

10. The Heart of the Matter: Practice

What does it mean to love God with all your heart, with all your life force, and with all your mind, and with all your strength? Loving God means paying attention to God and to what God loves. "Practice" is about practices, the means by which we live the Christian life.

Practice is center for the world's major religions but not so much so for modern western Christianity, especially Protestantism. Reasons:

- The "faith" vs. "works" controversy of the Reformation (practice sounds like "works").
- Faith came to mean "belief" in a certain set of propositions and not about "doing". Recall ch. 2 discussion that faith is "believing God": practice is how we "believe" God.
- The notion that God is a reality who can be known (have a relationship with) has become quite foreign in the modern world. Living the Christian life today is seen basically as being about our behavior in the world: ethics, or "being good", or justice work.

But Christian practice historically is about our relationship to both God and neighbor, about both Spirit and behavior, and about both God and the world. In the emerging paradigm, the Christian life is about relationship and transformation, so practice is central. Practice is all the things Christians do together and individually as a way of paying attention to God: actively participating in life of church both on Sunday morning and in the surrounding community at other times of the week; individual devotional times of praying and studying the Bible; and loving what/who God loves through compassion and justice in the world.

The Purposes of Practice

Practice is about:

- **Paying attention to God.** Just as with human relationships, our relationship with God grows and deepens to the extent we pay attention to the relationship. Our relationships shape and form us.
- **Formation of Christian identity.** Identity is our sense of who we are. We acquire a sense of who we are from our relationships and the culture around us. Our culture bombards (assaults?) us with messages that shape our identity and what is worth valuing. The U.S. culture values attractiveness, achievement, and affluence. We grow up with a sense of falling short or desperate fear of falling short of the "ideal".

The Christian life is about "conversion": the transformation from an identity given by the "world" to an identity in God, in Christ. Just as it is *not* a matter of "measuring up" to the world, it is *not* a "measuring up" to God—it is *not* requirements and rewards. The emphasis is on God's love.

The basic message of the gospels: You are created by God; you are a child of God; you are beloved by God; you are accepted by God. This is true of each one

of us and everybody else. We receive that identity shaped by God's acceptance of us and have it fill our life and soul.

- **Formation of Christian character.** How we behave is a function of the kind of person we have become and are becoming, our character. Having our Christian identity fill our life and soul shapes our character. What we do also shapes our character. Our character is shaped by entering into a larger identity and larger self through life "in Christ". The Spirit of God working through practice makes this happen. Our character and values are transformed from being of this world to being of God "in Christ".
- **Nourishment.** Practice nourishes us. Collective practices such as worship as well as individual devotional practices nourish us. We hunger and thirst for "the more" and our practice, paying attention to God, nourishes and nurtures us. Practice can become a "thin place (ch. 8), a sacrament of the sacred.
- **Compassion and justice.** These are the primary "fruits of the Spirit", the Christian life. Paying attention to God is not only about loving God, but about loving that which God loves and becoming passionate about that which God is passionate about.

Practice is about living "the Way". Practice makes transformation possible in our own personal relationship with God and with all those who (and that which) God loves.

Practices: Formation and Nourishment

Specific practices:

- **Being part of a church.** Be part of a church that nourishes you even as it stretches you. Find one that makes your heart glad. Participation in worship is vital to Christian formation. The tradition is internalized. We praise God, we draw closer to "the More" that is beyond ourselves, we affirm that God alone is the source of all blessing, and we are nourished.

Christian education matters for both children and adults. Important points for children's Christian education:

- Don't teach in a way such that they'll need to unlearn things later on.
- Use curricula coming out of the emerging paradigm (there are a lot).
- Train the teachers to use that curricula to teach from the emerging paradigm perspective.
- Don't assume that children are literalists. Stories with talking animals, fantasy are appreciated and they can see the meaning in a story even though the story is not literal-factually true.

Adult Christian education matters! It is difficult to give one's heart to something that one's head rejects. Adult classes and small-groups should be strongly relevant to the formation of Christian identity and character. Study groups and faith-sharing groups combine formation with nourishment and intimacy.

As part of a church we are given opportunities for the collective practice of compassion and justice for people within the church and beyond the doors of the

church. We need to be part of a community of memory that affirms a vision of life very different from modern culture.

- **Prayer.** Prayer is primarily about paying attention to God. Three major categories of prayer: verbal prayer, meditation, and contemplation.
 - **Verbal Prayer:** adoration or praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and petition. Intercessory and petitionary prayers are problematical for many Christians today. Why do we need to tell God what we need or wish if God already knows our needs and wishes? Do these prayers treat God like a vending machine? Also suggests that God is an interventionist who *sometimes* answers prayers. What about unanswered prayers of significant things like deliverance from the Holocaust, healing, safety during war, etc.

If God is not an interventionist, why do intercessory and petitionary prayers?

