

FAITH: DEVELOPING GOD'S SPACE Acts 2:42-47

We have been preaching and teaching our way through the book of Acts for the past months here at EUMC. Today, I would like to turn our attention to a well-known passage in **Acts 2:42-47**. We will focus on two themes that pulsate from our lesson today. The themes are those of faith formation and fellowship.

Our Long-term Strategic Planning Committee has been studying Bishop Robert Schnase's book **FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL CONGREGATIONS** as a way of encouraging growth and renewal for our church family here at EUMC.

Bishop Schnase's book reminds us that we fulfill our biblical mandate of making and sustaining disciples of Jesus Christ through local churches like ours. The past 2,000 years of church history identifies and reveals that there are five practices or disciplines that – when utilized by a local congregation – propel it in ministry and mission to the community in which it exists – and also the greater world. When a church offers authentic worship that connects people to God, helps people grow in faith, reaches out in service beyond its doors and cultivates generosity – great things happen.

Bishop Schnase became very concerned when churches like ours continued to decline while the population around them grew and changed. The average age of members and pastors continued to increase – even as most of our communities got younger. We could argue over who is to blame. The time for the blame game strategy is over – and the time to put in place the biblical strategy is long overdue.

A few years ago – Dr. Billy Graham was accused by American church leaders of setting the church back 200 years with his approach to evangelism and church work. With a twinkle in his eye he said, “Actually I am trying to set the church back 2,000 years.”

As we open our lesson today we see in **verse 42**, “They devoted themselves to the Apostle's teaching.” The word ‘devoted’ is a powerful word. The word means “to engage in something – to busy oneself – and to do so continually over an extended period of time.”

In the book of Acts, six times Christians are identified as the “people of the way.” In order to save themselves from the corrupt generation in which they lived in **verse 40**, the Apostles' teachings provided a greater and more excellent way. Jesus said, “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life.” Biblical discipleship always means a process being led by the living God. Following Jesus is radically different from following anyone and anything else.¹ The ‘Jesus Way’ is even more important than the American Way.² To love God is one thing – but to love the things that God loves is another thing entirely. This is why the study of God's word is so important. Only then can we rightly divide the word of truth.

So they were a learning church. They were eager to learn – they hungered and thirsted for righteousness. They did so not to be saved – but because they were saved. They were the ‘**called out**’ people of God.

I am often asked, “What were the Apostles’ teachings?” The Apostles’ teachings were the truths and words learned from the 12 who sat at the feet of Jesus for three years and were mentored to be a disciple – a learner. Jesus said in **John 14:25** that after he was gone – he would send the Spirit to bring to their **remembrance** all that he had taught.

The New Testament today is the deposit of their teaching and instruction (**II Tim. 3:14-17, II Peter 1:20-21, I Thess. 2:13**). The great reformations in the church by Luther, Calvin, Wesley and others were always empowered by a return to the authority of the Bible as the inspired word of God. Truth matters so much that God gives us truth so we don’t stumble or fail in our walk, way and witness. We can never divorce the ‘Jesus Truth’ from the ‘Jesus Way.’

As Eugene Peterson shares, “Reading is the first thing, just reading the Bible. As we read we enter a new world of words and find ourselves in on a conversation in which God has the first and last words. We soon realize that we are included in the conversation. We didn’t expect this. But this is precisely what generation after generation of bible readers do find: The Bible is not only written about us, but to us. In these pages we become insiders to a conversation in which God uses words to form and bless us, to teach and guide us, to forgive and save us.”³

In the modern world of computers and the Internet there is a web site called ‘**My Space**.’ In the word of God we are given the revelation of God so in our faith formation we can be led to seek the ‘**God Space**’ in us. To fill our heart, mind, and soul with anything else will lead to spiritual malnourishment and spiritual death. In **John 17:3** Jesus shares in his prayer to the Father: “This is eternal life that they may know you – the only true God – and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” This is the reason we exist. This is our purpose and mission. We will never discover our way until we know and love God.

The church of Jesus is at her absolute best when the word of God is central and primary, growing us up to our full potential in Christ who is our exalted head and way.

I don’t need to remind you that the Christian church (the body of Christ) is deeply divided and fractured. I read articles and hear conversations about liberal Christians – conservative Christians – fundamental Christians – Pentecostal Christians – and born again Christians. It is a challenge to know and identify what a true Christian is. Imagine how much more wholesome it would be if we simply asked one another “Are you growing in your relationship to Jesus Christ? How is it with your soul? Are you more in love with God than you were a year ago?” Yes, the early church devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching.

Secondly, the early church (the people of the way) “devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and to fellowship.” Fellowship means a common participation in the things of God. **Koinonia** is the word used in the Greek language to express this quality of life among believers.

Once they had met together in corporate worship on the Sabbath, they broke into small groups – classes – cell groups – both at the Temple and in their homes.

