"Being the Church: Fruitful Faith Development"

John 15:1-8

Sermon Series on Robert Schnase's
Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations

Sunday, June 9, 2013
Rev. Stephanie Swanson
First Baptist Smithville Pulpit

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Do you have any of those "how to" books on your shelves at home? Or perhaps one of those "(insert a subject) for dummies" books? You know like "Plumbing for Dummies" or "Math for Dummies." The "For Dummies" series started out as being a reference tool for computer programs back in 1991, but over the last 20 years it's branched out to include quite an array of topics. Between books such as these, websites, and even better the "how to" videos online, you can learn about any number of topics and in many cases, discover how to make or do something all on your own. In fact, for $15.09 on Amazon you can purchase Christianity for Dummies and learn all about our faith. If only I had known I could get all my questions answered for just over 15 bucks, I could have avoided seven years worth of religion classes and saved tens of thousands of dollars. Not to mention years sitting in Sunday school and various small groups. Ha.

At times though it does seem like it would be nice if one book would just answer all our questions about faith and church. If there was just an easy step-by-step process laid out for us we’d be all set. You might be thinking – "well, we have the Bible. Isn't that the answer to all our questions?" Well yes, but it’s not quite as simple as we might like to think. There’s no five-step or ten-step or even twelve-step process clearly lined out in the Bible. Sure we’ve got the Ten Commandments, but then we have to piece that together with all the things that Jesus says and does, some of which complement the laws of the Old Testament, others which seem to complicate and confuse issues even more. While the Bible is a wealth of knowledge for us, it’s not laid out for us in the easy manner of say a "For Dummies" book or a computer manual. There’s no clear “how to” guide or “troubleshooting reference section.” So when we talk about our own spiritual development or the mission of the church things can get a little vague or even confusing.

A big point of discussion in churches is what we need to do to grow and be a vibrant and active faith community. And this isn’t something that has been laid out in a “For Dummies” book, at least not to my knowledge. But many ministers and professors have written on the topic over the years, often pulling from one another while still trying to
copyright their unique brand on how to do church or how to grow your church. Let’s just be upfront about this though and say that there is no 100% guarantee that any book or method for church growth will work perfectly for every church. But there are still some useful books out there; some well-received proposals of how we can make a better effort at being the church. One such book, which came out a few years back, is Robert Schnase’s *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. I first became aware of Schnase when a follow-up book came out on these same five practices but set in the context of one’s own personal faith journey. His first book though was written with entire congregations in mind and aimed at helping the church focus on five basic qualities, that when carried out at an extreme level, could produce a healthy, vital, and fruitful church. And isn’t that what we want, after all, for both ourselves and the church? Don’t we want to be spiritually healthy, to have a right relationship with God? Is our faith not essential in our own daily lives and if it isn’t, how much better off would we be if we saw God and Christ in that way, as indispensable to our existence? And if the church is not being fruitful, if we’ve stopped making disciples as Jesus commanded us to do, then whose will are we living out? Clearly not God’s in that scenario.

When Robert Schnase set out with his five practices of being fruitful, he wasn’t attempting to define a clear “how to” guide that would church growth. He was attempting to address some of the basic practices of our faith and how we can live them out at an even greater level. He wanted to discuss how we can actually fulfill the mission of “making disciples” and do so in a practical way that fit into the life of the church and wasn’t some obscure set of ideals we could never reach. Since writing his first book on this topic, churches across the country have used his five practices in all numbers of ways through sermons, workshops, leadership trainings, small groups, and so on. When I first read Schnase’s book a few years back I set it on the shelf thinking that at one point it’d come in handy in a church I was serving. Then a few weeks ago I pulled it back out again, glanced through it, and realized that this might just be the type of thing we need to hear right now. Our church may have been around 140 years, but sometimes we need to get back to the basics; sometimes we need to be reminded of those principle ways that have shaped the church for centuries and consider them with fresh and renewed interest; sometimes we need to go back to the beginning and refocus our personal lives and our church ministry. So that’s what we’re going to do this morning and for the next four Sundays. We’re going to visit these five practices that Schnase lays out in his book and I hope you will consider with me how we can improve at “being the church” and being a fruitful one at that. And I also hope that as you leave this sanctuary you’ll remember that this is only possible with your engagement. These practices aren’t just for the really determined faithful folks, they are for all of us, because after all, we all make up the church.

