday night. If you were an active church member, you only missed any of these activities if you were sick or out of town.

Today, most folks who consider themselves active church members define what "active" means very differently. Now they'll say, "I'm an active church member, I attend Sunday morning worship once a month." I have said this before, but it bears repeating, ask any Sunday School teacher, pastor or minister of education, and they will tell you how hard it is to do any type of intentional faith development with children or adults when you only see them once a month. Public school teachers, imagine if you only saw your students 2 out of every 8 or 10 days, and you never knew which ones were going to show up at any given time. As with every other of church life right now, intentional faith

development requires creativity and adaptability. (PAUSE)

It may seem obvious, but intentional faith development is best done in community. Why? First of all, this is how Jesus taught. We don't hear about private tutoring session with each of the disciples, do we? No, Jesus gathered a diverse band of seeming misfits with differing beliefs and perspectives, and he taught them together in community. Jesus also modeled teaching in community, because this is where we can learn and discover God's presence in others. How many times have you had a new insight or learned something from someone else you studied with or served alongside?

Learning in community also provides us with a network of support, encouragement and direction. In community we learn that our doubts, our questions, our temptations and our missteps are not unusual, but a normal part of an authentic faith journey. In community we find empathy and accountability. Both are necessary because growing in and practicing our faith is too

demanding to do alone. We need support and community.[i] (PAUSE)

If you've been here the last few weeks, you won't be surprised to hear that churches that are the most fruitful in faith development offer people opportunities to grow and deepen their faith both inside the church and out in the community. We offer some good opportunities for faith development here – through Sunday School and the Virlina district online Bible studies. Ideally faith formation also occurs when the choir gathers to rehearse, when committees meet, when service teams gather to work and serve – as we share devotionals and pray for one another. All of these times are important, but they only take us so far. They only work for people who can be here on Sunday mornings – when many people work or in the evenings - when young families are busy working on homework, baths, and bedtimes, or for those who have the freedom to volunteer during the day or on trips.

To help bridge this gap, some churches are offering Bible study and prayer time in small groups that

gather in homes at a variety of times during the week. Often they will share a potluck meal and pitch in to hire a young person to supervise the children. One group of young moms meets every week by zoom at 9:00 p.m. when their children are settled for the night. One church hosts college aged Bible study at 10:00 p.m. on Sunday nights when the students are back in town from the weekend. The students decided this was the ideal time to reconnect and prepare for the week ahead. It is important to note, however, that the leaders tried six different meeting times before they finally landed on this one. There is trail and error along the way as we try new things. (PAUSE)

Opportunities abound outside of our doors as well. Many faith leaders are hosting Beer and Theology nights at local pubs where they talk about what the Bible has to say about hard issues – and they are reaching people who would never consider coming to church at 11:00 on Sunday morning. One campus minister hosts a regular, "Ask me Anything Night," where students can literally talk about anything on their minds. This is as important

for us inside the church as it is out there. Again the rules have changed. For decades, what three things did you never talk about in public, much less in church? Money, sex and politics, right? We still have to be very careful talking about politics, and we must talk about issues around sexuality with great sensitivity and respect. But do you know what people say when the church ignores the pressing issues of our day? They think that the church, or God or the Scripture doesn't have anything meaningful or relevant to say on the topics, yet we know that nothing could be further from the truth. We won't all agree on many of these topics, but church, of all places, should be a safe space to talk about hard things. (PAUSE)

One important area of intentional faith development that churches everywhere need to be focusing on is the development of young leaders. I'm going to ask you to do something. If you recently or currently serve on one of the committees or teams here at West Richmond, if you teach Sunday School or lead one of our service or community outreach events or serve in

any other way, would you please stand? Now, if you are age forty or under, I'm going to ask you to remain standing and have everyone else sit back down. Friends, if we want WRCOB to continue to thrive and to continue to fulfill our mission, we must continue to welcome, train and empower the next generation of leaders. Let's pray that our new initiative focused on reaching the younger generations will do just this. (PAUSE)

There is another important thing that we see in our Scripture text today. Intentional faith development is not only an end in itself. Hear that again. Intentional faith development is not only an end in itself. In his letter, Paul continues, "the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace." Intentional faith development should lead to a deeper desire to serve God and one's neighbor. One men's faith formation group took this admonition to heart. They decided to meet at the church on the same night that local boys gathered to play basketball. In addition to doing their own faith formation

work, they intentionally wanted to reach out to and mentor the young men on the basketball court. It's both/and. (PAUSE)

I hope that you are beginning to see how these five habits of fruitful congregations are interrelated and build upon one another. We welcome people into our family of faith through radical hospitality, we join in community for passionate worship and intentional faith development. As transformed people we engage in extravagant generosity and in risk-taking mission and service (which we'll talk about next week). Or, as we talked about a few weeks ago, we hope and pray that as our neighbors engage with us in service projects, they choose to become part of our family of faith, and then they grow in their faith in community.

So this morning, may our prayer echo Paul's," We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,[e] **10** so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, **11** being

strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, **12** and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you[f] to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. **13** For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." And all God's people said, Amen.

[i] Five Habits of Fruitful Congregations, p. 77-81