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Sermon: May 27, 2018
Rev. Kathie S. Pownall

I had a difficult time picking a title for this weeks meditation so I chose what you see – a “?.” Over the last few weeks the sermons have been based upon the goals of the Mission Initiative Team’s recommendations for Concord as it attempts to discerns what God’s “yearnings” are for in its ministry and what are the church’s priorities in this process.

Pastor Elizabeth shared thoughts about Radical Hospitality and Vibrant Worship. Jenny Godowsky preached a great sermon on Mother’s Day about being Mindful in our daily lives. She stated, *“mindfulness allows one’s self to create space for the uncomfortable, experience it, and give it to God.”* I found that suggestion immensely helpful in dealing with my topic for today: “Intentional Spiritual Formation.”

I experienced the discomfort of not knowing how to present meaning of this idea. As a matter of fact, yesterday I was talking with a member of the church and when I told him my topic he responded, *“I have no idea what means....”* Maybe you that are not part of the Mission Initiative Team or who are not involved in “leadership” positions at the church don’t know either.

So here we go.

Intentional Spiritual Formation!

I chose two scriptures this morning that both emphasized the importance of knowing and adhering to the Word of God. In the Roman’s passage it is said that Paul believed that God’s Word remains relevant to new situations – for new generations to come in the future. The Jews and early Christ followers found comfort in scriptures and they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching...[Acts2: 42]. They intentionally studied the scriptures to better deal with life situations.

That brings to mind Jenny’s sermon where she related Paul’s ideas of Jars of Clay to her own life dealing with its issues and eventually the idea of “mindfulness.” Those words from Paul written centuries ago were relevant to her.

Intentional Spiritual Formation is when the church realizes the importance of creating opportunities to all of its people to grow in Christ – to make relevant Christ’s stories of old to now. And doing this together is important. Jenny is now inspired to start a Safe Space Group who would meet to share life challenges.

Regarding the scriptures, C.S. Lewis gave a talk once to some Royal Air Force officers and in response to his words one old, hard-bitten officer responded by saying that he had no use for Lewis’ *“neat little dogmas and formulas”* about God. The old soldier considered his war experiences in the desert as his only “authentic” experience of God.

Lewis responded with this story that I find applicable to today’s thoughts. Quote: *“If a man has once looked at the Atlantic, from the beach, and then goes and looks at a map of the Atlantic, he also will be turning from something real to something less real: turning from real waves to a bit of colored paper.*

But here comes the point. The map is admittedly only colored paper, but there are two things you have to remember about it. In the first place, it is based on what hundreds and thousands of people have found out by sailing the real Atlantic. In that way it has behind it masses of experience just as real as the one you could have from the beach, only, while yours would be a single glimpse, the map fits all those different experiences together.

In the second place, if you want to go anywhere, the map is absolutely necessary. As long as you are content with walks on the beach, your glimpses are far more fun than looking at a map. But the map is going to be more use than walks on the beach if you want to get across the ocean. "

The two scriptures read this morning represent many in the Bible that are about just that – the value of scriptures – as a rich collection of the thoughts of people inspired by God standing on the beaches for thousands of years and recording that understanding, in other words instead of using just personal experience [standing on the beach] for one’s spiritual growth one uses the insights of others. And coming together to share this word contributes to ones spiritual health.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.”

Acts 2: 42

The part of the Mission Initiative here at Concord that deals with “The Practice of Intentional Faith Development” is focused on developing ways to not only share faith stories in worship, but in smaller groups as well. It seeks to develop groups of members willing to mentor newcomers and seekers. It looks to expand educational opportunities to focus on Christian Basics and to consider alternative opportunities for spiritual formation. The support of a strong children’s ministry is encouraged. Collaboration with other churches is also desired. That’s a lot.

But all of these goals have as their intended purpose the strengthening of peoples’ faith – Your faith my faith and the faith others along the way.

I find the theme of “sharing stories” very intriguing. Not “Once upon a time...” stories but real experiences in our lives where God has had an impact. Read Jenny’s sermon online from Mother’s Day. That’s a great example.

Our lives are rich with such stories. As Christians we look to the impact of our “faith” and “belief” on the stories of our lives. How did our faith shape and affect these experiences?

At Mug and Muffin this week [for those who don’t know what that is, it is a weekly Bible study [9:30 Wednesday morning] that focuses on the sermon scriptures for the next Sunday.