- Way of caring.
- Prayers for healing sometimes have an effect though the data is not conclusive. But interventionism or psychosomatic explanations are not the reason. Both claim to know the "mechanism" at work in the relation between prayer and healing.
- To refuse to do these types of prayers because you can't imagine how they work, and therefore, they can't work, is more than a bit of intellectual pride.
- These prayers like the other forms of prayer serve as a way to greater intimacy with God.

The whole purpose of prayer is about intimacy. Talk with God about your day. Report out as you do with an intimate confidant. Our relationship with God deepens through intimacy, through disclosure, through conversation.

- **Meditation:** reflecting on an image or phrase, we enter into the text, and the images of the text become a means for the Spirit to speak to us.
 - **Contemplation:** prayer and practice of internal silence so that we sit silently in the presence of God. Usually involves the silent repetition of a mantra. The mantra is not meditated upon—the mantra provides a focus for the mind so that the rest of the self can sink into silence to the deepest level of the heart, where we open out into the sea of being that is God.
- **A Daily Discipline.** There is great value in establishing a regular daily practice, a specific time set aside each day for paying attention to God. It can be a combination of prayer and Christian reading or just prayer. It is a reminder of God that is important for both Christian formation and nourishment.
 - **Practice in the Dailiness of Life.** Many ways of remembering God in the course of the day and week, including brief prayers or rituals of one kind or another.
 - **Christian Fellowship.** "Christian companionship"—having one or more friends with whom one can share intimately about one's Christian journey. Christian

friendship provides a context in which questions about God's presence in our lives can be asked, talked about, reflected on, and prayed about.

Practicing Compassion and Justice

Loving God means participating in God's passion that is compassion and justice. God loves the world, not just you and me and us. Compassion is the primary virtue shaping our personal relationships with each other in the church and outside the church. Justice is the social or systemic form of compassion. Church systems examples: ordination of women, status of homosexuals in the church, and role of laity in the governance of the church.

Practice of compassion means both charity and justice.

- **Charity:** direct philanthropy—giving directly to those who are suffering; social reform—creating and supporting organizations for their care.
- **Justice:** social transformation—changing society so that the structures do not privilege some and cause suffering for others.

Charity is always good and will always be necessary and is the most popular form of compassion because it never offends. Justice is also important but usually neglected because justice often offends. Bishop Dom Helder Camara: "When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint; when I asked why there were so many poor, they called me a communist."

Charity means helping the victims. Justice asks "why are there so many victims?" and then seeks to change the causes of victimization—social transformation. Governments and powerful and those who are comfortable do not like that!

We are all called to be political in the broad sense of being aware of the impact of systems on people's lives and of God's passion for those who are disadvantaged and victimized by systems. Recall ch. 7: practice of justice involves consciousness-raising within the church about the effects of social systems on people's lives, and then acting on that awareness in ways appropriate to who we are.

We (wealthy or middle class) need to develop an imaginative sympathy for the poor. For the most part we don't know the poor, whether the unemployed poor or the working poor; we don't know their lives. But don't beat ourselves up over that ignorance. Do something positive—enlighten ourselves about their lives. Imagine what it is like to live on minimum wage salary. Work in church programs or agencies that serve the poor. Consciousness-raising is learning about people and the way systems affect their (and our) lives.

The practice of justice affects the way we vote. Justice issues include: adequate public school funding, health care for those without insurance, support for those who are mentally or physically disadvantaged, food for the hungry, etc. Be thoughtful of positions of political leaders and the effects of ballot measures on those whom God is passionate about.

Give substantially to organizations whose purpose is to change the world in the direction of greater *justice* (they seek to transform the conditions that produce the

suffering), not solely to the usual *charity* organizations (they seek to care for people who are suffering). Work for transformation and not simply aid. Don't try to know it all or do it all—we all do our part. The practice of compassion and justice is both something to be done as well as the primary fruit of the Spirit. It is what an open heart is naturally compelled to do.

Concluding Comments

These practices are not chores to be done. Do one or two that nourishes you. Christian practice is about walking with God, becoming kind, and doing justice. 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.

Questions

1. Why are the traditional Christian practices or disciplines not emphasized today?
2. Why or how are the Christian practices in fact so necessary to deepening our relationship with God?
3. In what way(s) is the Christian identity different than the identity the world wants to give us?
4. How does Christian practice shape our character?
5. What are the primary "fruits of the Spirit"?
6. In what ways is being a part of our church essential to your spiritual formation and the nourishment of your soul?
7. In what ways is prayer essential to your spiritual formation and the nourishment of your soul?
8. How do you feel about prayers of petition and intercession?
9. What are your experiences with any of the various forms of prayer Borg describes?
10. How is "charity" different from "justice"?
11. Why is practice of "charity" so much easier or popular than the practice of "justice"? Why is the practice of justice so controversial?
12. What are some ways our church could raise our consciousness about the people God is passionate about—the poor and disadvantaged?
13. What are some ways you could or do practice compassion and justice?