



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

How Shall We Live Now?

Practices of a Christian Way of Life

(This is the second in a series of articles on formation for Christian living post-pandemic.)

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The “How Shall We Live Now?” series of articles is a response to the hungers and concerns of people as we emerge from the many months of the pandemic. This series seeks to address what I believe is one of the most important questions for faith formation (and the whole church) to address today: *How shall we live now?* The first article proposed that we shift the dynamic of forming faith today by focusing first on *Behaving* (practices for Christian living) leading to *Belonging* (being part of a Christian community living those practices) and integrating *Believing* (reflecting on how the Christian tradition informs our practices).

Behaving (Christian practice) is about walking with God, becoming kind, and doing justice: “*what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8). It is not about believing in God and being a good person; it is about how one becomes a good person through the practice of loving God.

What do we mean by Christian practice?

Dorothy Bass, co-editor of *Practicing Our Faith* and author of several books on Christian practices, describes a Christian practice in this way,

... a set of activities Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God’s active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ .

... the short definition of practice is “embodied wisdom”—a certain knowledge of the world is embodied and engendered by the way we go through our daily lives. There is an integral relationship between how we live and what we can know of God, other people and the world. What we believe is entangled with

what we do. We can believe more fully as we act more boldly. And we can act more boldly as we believe more fully. Christian practices invite us into Christ's radical way of being in the world.

In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg describes the centrality of practice in the Christian faith in this way,

What does it mean to love God? We all know that both the Hebrew Bible and Jesus commend and command us "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your life force, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." Indeed, it is the "greatest commandment." But what does it mean to do this? In a word, it means "practice." Loving God means paying attention to God and to what God loves. The way we do this is through "practice.

. . . Christianity is a "way," a path, a way of life. Practice is about the living of the Christian way. And "practice" really should be thought of as plural: practice is about practices, the means by which we live the Christian life. (105)

Practice is about living "the way." The aim and purpose of practice is the two transformations at the center of the Christian life: being born again, opening the heart, dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity; and becoming passionate about God's passion, the life of compassion and justice in the world. Practice is about paying attention to God and living the Christian path. (192)

Reflecting on the work of Dorothy Bass, Marcus Borg, and the authors of *Practicing Our Faith*, we can identify several important characteristics of Christian practices.

- ◆ **Practices are about paying attention to God:** This involves attending to our relationship with God, spending time in it, being intentional and thoughtful about it, valuing it, and ideally enjoying it. Paying attention to our relationship with God will shape and form us. The practices are for the deepening of our life with God and our love for God.
- ◆ **Practices are about the formation of Christian identity.** The formation of Christian identity will always involve a transformation of identity—from an identity given by the “world” to an identity in God, in Christ. The Christian life is about “conversion”—a continuing process that goes on through the course of the Christian life.
- ◆ **Practices are about the formation of Christian character.** How we behave is a function of the kind of person we have become and are becoming. Character and identity are closely connected: the internalization of a deeper Christian identity shapes character. The shaping of character happens through deeds—we become what we do. Our character is shaped by entering into a larger identity and larger self through life “in Christ.” Practice is the way this happens. The Spirit of God works through practice.

- ◆ **Practices are about nourishment.** Practice is not simply something we do. Rather, it nourishes us. Even as practice is about paying attention to God, it also nourishes and nurtures us.
- ◆ **Practices engage us in God’s activities in the world and reflect God’s grace and love.** Teresa of Avila put it this way: “Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless all people now.”
- ◆ **Practices are learned with and from other people.** We have been invited into Christian practices by Jesus. Almost always, however, other people have helped us to hear Jesus’ invitation and to learn the moves that make it possible to respond.
- ◆ **Practices come to us from the past and will be shaped by us for the future.** Our challenge and privilege are to join in each practice *where we are*. By drawing on the wisdom of the past and being creative as we put the practice into play in our own situation, we recognize that what we do will have an influence on generations to come.
- ◆ **Practices are thought-full; they rely on beliefs and develops in us certain kinds of wisdom.** The biblical story clothes each practice with images and words. Each practice relies on specific Christian beliefs; for example, the belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us hope (grieving) and allows us to repair torn relationships (forgiveness). However, belief doesn’t always come before practice: being members of communities where the Christian practices are really lived can help us to understand and embrace the central beliefs of the Christian faith more fully.
- ◆ **Each practice is a strand in a whole way of life.** Taken all together, Christian practices add up to a way to live. They are woven together: if one is missing, all are distorted in some way. On the other hand, because they are woven together, any one practice can become a gateway into faithful living.

