

“Fruit of the Spirit: Intentional Faith Development”

Psalm 119: 1-16; 105-106

A few weeks ago, the elders graciously allowed me to lead them in an exercise for one of my DMIN courses. I won't bore everyone with the details but I do want to share with the congregation is some of the fascinating gleanings that we were able to take from our conversation. One of the themes that kept running through our conversation is that the elders feel more connected to their faith, more connected to presence of God, more connected to the life and ministry of this congregation than in years past. This feeling of being more connected is being lived out through their personal spiritual growth which in turn as the spiritual leaders of Midway Christian Church is shaping the spiritual growth of this congregation as well.

This is a really good thing and it illustrates exactly what I mean when I say that we are all called to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit through Intentional Faith Development. Just like the elders, we, as members of Midway Christian Church, as people of faith, we are called to recognize that we can't share presence of God with others if our spiritual well has run dry. We are called to recognize that as we journey through life, we are to be grounded in the Word of God. We are called to

let the word of God shape us and transform us into the people God created us to be.

We are called to be intentional in our faith development.

Now you are probably wondering just exactly how we are supposed to do that? After all, the sermon is titled: Fruit of the Spirit: Intentional Faith Development. Everyone came here today, probably thinking I would give us some short cuts or quick tips on how to grow our faith.

Well, I hate to disappoint you. There are no short cuts or quick tips to growing in faith. It is hard work. It takes time. It takes effort on our part. That's why we call it a faith journey. Growing in faith is a process and there are no easy answers, just the discipline of studying the Word of God, praying daily, developing our spiritual health, and being connected the presence of God. And all of this stuff takes time, all of this stuff takes effort on our part. All of this stuff requires us to do the hard work of becoming the people God created us to be. There are no easy fixes and there are no short cuts.

That's why it is so important that we as people of faith be intentional about our faith development. As I was preparing for this sermon, I came across a statement that made me stop and pause. I want to share that statement with you today: "It is true in every era that the faith of the people of God is only one

generation from extinction.” Take a moment and think about that. The faith of the people of God is only one generation from extinction.

For the most part, many of us were brought up in the church. Many of us remember going to Sunday School and learning the stories of Noah, of Adam and Eve, of Jesus healing the blind man. Many of us remember going to Vacation Bible School and singing funny little songs to help us remember Bible verses. Many of us remember going to summer camps where we experiences God’s love through the community there and through God’s creation.

We were educated in the faith. We were raised on the stories of God’s saving acts. We were educated at church. There was something intentional about our faith development.

Now think about this: Where is the next generation? Are our children at church? Are our children’s children at church? Will our children’s children’s children be in church?

“It is true that in every era that the faith of the people of God is only one generation from extinction.”

That statement should make us stop and think. That statement should give us a moment of concern. Because that very statement tells us why we should be intentional in our faith development.

Now, please me say, I'm not advocating that we need intentional faith development as the new way to save the institution of the church. What I am advocating here is that we as people of faith need to be grounded in the Word of God, yes, because it is our how our faith seeks understanding but also because by being grounded in the Word of God, it becomes part of who we are. It gathers in our heart and mind and in doing so, shapes our words, and our actions. When we are intentional about our faith development, we begin to understand that faith lived out is not about following a strict set of rules and regulations but rather faith is a way of life that brings us closer to God.

And that's where Psalm 119 comes in. As you may know, I had planned on preaching on a completely different text today but on Monday, when I sat down to begin sermon prep, those verses from Hebrews just didn't feel quite right. Something was pulling me away from that text and drawing me to Psalm 119. The words from verse 105 kept running through my mind. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

That really is a great image for us as people of faith. The word of God like a light leading us and guiding us through life. Always being there for us, to bring us hope, to bring us comfort, to bring us joy. Always there for us as source of love, a source of grace, a source of new life. The word of God always there for us, helping us develop a sense of wholeness, helping us claim who we really are as beloved children of God.

Now, I will be the first to admit that this image of a light along our path gets lost in the many many verses of Psalm 119. Over all, Psalm 119 has 167 verses and takes so many twists and turns that it is hard for us as readers to see the larger picture which is unfortunate for us as people of faith. Because by missing the larger picture, we miss the beauty of this psalm. We miss the wisdom it wants to share with us as people of faith.

Let me explain. As I said before, this psalm has 167 verses and in spite of that fact, it really is an “incredible piece of creative writing that teaches the faith. The Poet who composed this Psalm began with the idea of taking all of the consonants in the Hebrew language, 22 of them, and using them as the structure of the poem. He took each letter and then wrote eight lines of praise for the Word of God, each line beginning with that letter. Eight lines that start with A talking about the Word of God. Then eight lines that start with B talking about the Word of God.

On and on through all 22 letters. This psalm is a creative work of literary skill that is consumed with a passion for the Word of God”, written to nurture the faith and prevent the faith of the people of God from experiencing extinction.