Over the next four Sundays we will consider radical hospitality, passionate worship, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity but for the remainder of this morning I want us to take a look at intentional faith development. You may have noticed that Schnase always adds an intensified adjective to his practices, suggesting that we live them out in extreme ways. Did you hear these adjectives: radical, passionate, risk-taking, extravagant, intentional? Nothing is mediocre here. Instead he envisions a church filled with Christians that go above and beyond in tackling these practices of their faith. And so we’ll set out in the same manner this morning, seeking to not just consider what faith development is, but how we can go about intentionally. No matter how many years or
decades we’ve been Christians, there is always room for us to mature further in our faith and grow and adapt as a church in being effective at faith development.

In our scripture reading this morning Jesus calls us to abide in him. As we do so, he also abides in us, working in us and through us and enabling us to bear fruit. And through this we become disciples and the Lord is pleased. The Holy Scriptures call us to both be disciples and to make disciples – that is a key mission of the church. But questions pop up along the way. How do we go about doing this? Is this for everyone or just the folks that really want to be invested in church work? Can I do this on my own or do I have to be part of a group? What are we gaining from this practice?

This morning I want to briefly touch on three points that answer some of these questions as well as others you might have around intentional faith development, and the first addresses the important role the church plays in this particular practice. Faith development needs to take place within a community. There is greater room for us to mature in our faith in the setting of a community than there is on our own. To some extent you all understand that and that is why you are sitting in one of these pews today. Unfortunately though Christianity has put such an emphasis on the privatization of religion, of the personal relationship with God, that in recent decades the need for active involvement in a church body has dropped down on the list of priorities for many Christians. Some of us think that we can get sufficiently fed spiritually by reading our Bible on our own or listening to TV preachers. Some see no need to ever grace the doors of a church. But that is just not the case. We need more than that if we want to be intentional about our faith development. We see the example set for us by Jesus and the disciples as they learn together and pray together. They lay out the vision for what learning in community looks like.

Within the Christian community, our faith has the opportunity to develop and mature as we are supported, encouraged, and even challenged by one another. It also provides us with the accountability that many of us need to stay intentional about our faith development. Now some of that can be supplied here in worship, but where we experience it most is in Bible study groups or other small groups. Those are the places where we build close relationships with one another. Where we get to know each other more deeply and can journey alongside one another through the joys and struggles of life. Where we can be encouraged in our faith journey and have a safe place to ask the hard questions of life. We need to put ourselves where God has an opportunity to shape us. The church community can be our spiritual home that nurtures us in our faith and opens us up to growth opportunities.

I came across a story recently of Anne Lamott’s from her book Traveling Mercies. In her memoir of how she gave church another try, she tells a story from her pastor’s childhood, illustrating the important role church community plays in our lives. Around the age of the seven, the young girl got lost one day. She looked around at all the landmarks, going up and down the streets, hoping that something would look familiar, but nothing was recognizable. In the midst of her fear a policemen came to her aid and drove her around town, looking for something she would know when suddenly she saw her church. She told the officer, “You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.” Lamott comments on the thoughts stirred up within herself upon hearing this story from her pastor’s childhood, “That is why I have stayed so close to [my church] – because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the
faces of the people at my church, and hear their [comforting] voices, I can always find my way home.”