What practices are central to forming a Christian way of life?

We can discover the most important Christian practices by drawing upon the wisdom of the Bible and the Christian tradition. At the heart of Christian practice is Jesus—in his presence and example, a way to live comes into focus. We experiences this model of living whenever we celebrate the blessings of life, serve the poor and vulnerable, offer our lives in prayer, forgive others, keep the Sabbath holy, discern God’s will for us, or make an effort to transform the world.

Without suggesting that the following Christian practices are a definitive list, they do emerge repeatedly in the Bible and Christian tradition, and have demonstrated their importance in forming a distinctively Christian way of life. These practices are illustrative of the wisdom available to us in building a Christian way of life that speaks to the challenges of living faithfully today. (The Appendix has a summary of twelve Christian practices described in the book *Practicing Our Faith*.)

- ◆ Caring for Creation
- ◆ Discernment
- ◆ Doing Justice
- ◆ Dying Well
- ◆ Eating Well
- ◆ Embracing Diversity
- ◆ Finding God in Everyday Life
- ◆ Forgiveness
- ◆ Healing
- ◆ Honoring the Body
- ◆ Hospitality
- ◆ Household Economics
- ◆ Keeping Sabbath
- ◆ Praying
- ◆ Peace and Reconciliation
- ◆ Reading the Bible
- ◆ Saying Yes and Saying No
- ◆ Serving the Poor and Vulnerable
- ◆ Shaping and Forming Communities
- ◆ Singing Our Lives
- ◆ Stewardship and Generosity
- ◆ Testimony
- ◆ Worship

We form people in these practices of the Christian way of life by drawing upon the wisdom of the Bible and Christian tradition, and connecting the practices to the “signs of the times” – the struggles, joys, needs, and hungers of people and communities today, and equipping people with the skills and ways to live the practice in their daily life.

There are many fundamental human needs and hungers of people today (individuals, families, and communities) as we emerge from the disruptions created by the pandemic and broader social issues. Formation connects Christian practices to the signs of our times, such as overcoming isolation and rebuilding community; addressing wellbeing (e.g., stress and anxiety); dealing with loss and grief; working for justice for all people, promoting peace and reconciliation, developing racial understanding and equality, caring for creation, respecting the dignity and rights of all people; and much more.

Reflection

- ◆ *What are the “signs of the times” in your community?*
- ◆ *Which Christian practices can address the hungers and needs of individuals, families, and the whole community?*

Next Article in the Series

In the third article of the series, I will describe what a “practices curriculum” might look like in a church and how we can educate for Christian practices.

Works Cited

- Bass, Dorothy, and Craig Dykstra, editors. *Practicing Our Faith*. Augsburg Fortress, 2010, 2019.
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- Bass, Dorothy, and Don Richter. *Way to Live*. Upper Room Books, 2002.
- Borg, Marcus. *Heart of Christianity*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.

Twelve Christian Practices

(Based on *Practicing Our Faith*. Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, editors. Augsburg Fortress, 2019)

Discernment

Our decisions and our search for guidance take place in the active presence of a God who intimately cares about our life situations and who invites us to participate in the divine activities of healing and transformation (Frank Rogers, Jr.). Christians believe we are not alone in the midst of uncertain insights and conflicting impulses. Discernment is the intentional practice by which a community or an individual seeks, recognizes, and intentionally takes part in the activity of God in concrete situations.

Dying Well

Those who face death experience the living presence of God through the living presence of the community that cherishes and mourns them (Amy Plantinga Pauw). Death is a frightening prospect, for the specter of death destroys any illusion that we are in full control of our lives. How is it, then, that some people are able to die with the assurance that death is not the final word? In the Christian practice of dying well, Christian people do things with and for one another in response to God's strong love, translating into concrete acts our belief in the resurrection of Christ, and of ourselves. Dying well embraces both lament and hope, and both a sense of divine judgment and an awareness of divine mercy.

Forgiveness

Practicing forgiveness can produce dramatic transformations in our imaginations and the psychological, social and political horizons of our lives (L. Gregory Jones). The practice of forgiveness is not simply a one-time action or an isolated feeling or thought. Forgiveness involves us in a whole way of life that is shaped by an ever-deepening friendship with God and with other people. The central goal of this practice is to reconcile, to restore communion—with God, with one another, and with the whole creation. L. Gregory Jones writes, "Forgiveness works through our ongoing willingness to give up certain claims against one another, to give the truth when we access our relationships with one another, and to give gifts of ourselves by making innovative gestures that offer a future not bound by the past."

