

Pastor Kevin Garman

September 27th, 2020

Theme: Intentional Faith Development

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

In Bishop Robert Schnase's book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, we have discussed how Radical Hospitality and Passionate Worship are expressed through the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. This week, our theme shifts to the practice of Intentional Faith Development. We will look at the story of the church of Corinth and how they were dealing with their differences to develop their love and grace towards one another. We heard today in the reading of Psalm 8 how our humanness is tied to God's creation. As a part of that creation of life, we are called to see the beauty of creation in one another as we journey through life.

In his song, "The River of Dreams," Billy Joel describes a journey which takes his listeners through mountains of faith, valleys of fear, and a soul-searching expedition that is filled with weariness, lost connections to the sacred, and doubt. The chorus reads like this, "In the middle of the night, I go walking in my sleep, Through the valley of fear, to a river so deep. And I've been searching for something, taken out of my soul, something I would never lose, something somebody stole." (The River of Dreams by Billy Joel). This journey is depicted as lonely, a journey filled with fear, something that is intrinsic and a natural part of oneself, but also, something that has been taken away, in fact, something even stolen.

The song goes on to say, "And even though I know the river is wide, I walk down every evening and I stand on the shore. And try to cross to the opposite side, so I can finally find out what I've been looking for" (The River of Dreams by Billy Joel). Although this journey is certainly described as a struggle and difficult, it is a story of perseverance, resilience, determination, and discovery. This is what Intentional Faith Development looks like. A journey filled with highs and lows and more often than not, a path untrodden and unknown to the wandering travelers. Even though this song is speaking about the individual's journey, Intentional Faith Development is also about our journey together. Bishop Schnase says this, "Christ's

gracious invitation through Radical Hospitality invites and welcomes us, and God's transforming presence in Passionate Worship opens our hearts to Christ's pardon, love, and grace, creating in us a desire to follow. Growing in Christ requires more than weekly worship though, and it is through Intentional Faith Development that God's Spirit works in us, perfecting us in the practice of love as we grow in knowledge and love of God" (Schnase p. 63). Let us imagine how we see each other on this journey together.

Communal, spiritual development was the practice of Jesus because everyone was invited to the table of grace. Jesus spoke to massive crowds, he taught to people in attendance at the Synagogues, he counseled his disciples and closest followers on how to do ministry, and he served as many people as he could with the time he was given. Jesus didn't just talk about what it meant to be faithful, but he practiced it too. He healed the sick, he fed the hungry, he acknowledged the poor and outcasts of society, and ate with tax collectors and wealthy leaders just as the most poverty ridden communities of the Roman Empire. Jesus' ministry had no boundaries, and I would argue Jesus put few limitations on people's faith development as well. He did not expect the poor widow who gave all she had to act in the same way as Zacchaeus, a despised tax collector hated by his community. He did not ask Peter to be the same leader as James or Mary because all three of them had different gifts and talents to offer.

In the church of Corinth, we see Paul addressing many of these all too familiar issues. According to the Book of Acts, Paul spent eighteen grueling months starting the church of Corinth (Acts 18:11), and immediately, he was met by opposition and slander against his instruction (Acts 18:6). In fact, it was the Gentiles who received Paul's message most openly and respectfully (Acts 18:7-9). The church of Corinth was made up of wealthy folks and poor folks, educated scholars and working-class laborers, enslaved people and liberated people, and some with a powerful status in society and others who society could have cared less about. The church of Corinth was in constant turmoil because of these differences as they tried to expel one another from the community (1 Corinthians 6:1-8) and competed for political and social influence over one another (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:3-4; 11:18).

In Paul's second letter to the church of Corinth, he continues to talk about many of these issues, but in our section for today, he makes the case for

reconciliation with one another. Reconciliation takes a specific intention to not only look at the mistake's others have made, but it requires us to look at the mistakes we have made as well. It requires us to intentionally travel through our disconnections with one another.

Paul says in verse 14 & 15, "The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this; one died for the sake of all; therefore, all died, ¹⁵He died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15 CEB). Love propels us on this journey of understanding our calling and our place in the world. In clergy circles, we often talk about our calling stories and why we chose to start a career in ministry, but in all actuality, we are all called by God to participate in the Gospel and find our place in the world. Love invites us, guides us, and grounds us on this journey.

In verses 16 & 17, Paul states, "So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. ¹⁷So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!" The Common English Bible uses human standards, but I like the NRSV translation in saying our human point of view. Our society, more often than not, teaches us to exploit one another. Our worth is determined by our quality of labor in the workplace. Our worth is determined by our success in regards to our legacy. Our worth is determined by one another by how well you conform to our cultural standards, but Paul reminds us that through Christ's sacrifice of Love, we are enough because we are a part of the new creation as we follow Christ.

Paul goes on by saying, "All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. ¹⁹In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation" (Ibid 5:18-19 CEB). The wonderful illustration of our personal journey by Billy Joel's song tells only part of our story, because we are called to be in reconciliation as we partake in the journey of Intentional Faith Development. In fact, as Paul said in verse 19, Jesus has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. Paul even goes as far as to warn us not to count each other's sins

against one another. It reminds me of this stone Pastor Carol left in the office that has inscribed on the stone, "Let him who is without sin," referencing the story in the Gospel of John where Jesus points out none of us are without sin and none of us are able to cast the rock of judgement on to each other. (John 8:7).

Paul concludes his case for reconciliation with calling us ambassadors who represent Christ and that God negotiates through us (2 Corinthians 5:20). Why is this verse so important for our understanding of Intentional Spiritual Development? This is important because this is a part of our calling as Christians, which is to be Christ like. If we are to be ambassadors and negotiators of reconciliation in our communities, then we must be able to imitate Jesus' ministry of reconciliation to the world. We must not become holier than thou in our approach to the world, but we are reminded by Paul to humble ourselves as we are all a vital part to the story and song of creation. We must not do what the church of Corinth did as they brought legal charges against each other and bickered with one another in a struggle for power and influence. It is our calling to use our gifts and graces to help build each other up in love and grace as we journey together in our faith development.

We certainly do this through praying together and casting our concerns and celebrating our joys together. We do this by reaching out and supporting one another in each other's financial struggles, grief of loss, and pains from our past and present. We do this through singing and hearing God in our beautiful music on Sunday and Wednesdays. We do this by loving one another for who we are, just as we are as we journey through life together. This is Intentional Faith Development as we practice our faith with each other.

"The River of Dreams" song reminds me of a teaching in Taoism. Taoism talks about the Way and letting the Way guide you through life. The Way is often described as floating down the river and letting the current take you wherever it goes. Not resisting the current but trusting the current as it takes you where you need to go. May we trust one another as we let the river of faith sweep us off our feet and take us on our journey of life. The current is sometimes too much, and we need someone to pull us up on the boat, provide us some rest and relaxation, and carry us on our journey. Sometimes the current takes us to exciting places unknown and foreign, maybe even a little scary at times, but make no mistake that we are all on the River of Dreams finding our place in the world and navigating through new

waters together. Because as Jesus reminds us through his love on the cross and as Paul reminds us in his letter to the church of Corinth, we must intentionally walk together as we find our place in this world and our communities together. May the peace and love of Jesus Christ carry you forward on your path. Amen.