Throughout this psalm, The psalmist calls the people of God to be intentional in their faith development, in their connection with God so that they would continue to understand that they are a part of something more, so that they would continue to be inspired. He wrote this psalm to share the passion that the Word of God inspires in the hearts of the people. The psalmist understands that when we forget or ignore God’s word for us as the people of God, we forget and ignore the ways of God. Let me say that again, when we forget or ignore God’s word for us as the people of God, we forget and ignore the ways of God. We forget the ways God has worked in our lives in the past. We forget and ignore all the ways God is working in our lives now. When we forget and ignore the Word of God for the people of God, we forget all the ways God has promised to continuing working in our lives and in our world to bring about healing and wholeness for all of God’s creation. If we forget the word of God, we forget how to be the people of God.

This psalm is written to prevent that from ever happening. This psalm is designed to teach us the ways and word of God. All we have to do is read it. All we

have to do is let the Word of God become part of who we are. All we have to do is let the Word of God shape us into the people God created and calls us to be.

Now, I'm sure everyone is wondering if I'm going to go into a long explanation about just what exactly is the Word of God. Well, thankfully for you, I don't have to do that. What I love about Psalm 119 is that he gets it. He understands that the Word of God is not just one thing. The psalmist gets that the Word of God is not limited to the actual written down words from our Bible that we read and study. He shares that the Word of God comes to us in many forms. It comes to us through testimonies, through moments, through conversations and experiences. He knew even way back then, that The Word of God is a living transforming experience that meets us every day. It is not frozen in some past, irrelevant and disconnected from the events and issues of our day. God is still speaking today. God is still inviting us to join into a conversation with God through open hearts and open minds. In psalm 119, he is reminding us that the Word of God is not about literal or metaphorical interpretation. He is reminding us that the only way we can become conversation partners with God, is if we actually speak and understand the Word of God. And the only way we can do that is if we are intentional about our faith development. We cannot rely on anyone else doing the hard work for us. We cannot rely on someone else interpreting it for us. We cannot rely on anyone else telling us what the Word of God means for us as people

of faith. We need to do this on our own and in conversations with other people if for no other reason than this. Just like the psalmist discovered, we too discover that without the Word of God in our lives, our lives are empty. We cannot survive without the Word of God as our anchor. We cannot live without the Word of God in our lives, guiding us, leading us, refreshing us, restoring us, giving us hope, telling us about God's grace, reminding us that God is still at work in our world, bring healing and wholeness for all of God's creation.

It is a joy to meditate on the Word of God each day. It is a joy to go to God in prayer each day. It is a joy to discern who God is calling us to be. At the heart of what it means for us to be people of faith, there is a call for us to engage the Word of God. There is a call to engage in conversations with our God, discern where God is calling, and yes, there is even a call as we become more intentional about our faith development to have doubts and wonder what it all means for us to be connected to all of God's creation.

You know, it's funny, you ask any kid how the start of any good story begins and they will tell you all the best stories start with "Once upon a time". What would you say to me if I asked you to share with me the best story you ever heard? Would you say something like, "Once at a UK basketball game" or would you say something like, "Once I was driving one day". Or could it be possible that

the best story you ever heard started something like this: “In the beginning God created the world. In the beginning, God created man and woman in God’s own image.” Could it be possible that you would tell me that the best story you ever heard started with something like, “You are God’s Beloved, marked by God’s love and there is nothing that can or will ever separate you from that love.”

But you know the story doesn’t end there. It keeps on going, page after page, Experience after experience. The story still continues today.

You see, the thing of it is these words that start our story as the people of God were just the beginning of our story as people of faith. These words were not said to us just once and then forgotten. These are the words that are written upon our hearts. These are the words that came from our God. These are the words that strengthen our faith, that push us to interpret our texts anew. These are the words that remind us that we are called to be in relationship with our God and with one another. These are the words of grace and love that sparked the light that guides all of our paths.

These are the words that call us to spend a lifetime in prayer, in study, in meditation upon the Word of God because these very words have become our way of life.

This past week, I came across a video that invited people on the street to share the best advice someone gave them. There were comments like, “Be who you are.” Or “Worrying doesn’t help anything”. There were also comments like “Be kind to others” and “Stay out of trouble.” And as the people were speaking, I could help but think, everything these people were saying was in some shape or form, rooted in the Word of God. These are all things we discover as we become more intentional about our faith development, as we continue on our journey of becoming the people God created us and calls us to be.

All those words of wisdom that the people in the video have withstood the test of time. All the words of wisdom that have been passed down to us, at their core, is the word of God for the people of God. And through this word, we find comfort, we find joy, we find hope, we find love, we find new life.

We are a people of faith who seek understanding. We are a people of faith who seek wisdom. We are a people of faith who need God’s word as a lamp unto our feet and light unto our path, guiding us and leading us into the people God created us to be, into the people God calls us to be.

May we always be intentional in our faith development knowing that it is through the Word of God that we become attuned to the voice of God speaking a new word to us now and in the future. Amen.