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**Sermon Series:**  
**“Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:**  
**III. Constants and Variables:**  
**The Practice of Intentional Faith Development”**  
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)**

**January 26, 2014**

**Deuteronomy 6:4–9; Acts 2:37–47**

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Although math and science have never been my strong suits,

I always have been intrigued by the concept of *constants and variables*

and how they might apply to other areas of study, like theology, for instance.

As I understand it, a constant is a fixed entity,

a character or element that does not change, but remains the same.

And a variable is a factor or element that can change.

The size—length, width, height—of our sanctuary is a constant.

The number of people we can squeeze in here on Christmas Eve or Easter is a variable,  
depending upon the size of the people occupying the sanctuary.

Noise in the sanctuary is a constant—the furnace blowing, traffic outside passing by,  
people coughing, babies crying.

The level of noise in the sanctuary is a variable, depending upon

how many people have colds and what time the Amtrak train passes by.

And the Holy Spirit in our midst, is it a constant or a variable?

Is it constantly present, and we're just not aware of it being as close as breath?

Are we the ones who need to be invoked to be aware of the Spirit?

Or is it a variable who needs to be invoked, as some of our prayers suggest, to come down,

to be poured out, to be present when we are ready?

In today's text, Pentecost has happened,

and the Holy Spirit has been poured out *on all people*:

not just on prophets, priests, and kings, but *on all people*.

Or perhaps, all people have been elevated to the status

of prophets, priest, and kings through the egalitarian power of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps this is the Spirit of Sabbath, the power to cease and desist,

that does not distinguish between beast of burden, worker, or employer,

but recognizes *all creatures* as worthy of rest.

Perhaps this is the Spirit of Jubilee, the power of material detachment,

that has *each of us* standing equally dispossessed before God

as a beloved child of God.

That Spirit has been loosed in the world,

and the early church does not quite know what to make of it,

and neither do we.

Is it friend or foe, this Holy Spirit? Is it uniting us or testing us?

Is it a good thing, in our best interest, that men and women, sons and daughters,

old men and servants now dream dreams and see visions

and have the voice or prophecy, have voice in decision-making and governance?

Does that mean we now have to treat all people equally? Pay all people equally?

Allow equal opportunity to all?

Is this Holy Spirit on the side of order, or chaos?

When Peter accosts his crowd with the fact that God has raised Jesus to new life,

even though *they* crucified the Promised One,

the people are cut to the heart (v. 37), Luke tells us.

And in deep remorse they exclaim to Peter, "What, then, shall we do?"

"How do we make amends? *Can* we make amends?"

And Peter tells them to repent and be baptized, and they and their children

will receive this crazy, loosed, gift of the Holy Spirit, too,

that makes *everyone* dreamy priests, visionary kings, and loose-lipped prophets.

Since the earliest days of the Christian Church, the community of faith,  
according to this account in Acts, has given **constant attention** to four practices  
that we might call disciplines, conducive to our spiritual formation.

It's interesting to me that Luke uses a Greek term here (*ēsan proskarterountes*)  
that means **constant attention** or perseverance  
or continuance in a consistent pattern of behavior.

We also might refer to these as *the four marks of the early church*.

I want to suggest that these basic practices are *constants in our life together*  
that help us mitigate the *variables*, the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
that come to us on any given day.

### **The first mark is constant attention to the apostles' teaching.**

It recalls that Jesus was first and foremost a rabbi, a teacher to the twelve,  
and that what we do now as disciples was what the twelve did then:  
sat at Jesus' feet, or walked with Jesus, and learned from his instruction,  
learned from the way he walked and fulfilled the words of scripture.

N. T. Wright, in his commentary on Acts, says it this way:

“Were not attention given to teaching, and to *constant*, lifelong Christian learning,  
people quickly revert to the worldview or mindset of the surrounding culture,  
and end up with minds shaped by whichever social pressures  
are most persuasive, with Jesus somewhere around as a pale influence of memory.”  
(N. T. Wright. *Acts for Everyone*, p. 44–45)

The church is called to be caretakers of the continued teaching ministry of Jesus.

