

## **“INTENTIONALITY: Why it matters”**

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 27; Matthew 7:7-27

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I'm sure we've all heard – and maybe even said – things like

“Don't worry about it; God will handle it”

“What will be will be”

“Just trust God.”

“If it's God's will, it'll happen.”

“Let go and let God.”

To be sure, sometimes there might be some wise advice there. Recognizing that there are things we can't control and situations we can't change can be freeing. But a lot of the time, when people say these well-meaning things, they end up reinforcing a mistaken idea about the nature of faith. I guess it might come in part from our Protestant convictions about grace and faith – the belief that forgiveness and belonging are ours through trust in Christ's love, and not because we do something to earn them. It's a short step from there to seeing faith as a kind of passive acceptance of whatever transpires, or even imagining God as micromanaging the events of our lives, gently steering us in the right direction in spite of ourselves, while we more or less go with the flow. I can see why that might be appealing, but I don't think it's a very sound understanding of the faith we are called to.

Throughout the Bible, we are given to understand that human beings have agency, and that what we choose and what we do matters to God.

This is front and center in the section of Matthew 7 we read:

Ask, seek, knock.

Don't follow the crowd but choose the more difficult way of integrity and faithfulness.

Be like a tree that bears good fruit.

Build your life on a solid foundation.

Elsewhere Jesus says that the first and most important commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; the second is to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells his friends that they must remember they are the body of Christ, and that they have gifts they are supposed to be putting to use for the common good.

Earlier in the same letter, he tells them that they are “God's co-workers.”

The prophet Micah reminds us that what God requires is that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Genesis 1 declares that human beings are made in the image of God. There's so much we could say about what that means, but for sure it's a big (and sobering) responsibility.

Our calling is so far from passivity: we are meant to be partners with God in the work of healing, making peace, caring for the earth, building community, doing justice, showing love. We represent Christ in the world. We are meant to live with intention – not acquiescence, not resignation, not mindlessly, not merely reacting but turning ourselves and our gifts and our energy toward some purpose. That's true for us as individuals (we'll talk more about that next week) and it's true for a faith community as well.

“If you don't know where you're going, who knows where you'll end up.”

I've heard variations of that truism in many contexts, and you probably have also. But when I talk about intentionality in the context of church and faith, I'm not thinking about setting personal goals, or taking control of your life, or mindfulness. I'm not talking about strategic planning or 5-year goals or corporate success. I'm not dissing self-help and organizational development; but for us, intentionality is different.

We recognize that faith isn't a self-help project and that the church belongs, not to us, but to Christ. We know we need God's help and that the Spirit sometimes moves in mysterious and wonderful ways in our midst. Hopefully, we hold our intentions with humility and stay open to new directions in which God might lead us. “Success” (whatever that means) isn't our goal.

For the community of faith, intentionality isn't, fundamentally, about an institution, about affordability, expediency, or convenience, about doing what we've always done, maintaining a status quo, or meeting everyone's expectations of what the church is “supposed” to be like.

For people of faith, intentionality is about *identity*. It's about calling. It's about values. It's about the gifts entrusted to us. It's about love. And it's about the particularity of how we live all that out where we are. Intentionality asks “what are we about here?”

Intentionality is an ongoing commitment to living out what we say we're about.

Intentionality is important because:

A church culture that's genuinely welcoming to newcomers doesn't just happen.

We don't grow in faith or understanding of the Bible by accident.

Friendship and trust don't just happen.

Resisting racism, sexism, and all kinds of stereotypes and –isms requires intention.

Mission that's truly compassionate and helpful... meaningful worship ...good stewardship of resources ... ministries of caring to shut-ins, families with little kids, grieving folks – all those things and more require intentionality.

Assuming that these things will happen (or just “hoping for the best”) is not enough. Intentionality is more than “good intentions.” It’s *actively* choosing words and actions that make intentions real. It’s creating structure and systems and practices that help us live out our intentions. It’s being aware of how particular choices, actions, and words do or don’t support what we say we’re about. And always trying to do better.

Intentionality can be challenging, no doubt about it. I read a book recently that talked about how we who are alive today have in front of us SO many more options for what to do with our time and with our lives than our ancestors did. There’ve always been (and still are), of course, people who have a lot more choices and people with few choices. But once upon a time most people’s lives – community, work, home, social position, etc. – were lived within a narrower range of possibilities, often much like the lives of their parents before them.

I think maybe that was often true of the church as well. The church did certain things to “be the church” and continued to do those things because they worked, or at least seemed to. People both within and outside the church shared an understanding about the role of the church in the community. Expectations around membership and participation were clear. So maybe there wasn’t such a pressing need for intentionality.

But today the church faces an almost infinite smorgasbord of options for ministry and mission. That’s exciting... but it can be as difficult and overwhelming (or paralyzing) for the church as life choices often are for individuals. We don’t want to limit our possibilities; we hate to say “no” to any good idea; we try to keep everyone happy. But the reality is that no church can do everything, be everything. To be a faithful community of faith in today’s world demands intentionality. What are we about? We have to discern and make choices, which is hard. “Yes” to one thing means saying “no” to something else. Sometimes the choices are clear. Sometimes the Spirit pushes us in a direction. Sometimes there’s less clarity and we have to make a decision and step forward, prepared to learn and be flexible and change course if necessary.

Intentionality is also difficult because it implies dedication and commitment over time. In a culture of the latest thing, quick results, and measurable goals, that seems almost quaint. And it’s often not splashy or exciting or fun or immediately rewarding. You know, we usually remember Martin Luther King Jr. for his stirring speeches and leadership in some of the most dramatic actions of the civil rights movement. But what we don’t hear a lot about is that behind those well-known events were years and *years* of pastoral work, relationship building, prayer, teaching, and literally hundreds of planning meetings in churches, community groups, the NAACP and other organizations, and with other leaders of the movement. All aimed at building a movement for justice and equality. Imagine if thousands of people in church like ours lived with that kind of intentionality.

Intentionality comes from the Latin root word “intendere,” which means “to reach, or stretch.” Which is, I think, a very interesting and helpful way to think about it.

It speaks to the reality that we aren't yet – ever – all that God desires for us, or all that we want to be. It accepts that we are – and our church's ministry is – a work in progress. It recognizes that we are active participants in that process, yet with no pretensions that we are in charge of or in control of it. It speaks to a willingness to grow, to stretch the limits of our imagination, our energy, our understanding, our abilities, our comfort ... in order to be the church.

You know, in the Catholic Church, when people come with a prayer they want to offer for themselves or for someone else, their request is sometimes referred to as an "intention." That's not language we Protestants use, and I always thought it was strange – not my understanding of what "intention" means. But I've come to think that maybe we can learn from it. I love that sense of prayer stretching or reaching toward something. It's awfully easy to make prayer a very passive thing: I'll just ask God to take care of these needs, this person, this horrible situation in the world. But what if we think of prayer as reaching out not just for help, but for more understanding of what we are praying about? What if prayer is reaching out to take the hand of God, who wants to partner with us in ministering to that need? What if our prayer included our commitment to take some action, reach out, give, help, do something differently? What if our prayers really took seriously our calling as partners with God in the work of loving the world? And then, what if our actions, our words of welcome, our open minds, our generous hands also became prayers? - prayers for healing, for justice, for hope, for changed lives... for a church that *intentionally* reflects the just and generous love of God?

Resources:

Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When you Don't Know Where You're Going!*

Pete Davis, *Dedicated*