

“Intentional Faith Development”

Acts 2:42-47

Today, I'd like to talk to you about Intentional Faith Development. Like many other things that we treasure in life, our faith does not develop and grow strong without our intentional participation in practices that lead to growth. You know this in other areas of life: If you don't weed and water your garden, it's going to be overrun with weeds or dry up and die. If you don't teach, guide and discipline your children, they will face big problems in growing up to become mature adults. This is super embarrassing, but for a brief time when I was a boy, I wanted to grow up to become a professional athlete. If you can call it that. I wanted to be a professional wrestling star! Thankfully, that ambition was short lived. But among the many reasons that this dream could never become a reality is the fact that I would never commit to the physical training it would have required. I liked my couch and TV way too much to go running or work out at a gym. My intentions just weren't enough. And so it is with the growth of our relationship with God. The development of a strong, healthy faith requires intentional behaviors, not just good intentions. Wanting a strong faith doesn't cause it to happen. Our intentions must be matched by a commitment to **practices** that bring spiritual growth. Thankfully, the Bible gives us many examples of the kind of intentional practices that lead to growth and maturity in our relationship with God. Today's reading from Acts is probably the most concise summary of them. Let's think about what the reading teaches us.

Faith development requires devotion to several things, the first of which is a commitment to **learning in community**. It's no accident that the second step toward spiritual growth in our church's new mission and purpose statement is precisely this: Learning in community. We have chosen to make learning in small groups a priority because we see it repeatedly in the New Testament. In Acts, we find that the early church was simultaneously committed to the Apostle's teaching and fellowship. Teaching and fellowship were interwoven. In our day, it's too often the case that we separate the two. If you want to learn, you take a class. If you want fellowship, you have a meal. But seldom do we see how closely inter-related the two are meant to be. When the early church gathered, their learning took place in the context of fellowship and community, and that fellowship was itself a teaching experience. This idea wasn't original to Peter and the Apostles. It was the way Jesus chose to teach. He gathered a small group of disciples, and they went everywhere together. They heard what Jesus said, they saw what he did, they helped him carry out his mission, they ate together, they prayed together, they argued together, and they had plenty of time to discuss things together. Learning in community was at the heart of Jesus' ministry because what he was teaching could only be learned in community. You can't learn to love or to serve, or follow any of Jesus' other teachings in isolation from others. But, being in a group with others gives you a context in which to practice showing love and care, it gives you a community to support you, to pray for and with you, and to hold you accountable. How many of you ever learned to do a job all on your own? You may have had some academic training, which probably involved interaction with other students. And when you went on to do the job, you probably learned a lot from your co-workers or experienced mentors. You tried things and made mistakes and got constructive feedback, and learned by doing the job in the midst of other people doing the same or similar jobs –and it wasn't always fun. It stretched you, made you uncomfortable, and made you confront situations you didn't want to face. But that's how you learned. While our

relationship with God is not a job, it is the most important thing we can ever work on. If we are serious about the development of our faith, it's something we must commit to doing in community, together, through small groups and the larger context of the worshipping community. Yes, we will study the scripture and pray as individuals, but we need the community of faith to guide us, correct us, support us and hold us accountable.

As part of our intentional faith development, while learning in community, we must include **prayer and sharing**. We see this very clearly in our reading from Acts. The early disciples prayed together and for each other. They shared food, both through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and as a fundamental principle of Christian community. They shared whatever resources they had to help each other. They shared their lives-high points, low points, struggles and all. Prayer and sharing were not non-essential options for Christians. They were, and are, essential parts of a growing faith. When we pray for others, we grow in our love for them. When they pray for us, we are strengthened and blessed. When we pray together (which I know can be uncomfortable because it makes us vulnerable) we open our hearts to one another, and are in the process enabled to find our unity and strength in Christ. The same is true of sharing our thoughts and feelings, our questions and struggles, with a small group of people that we trust. I can tell you that some of the most important steps on my spiritual journey have taken place in the context of small groups. I dedicated my life to Christ in the context of a small group. I learned to love, respect and work with colleagues from very different faith traditions because we were in a small group that prayed together. While serving a deeply divided, conflict-filled church, I was sustained through hard times by two small groups that cared for me, supported me and prayed for me. And the history of the church is filled with examples of how small groups praying together and sharing their lives with each other have actually transformed Christianity for the better. These groups have literally reinvigorated the faith of their members, and brought renewal to the entire church.

All this leads to the conclusion that, when we commit to intentional faith development through learning in community, praying together and sharing with one another, **awesome things** will happen. In Acts we see how God's Spirit moved so powerfully in the early Christian community that truly miraculous things took place, and people observing those early followers of Jesus were filled with awe. Christianity spread like a wildfire because of the incredible power unleashed when God's people committed to intentionally developing their faith together. The same has been true repeatedly throughout history. And it can be true today. In this time. In this place. In this church. If we truly want to be a church that is alive to God, to have an impact on our community, and to have vital, growing, personal relationships with God, then we cannot neglect the intentional development of our faith by learning in community, praying together, and sharing with each other our questions, our struggles and our lives. By God's grace, may we become that kind of Church.