And disciples must be participants in the constant practice  
of life-long Christian learning, if the church is to thrive.

### **The second mark of the church is fellowship or the common life or the shared life.**

This *could be* thought of as spiritual communion with Christ, and with those of like-mind,  
as might be suggested in Philippians 2:1–2:

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, any fellowship with the spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.”

But I think the more likely meaning is probably the more difficult and controversial meaning suggested in v. 44-45: the sharing of material possessions.

The early church lived as a single family, made up of brothers and sisters of equal standing.

There's that unstabilizing influence of the Holy Spirit!

And as such, they held everything in common:

they had a common purse, they shared resources

to protect anyone within their fellowship who might be in need.

Neither the process nor the distribution of these resources is described in Acts,

but Luke wants to show, perhaps, that spontaneous generosity as an outgrowth of the Holy Spirit was a constant goal of the early church.

Some people are quick to dismiss this as an idealized state of the church

or as a temporary state of the church, due to its small size at that time,

or as an undesirable state of socialism being practiced there.

Some will dismiss it however they choose.

But the fact remains that the earliest mark of the church required celebrating

God's generosity by being generous ourselves

and by caring practically for one another.

Maybe if we took that seriously, a quarter of the children in Durham

would not be living in poverty!

The Young Adults, the Scratch group, met for their planning retreat two Sundays ago,

and one of the topics they wanted to take seriously this year

is how we are called, as Christians, to use our money.

“Whoa!” Cherrie Henry, their facilitator said. “That's a tough topic.

People get really sensitive when we start talking about money at church.”

But that was what they were interested in learning and in sharing with one another,

and I commend them for taking a baptismal plunge into those rough waters.

Lisa Gabriel, one of our members and a Certified Financial Planner,

has been leading our Faith and Community Class these past two weeks,

considering how we might leave legacies to our families  
and to the next generation.

She has been addressing the topics of faith, wisdom, values *and money*

that we might want to impress upon our children,

talk about when we sit at home and walk along the road,

when we lie down and when we get up, so we might know

how to pass along, from generation to generation, our total love of the Lord,

not just in word, but in practical acts of caring.

That strange, unsettling influence of the Holy Spirit seems to nag us with the notion

that in life and in death, our money, also, belongs to the Lord.

### **The third mark of the early church is the breaking of bread.**

There is always a connection in Luke's writings between meals and the presence

of Jesus which gives us *constant permission* to eat together... hallelujah!

This is not necessarily a ritualized breaking of bread, like Holy Communion,

but is more likely intentional times of table fellowship, love feasts, *agape* meals,

congregational potlucks, progressive dinners, picnics,

baptism meals and funeral meals, first suppers and last suppers.

Isn't it great that the Bible proscribes a steady diet of eating together

for the prolonged health of the church and its members?

When Jesus said, "Do this, in remembrance of me," isn't he teaching and modeling a

constant practice that re-members his presence in the midst of his people

every time we come together to break-fast?

Good news, right... as long as you're invited to the banquet.

The haunting Holy Spirit has us ask, however,

whom might we have forgotten to invite and include?

### **And fourthly, the last mark of the early church is prayer.**

No one seems to challenge this assertion.

No one seems to suggest that we might call ourselves church without prayer.

Praying is as fundamental to the new covenant church as it was to the old covenant church.

Prayer is the alpha and omega of the life of faith, the beginning and the end.

It is praise and it is lament. It is how we express our love for the Lord our God  
with all our heart, and soul, and strength.

It is what the earliest believers would have tied as symbols on their hands  
and bound to their foreheads and written on the doorframes of their homes and gates.

Prayer is the inhaling and exhaling of God-love for the world.

And so, what do we make of these marks of discipleship in the early church?

Some have suggested that they are only an idealized form of the faith:

a utopian ideal, never intended actually to be realized;

rather, it is a template for the highest aspirations of our human longing.

Some suggest that the church always has looked back on these as a pristine

model of church—how the church might be if we did everything exactly right,  
the Garden of Eden, the Paradise Lost of our life together.

Do they represent an ideal, but not an actuality for our church today?