Church can be that home for us, and a home like that nurtures our faith. Some of you know exactly what I am talking about. I’m hoping all of you do. But if you don’t, maybe it’s time to be a bit more intentional about integrating yourself in the church family and allowing the community to be a part of your journey. And maybe we as a church need to be more intentional about bringing people fully into the community and not letting them remain on the outer edges.

Secondly we need to understand that if we want our faith to grow, we need to be learning. If our goal is to be like Christ, then we need to know his stories and his teachings so well that they become our own. And I’m not just talking about being able to win a round of Bible Drills here, but to have the scriptures written in our hearts. We need to be reading our Bibles regularly and engaging the text with questions of our own. We need to be listening to the insights of others and seeking God’s guidance in interpreting the scriptures.

If we’re going to have any muscle or backbone to our faith, we need to have something to stand on, and that means knowing the stories and teachings of our religion. If we’re to allow the words of Jesus and the wisdom of God to transform who we are and how we approach life, then we need to know the scriptures first. We need to make knowing the content of our religion a priority in our life.

In just about any profession, you have to go through a learning process and then you have to continue to keep up to date with the latest teachings on the subject. For instance, teachers are often required to attend continuing education workshops. Doctors read up on the latest research and attend seminars so that they will be have the most accurate and up to date information for their field. Scientists keep up with the most recent hypotheses and finds so that their work will stay relevant and continue to advance. If your job in any way involves a computer, you have to keep up with the latest updates so that you’re able to effectively use the software. Even in our families we read the latest parenting books and articles so we can better care for and raise our children. It shouldn’t be any different for our faith. If we’re so intentional and disciplined in other areas of our life, why don’t we approach our faith development in the same way? Why aren’t we devoted and disciplined to the same extent?

And lastly, we need to understand that making disciples is a process - that our salvation is an ongoing process. In describing the apostle Paul’s understanding of faith, Robert Schnase writes, “He presents faith not as something static, a possession, or an all or nothing proposition, but rather as something we grow into and strive toward, a putting away of one’s ‘former way of life, [the] old self’ to clothe oneself ‘with the new self’ (Ephesians 4:22, 24). As we journey through life, experiencing the many different stops along the road, our faith matures and changes. As we encounter joys and hardships, as we meet new people and discover new places and ideas, as we embrace or battle the events and decisions made by leaders across the world, our faith and our understanding of God’s will for us and for creation will deepen and expand. There is never a point where our faith stops growing or meets completion. Instead, the development of our faith spans a lifetime. But this can only happen if we allow ourselves room to grow. It is possible for us to close

\[1\] Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, p. 55.

ourselves off to opportunities that could cultivate our faith and draw us closer to sharing in God’s desires for creation. Once again, it comes back to intentionality.

Many of us are willing to admit the importance of faith development. We can echo the vital role it plays in the life of individuals and in churches. But I want to challenge us collectively, as the church, to consider how much of an importance we place on faith development as a basic practice of the church. Let’s ask ourselves what we are doing well and what we need to improve on. How can we, as a church, better offer opportunities that will engage members in this kind of intentional faith development? How can we be better at making disciples and journeying alongside one another in this lifetime process of growing in our faith? And I also want to challenge each one of us here today to be honest with ourselves about how intentional we are about our own faith development. Are you just bouncing along in your faith, kind of haphazardly? Or have you taken an avid interest in growing in Christ? Have you integrated yourself in the church community in such a way that the people around you do encourage and support you and serve as a spiritual home for you? Do you take time to study the scriptures and pray, to engage the text in the company of others so that you can become more alert to God’s guiding wisdom in your life? Are you opening yourself up to the opportunities for growth that come across your path or have you become so set and determined in your beliefs and concept of what faith is that like the Pharaoh Moses encountered in Egypt whose heart was hardened, you too have become impervious to new and unexpected ways God may be working in and around you? You have the answers to these questions. No “how to” guide is going to answer them for you. So let me leave you with this one last question: what would it look like for you to step it up, to become more intentional about growing in your faith? Amen.