It is unfortunate that local churches are filled with people who take – but never give anything in return. Our text tells us “**they were together.**”

In 2004 a Harvard University sophomore created a web site that would allow Harvard students to better connect with each other. It would allow people to connect and interact with classmates and friends that they had not seen in years. **Facebook** soon expanded to other colleges, high school students, and anyone over 13 years of age. Today, **Facebook** has more than 80 million active users world-wide and is growing rapidly. It is not rocket science. It addresses and provides a basic human need – friendship.⁴

This was the type of fellowship and connectedness that describes the church in Acts and other New Testament churches. The Apostle Paul writing in **1 Thessalonians 2:8** (NIV) shares, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God – but our lives as well because you had become so dear to us.” Yes, as fellow believers on a spiritual journey God wants us to share not only the gospel – but our lives as well. We are much more than a gathering of strangers who meet for worship on Sunday mornings. We are to be a holy family under the lordship of Jesus Christ.⁵ Remember, 90% of life is about showing up. This is why we need each other.

Recently, a secular psychologist said, “After 50 years of practice and research in psychotherapy, I am absolutely convinced that when we struggle it is helpful to talk to someone we trust.” Imagine the enormous power that can take place when we share with another believer our need for guidance, correction, and encouragement. Wall Street will never know the value of a wise, experienced friend to help us see more clearly and to strengthen our growth in faith and godliness.⁶

Recently, Jeanie Lowery - who attends primarily the 8:30 a.m. service, is a member of our Long-term Strategic Planning Committee and is one of the many missionaries we support – shared a devotion at our Long-term Strategic Planning Committee based on Bishop Schnase’s book – on the importance of faith formation and community. I have asked her to share parts of that today.

Some things you can only learn in community...

In recent committee meetings we have been studying the second chapter of Acts starting with vs. 42. As we read this passage we were stuck with the disciples' decision to pool all of their resources and live and work together, pray and study daily as a community of believers. The end result we are told in this passage was that God greatly blessed their efforts and many were added daily to their group. They radically changed their world by modeling their community after Jesus' example of teaching, learning and growing in community.

Living in community reminded me of an experience Dan and I had as new missionaries in Africa. When we first arrived in Kenya we had three months before we were slated to attend an 8 month language course on Kiswahili. During those three months while working in temporary positions we decided it might be helpful to begin studying Kiswahili on our own, on the side. We thought hopefully if we studied really hard and read up on the language it would give us a big head start and maybe even push us months ahead of the program.

On the advice of senior missionaries and Africans we bought the suggested Kiswahili grammar book, a nice big thick book, and another book listing common vocabulary words to learn. We studiously read through this very dry difficult grammar book trying to understand this new language that was foreign to us. We memorized vocabulary words to learn how to count in Kiswahili and how to buy fruits and vegetables in the open market place. After three months of slugging it out on our own we felt pretty good about beginning language school.

The first day in class we looked around at the other 8 missionaries, all from various parts of the world and all going to different places in Africa. We were going to be in this same group for 8 months, in the same classroom from 8:30-3:30 five days a week. Our teachers were Africans from different parts of East Africa, each from different tribes from one another. The first thing the teachers did was tell us to put all our books and pens away and just listen and repeat phrases after them the next five days.

By the end of our first week in class we realized that everything we had diligently taught ourselves on our own was exhausted, finished by the fifth day! Everything we had learned before language school had been covered and passed by. What we learned in the classroom in five days was so much deeper and richer than what we had taught ourselves from books or memorizing vocabulary. Some things you can only learn in community.

We discovered there was so much more to learning a language when in a small group or learning community. In learning a new language the teachers taught us so much more about their culture and how Africans think or feel about things. We gained insights into African culture and Africans that we would never have learned on our own regardless of whether we had continued to study 3 more months or 3 years.

We needed to be in this small group to learn from one another and to grow together as a community because some things you can only learn in community.

We quickly realized that God has designed each of us to learn and grow in community because that is where He speaks to us and works among us as a body of believers. Wherever we are in whatever small group God has placed us in right now, such as worshipping at EUM, in our Sunday School class, in a ministry group, an exercise group, God wants to work in new ways as we grow and learn in community because **some things you can only learn in community.**

Thank you, Jeanie.

Phillip Brooks was a famous Episcopal priest who served the well-known Trinity Episcopal Church in Boston. He wrote the hymn, **“O Little Town of Bethlehem.”**

He was the ‘Rick Warren’ of his day. He invited the members of his church family to imagine they were walking down a street in Boston and came upon a house with a large picture window. Looking inside he would ask them to imagine an easel with a large canvas – and beside it many brushes and colors of paints. He then asked them to imagine our Lord Jesus standing outside – looking in and saying “Wow! What a masterpiece I could paint if only I could get inside!”⁷ That is the power of faith formation – when we develop the ‘God space’ in us.

May God give us the courage and grace so to do.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE JESUS WAY**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, page 9.

² Ibid, Peterson, page 5.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with its Translator**, NavPress Publishing Group, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 16.

⁴ Thanks to John Schmidt, **“The Pastor’s Column,”** Frazer UMC, Montgomery, Alabama, July 20th, 2008.

⁵ Schmidt, *ibid*, my adaptation of his material.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE WISDOM OF EACH OTHER**, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, front inside flap.

⁷ Thanks to Dr. James Harnish, Hyde Park UMC, Tampa, Florida, for this illustration.