Healing

Healing is an indispensable part of the coming wholeness that God intends for all creation (John Koenig). The practice of healing is a central part of the reconciling activity of God in the world. Healing events are daily signs of the divine mercy that is surging through the world and guiding it

toward its final perfection. This is true whether they take place by the sharing of chicken soup, the performance of delicate surgery, or the laying on of hands in a service of worship.

Honoring the Body

To hold a newborn in one's arms is to know both the sacredness and the vulnerability of the body; indeed, it is to know that there is an intimate connection between sacredness and vulnerability (Stephanie Paulsell). The practice of honoring the body is born of the confidence that our bodies are made in the image of God's own goodness. As the place where the divine presence dwells, our bodies are worthy of care and blessing and ought never to be degraded or exploited. It is through our daily bodily acts that we might live more fully into the sacredness of our bodies and the bodies of others. Stephanie Paulsell writes, "The practice of honoring the body challenges us to remember the sacredness of the body in every moment of our lives... Because our bodies are so vulnerable, we need each other to protect and care for them."

Hospitality

To welcome the stranger is to acknowledge him as a human being made in God's image; it is to treat her as one of equal worth with ourselves— indeed, as one who may teach us something out of the richness of experiences different from our own (Ana Maria Pineda). The need for shelter is a fundamental human need. None of us ever knows for sure when we might be uprooted and cast on the mercy of others. But how do we overcome our fear in order to welcome and shelter a stranger? The Christian practice of hospitality is the practice of providing a space to take in a stranger. It also encompasses the skills of welcoming friends and family to our tables, to claim the joy of homecoming.

Household Economics

To choose simplicity is to live into complicated questions without easy answers, taking one step that may make another step possible (Sharon Daloz Parks). Good economic practice—positive ways of exchanging goods and services—is about the well-being, the livelihood, of the whole household. In the face of great economic and environmental challenges, the Christian practice of household economics calls on us to manage our private homes for the well-being and livelihood of the small planet home we all share.

Keeping Sabbath

Sabbath keeping is not about taking a day off but about being recalled to our knowledge of and gratitude for God's activity in creating the world, giving liberty to captives, and overcoming the powers of death (Dorothy C. Bass). "I'm so busy... I just don't have enough time to complete all my work." Do you need a break, but doubt you have time for it? What about those who don't have sufficient

work to sustain themselves? The practice of keeping Sabbath helps us to resist the tyranny of too much or too little work.

Saying Yes and Saying No

Christian asceticism is not spiritual boot camp, but neither is it effortless. Learning when and how, to what, and to whom to give our yes or our no is a lifelong project (M. Shawn Copeland). Tough decisions and persistent effort are required of those who seek lives that are whole and holy. If we are to grow in faithful living, we need to renounce the things that choke off the fullness of life that God intended for us, and we must follow through on our commitments to pray, to be conscientious, and to be in mutually supportive relations with other faithful persons. These acts take self-discipline. We must learn the practice of saying no to that which crowds God out and yes to a way of life that makes space for God.

Shaping Communities

Coordinating a community's practices through good governance helps to make its way of life, clear, visible and viable (Larry L. Rasmussen). The shaping of communities is the practice by which we agree to be reliable personally and organizationally. This practice takes on life through roles and rituals, laws and agreements—indeed, through the whole assortment of shared commitments and institutional arrangements that order common life. In one sense, then, shaping communities is not just a single practice of its own. It is the practice that provides the choreography for all the other practices of a community or society.

Singing our Lives

If music is the language of the soul made audible, then human voices, raised in concert in human gatherings, are primary instruments of the soul (Don Saliers). What we sing and how we sing reveals much of who we are, and entering into another's song and music making provides a gateway into their world, which might be much different from our own. Something is shared in singing that goes beyond the words alone. This something has taken shape over many centuries in a practice that expresses our deepest yearning and dearest joy: the practice of singing our lives to God.

Testimony

Testimony occurs in particular settings—a courtroom or a church—where a community expects to hear the truth spoken (Thomas Hoyt, Jr.). In testimony, people speak truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for the edification of all. The practice of testimony requires that there be witnesses to testify and others to receive and evaluate their testimony. It is a deeply shared practice—one that is possible only in a community that recognizes that falsehood is strong, but that yearns nonetheless to know what is true and good.