This past week I asked the group about their own faith development - specifically learning about the Bible. Maybe you identify with these: Sunday School Classes, Youth Groups, Vacation Bible School, Summer Camp, Mission Trips, Circles, Faith at Work Gatherings, Mug and Muffin, Book Groups, Synod School, and Communicants or confirmation classes. Some of those activities may have required memorization of Bible verses, at least in the old days. [How many of you remember having to learn verses by heart?]

This Mission Initiative Goal regarding Intentional Spiritual Development is intended to help you focus on how faith as impacted your life. It also wants to promote the sharing of those experiences with others.

As examples I would like to share 3 stories with you from the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations by Robert Schnase – the book that has been referenced in the last few weeks from the pulpit. [You may recall hearing about Radical Hospitality and Passionate Worship.]

STORIES:

1. In Biblical times not too long after Christ's death and resurrection there was a woman whose husband became ill and died, leaving her to care for her daughters by herself in a society where single women by themselves were frequently left alone. As she was gathering water one morning she remembered a story about Jesus touching a paralyzed man and subsequently many stories came to her mind – a shepherd and sheep, a woman and her coin, and women finding an empty tomb. The stories she had heard were committed to her memory now. They had been repeated many times and the people who told them invited her and her daughters into their homes. These followers of Jesus continued sharing the stories about him and the woman loved learning about him and God and she loved building friendships with others. Her life became easier because she wasn't alone carrying her burdens any more. Her days were now full of life. This community had lifted her spirits.
2. Seventeen hundred and fifty years later there was a man using the light of his oil lamp to write in his journal. His day had been long – he worked the fields from sun up to sun down. But arriving home did not mark the end of his day; then he washed up as best as he could, ate a meal and reread some scripture and prayed for guidance. He was now ready to teach his Methodist pupils who showed up for class that evening at his home. There were words of greeting, laughter and blessings as his friends –other day laborers. He reminded them of their Wesleyan Covenant to attend worship, read and study the scriptures and pray. They spent the evening listening and singing and praying. They shared their joys and concerns and they collected coins for worthy causes while the man recorded each amount carefully. When they bid farewell at the end of the evening the man snuffed out the lamp and retired. Even though his day had been long he was renewed and strengthened and encouraged. By his work in the fields, he made a living. By this care of souls, he made a life.
3. Two hundred fifty years later, a young woman pulled into a church parking lot before the evening class began. She was a bit late. She was still wearing her clothing from work. Earlier, she had left job picked up her son from school and driven him to soccer practice. On the way to church they picked up some fast food. They both entered the church together. Her son would do homework while she did her "Bible thing." In the class was a close friend and a few other couples, an older woman, graduate student and the teacher. Before she attended this Discipleship Bible study she hadn't known most of those folks. As they studied together they began to know each other and care for each other. That evening they watched a video about Moses and they shared their observations and questions. During the previous week she had spent time reading and studying - not always clear about what she was reading. This particular evening she didn't see the relevance of studying about Moses but as she learned about his fears and the excuses he made up for not responding to God's call something happened. Others started talking about their own fears and their own responses in life when they felt God calling. The young woman shared her questions and they continued to wrestled with them. When she left that night with her son she pondered the question, "Lord, what would you have me do?"

I shared these stories because they emphasize the importance of learning in community. As Concord works to bring about Intentional Faith Development it will struggle with how to help people understand Scripture, grow in faith and cope in life – hopefully with supportive relationships around them. This isn't an easy task. There are different age groups, life styles, energy levels, available time etc to consider.

“Learning and Community” are referenced frequently in the early church. And now - over two thousand years later they are still linked strongly together for spiritual growth.

Paul instructed Christ followers to learn, grow, teach and mature. If a child shows an interest in golf, someone may teach him and eventually he may mature to be a great golfer. He still practices. A Christian is in a never ending journey of maturation. There is no, “Look, I’ve made it. I no longer have to practice.” Spiritual Formation is as life long process.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer states that we see “in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of Christ.” According to him every Christian needs another Christian when she/he becomes uncertain and discouraged. That is why Faith Development is necessary and when that effort is **Intentional** it has more possibilities of success.

Pray for our journey together and give thanks to God for the opportunity to do so.

AMEN