

Five Practices Series: Intentional Faith Development
Ephesians 4:21-24
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St. John United Methodist Church
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This is the halfway point in our series on Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. The first practice is radical hospitality. Second is passionate worship. Next Sunday Adam Muhr will lead us in risk-taking mission and service. Then Jo Ann will finish it with extravagant generosity. Today is intentional faith development.

When I hear the phrase intentional faith development my mind jumps to the opposite which could be called “haphazard faith development.” How would you characterize your faith development: intentional or haphazard? Haphazard is not all bad if it is interspersed with times of intention. The journey of faith is not a linear progression with every step the same as the one before.

Twentieth century archaeologists uncovered some interesting things about the ancient Temple Mount in Jerusalem, one of which is the seemingly random design of the southern stairs. It was by these stairs that weary travelers climbed several hundred feet from the valley to the actual Temple. Most steps have the same rise of about 7-8 inches. When you used the steps in your home this morning you didn't have to think about how far to lift your foot. Each step has the same rise and this information is imprinted on your brain.

The rise of the temple steps varies in some instances by several inches. The stretch or depth of the steps varies—in no discernible pattern—by several feet! Now, some might conclude that the design engineers were incompetent. But not the ancient rabbis. They saw the random, sometimes treacherous state of the southern stairs as a powerful metaphor for Intentional Faith Development. They argued that the engineers were persons of faith who knew that to ascend the hill of the Lord hurriedly and without thought would be spiritually dangerous. Rather, those who would approach God must do so with *intention*, caution, and measured steps—paying attention and learning all along the way.

In the development and nurturing of our faith, we sometimes grow in leaps and bounds. Other times it feels like we are stuck on the “same step” for too long, not really going anywhere. The rabbis would teach us that *both* experiences—and everything in between—offer growth and spiritual maturity. Every aspect of the journey carries us, as Christians, closer to the goal of living like Jesus. The key is in taking the journey with care and intentionality. Each step, no matter how deep or shallow, is an important step in the journey.

Have you been walking up and down the steps of your faith journey without much thought? Are you so consumed with the activities of daily life that you don't pay much attention to your spiritual life unless something upsets the routine of your life? My guess is that the passengers and crew of the US Airways flight that landed in the Hudson River this past week have been forced to pay attention to their relationship with God. Why must we wait for such an event to help us be intentional about our faith journey?

That water landing or crash no doubt helped many people think about what they wanted in life. It's really about our desire. Do you want to take a step of faith even if it's a small one? Do we truly want to grow in our faith? I have to tell you that this question is the most important one in our Christian faith. It is a question we must answer every day of our lives.

It's somewhat like marriage. In a marriage the desire for each other ebbs and flows. Some days spouses feel the desire for each other. Other days they don't. When you don't feel the desire you still work at your marriage. You remain faithful to each other even though you don't feel close to each other.

It's the same with God. There are days when we don't feel God's presence. I shared last week that I had been experiencing a dry spell with God. It is a normal thing to not feel very close to God. You may be feeling that dry spell right now as well. But the point of this message is that we don't have to be haphazard about it. We don't have to wait to be on a crashing plane to focus on our faith. We don't have to be like a pinball in an arcade game being slapped around by outside forces. There is something we can do.

Today's New Testament reading comes to us from the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. Throughout his church-planting and letter-writing ministry, Paul emphasized the importance of "growing up" in Christ—developing faith, learning together through worship and study.

In the fourth chapter of Ephesians, Paul argues against some non-Christian teachings, concluding his argument in verse 20 with a passionate, "That is not the way you learned Christ!"—much in the way mothers admonish their kids, "You didn't learn *that* in *this* house!"

Let's listen to Paul, reminding us of what we *did* learn: *For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (vv. 21-24)*

This, then, is the goal of Intentional Faith Development: to allow God's Spirit to create us anew so that we carry with authenticity the image of our righteous and holy God. It is choosing to open ourselves to God's Word and will. The first step is to actually want this for ourselves. Being in touch with our desire for God and our faith is one of the biggest steps of our faith journey. Another step is to realize where we are and what step we are ready to take. Have you ever wondered where you are on this journey of faith?

In his groundbreaking work *Stages of Faith* (HarperOne, 1995), James Fowler likens the development of faith to a spring with seven identified stages of faith development along the way. Each stage builds on the previous stages.

The first stages, often occurring when we are very young, are very basic. Quite literally, our nursery workers, parents, and caregivers lay this foundation with their words and actions. We wonder what God looks like. Then we begin to think logically about faith. In a stage Fowler calls Literal Faith, we begin to enter the perspective of others and grow in our ability to capture life and significance in story and narrative. We may see this in our children as they learn the stories of the Bible.

Abstract thought comes next. More abstract thinking helps us to make sense of things. We can reflect upon past experiences and find within them lessons for today, creating connections between the concrete and the abstract.

We begin to get to where many of us as adults are—points where we have to question, examine, and reclaim the values and beliefs formed to this point. Rather than blindly accepting what has been taught or experienced, we now consciously choose our personal commitments to particular values and beliefs. We may ask ourselves, “At my core, as one created in God’s image, who am I?”

Fowler calls the final stage of growth Universalizing Faith, where we are grounded in a oneness with the power of God. This is what John Wesley would call Christian perfection, which empowers our devotion to overcoming violence and oppression and to living as if God’s kingdom has already come.

As is true of coiled springs, faith development moves us, stretches us, compresses us, and even spins us at times. Ultimately, it is our choice how and where we move along the coil. We may say that our intention is to experience universalizing faith. We may pray for God’s kingdom to come. But are we doing anything that will grow us into that way of living?

Fowler isn’t the only one who has given thought to the stages of faith development. Ancient Christians offered their faith maps. More recently author Brian McLaren in his book, *Finding Faith*, presented four stages of faith which I find helpful. Simplicity. Complexity. Perplexity. Humility. I think I’ve been in the perplexed stage for some time now.

The point is that there are common lessons all spirit-led people learn along the way. Sometimes it is helpful to know where we are so we can be intentional about where we want to go. Our Church Council invites you to a gathering Sat. Jan. 24 to do some learning and goal setting. We hope to work on our discipleship metaphor which is a trek or hike in the wilderness. We compare the spiritual journey to a trek and invite us all to see where we are. Some of us are at the trailhead ready to begin the hike with excitement. Some have fallen and twisted an ankle and need others to offer care and healing. And some of us have been on the same trail a long time and need help to embark on a more challenging path. And we have some original artwork that will help us all visualize this journey. We are taking important steps as a congregation in helping us all be intentional about our faith.

You might remember comedian Yakov Smirnoff. When he first came to the United States from Russia he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores. He says, "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk--you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice--you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, What a country!"

There are no instant disciples of Christ. This journey requires a blend of time, adversity, and grace. Slowly the lessons learned are remembered. They are deeply imbedded in our souls. We realize that steps of faith are not all the same. They don’t all require the same movement, the same amount of energy. So we pay attention to our steps up and down the stairs of faith. We pause to thank God for the steps we have already climbed, and for where we are at the moment. And with purpose and intention we lift our foot to continue this wonderful and joy filled journey.