Robert Schnase, in his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, says that

“vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Intentional Faith Development,  
offering high quality learning experiences that help people understand  
Scripture, faith, and life in supportive nurture of caring relationships” (Schnase, p. 62).

And he lists a few of those, like Sunday school classes, bible studies, topical studies,  
support groups, Vacation Bible School, camps, retreats, choir, and fellowship groups,  
to name a few.

The first generation of Christians, as reflected in Acts, chose four essential marks  
of good church practice.

Roger Williams, a seventeenth century Calvinist immigrant

and founder of the Rhode Island colony, outlined a different set of

spiritual practices which he deemed essential for the “health” of his people.

During one of his trips to London in 1652, he published a little book

containing his thoughts on the nature of good spiritual formation.

The book took the form of a letter written to his wife shortly after she had recovered from a serious illness for the benefit of her sustained well-being.

The work's full title was *Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health and Their Preservatives: In which the weakest Child of God may get Assurance of his Spirituall Life and Blessednesse, And the Strongest may finde proportionable Discoveries of his Christian Growth, and the means of it.*

A synopsis of the entire book is found in the final chapter, entitled, "Helps to Preseve Spiritual Health and Cheerfulness".

(Lundin, Noll, *Voices From the Heart*. Roger Williams, p. 30-37)

Williams' marks of spiritual discipline for the well-being of the faithful included the following:

- 1) *Self-examination:*
- 2) *Prayer with fasting:*
- 3) *Avoid cold societies and places destitute of Christ. The Lord Jesus is a Christian's garment, Williams said. O let us keep that blessed garment always close about us.*
- 4) *Avoid against feeding too much on worldly comforts: friends, children, credit, profit, riches, cattle, pleasures, etc.*
- 5) *Meditate upon the joys that are to come: those victories, those crowns, those harvests, those refreshings and fruits... which God hath prepared for them that love him.*
- 6) *Bitter and untoothsome things may be of a blessing and of wholesome use: God uses them for our cleansing and purging.*
- 7) *The meditation of death: think of each day as our last, the day of our farewell, the breaking of this bubble, and the quenching of this candle.*

(Lundin, Noll, *Voices From the Heart*. Roger Williams, p. 30-37)

Says Williams, "How frequent, **how constant** ought we to be like Christ Jesus, our founder and example, in doing good, especially to the souls of all people, and especially to the household of faith, when we remember that this is our seedtime, **of which every minute is precious.**" (Williams, p. 37)

So, these practices of Roger Williams might not be *our* particular practices, our constants

of intentional faith development,  
but they might be the foundation upon which we have built our church's own  
practices, and your own personal practices of faith development.

So in the remaining time we have together, I want you to do two things.

*First, I want you to turn to a neighbor in the pew and discuss briefly some of the  
ways the church, this church or another, intentionally has nurtured your faith,  
whether through classes, or support groups, or retreats, or fellowship groups.*

*Take a few minutes to talk amongst yourselves and share your  
best practices of faith development. I will tell you when to stop.*

*And secondly, I want you to think about these important, intentional faith practices  
and name an important one you would like to see us put into place here at FPC.*

*Write it down on the blank page in your bulletin, and drop it into the offering plate,  
or put it into my box, or give it to me, so I can collect your thoughts  
and meditate and cogitate upon these things for our life together.*

In closing, what I want to suggest is that intentional faith development practices  
are the **constants** in our life together.

Just as the early church gave *constant attention* to four basic practices,  
we also should give **constant attention** to the development of our spiritual  
inner resources, so that we might be prepared to better handle the variables  
that life places before us: the unexpected illnesses, the accidents,  
the episodes of mental illness, the deep griefs, the broken relationships,  
the panic attacks, the disappointments, the miscarriages, the mistakes,  
the hurts, "the bitter and untoothsome things."

I like what Roger Williams says about the Lord Jesus being our garment,  
our favorite old shirt, our second skin, our comfort object.

Let us give constant attention to putting on Christ, to putting on his ways and words,  
and give constant attention to keeping his blessed garment close around us. Amen.