

Spiritual Practices-Why Bother?—Jeremiah 18: 1-6
(September 9, 2018-16th Sunday after Pentecost)

There is a saying that goes, “how you spend your days is how you spend your life.” It’s another way of saying that habits matter. Taken cumulatively over a lifetime habits form us and define us to others. It’s no different in the life of faith; participation in certain rituals and practices gives shape to our lives as Christians, as followers of Jesus. So today, Fred and I are starting a sermon series on spiritual practices, some you’ll identify as specifically Christian and others are shared among many traditions. We’re going to run this series through to Advent with some breaks for other occasions. The practices we’ll focus on in this series have stood the test of time, engaging spiritual pilgrims and seekers through the centuries. Here is a guide for this journey we’ll be taking:

- “Practicing Together”-Worship.
- “Healing Busyness”-Keeping Sabbath.
- “Entertaining Angels Unawares”-Hospitality.
- “Having Enough”-Gratitude.
- “Ask and You Shall Receive”-Praying with Intention.
- “Being Read by a Book”-Praying with Scripture.
- “Listening for the Soul”-Praying with Silence.
- “Going Barefoot Through Life”-Paying Attention.
- “Now What?”

But before we head down this road, a note of caution. Are you familiar with the notion of technology as a disruptor? People who describe technology as a disruptive force refer to the way it disrupts conventional systems. For example, Netflix and YouTube have disrupted the television industry, Uber and Lyft have disrupted the taxi industry, and the internet as a whole has disrupted the news industry. God is a disruptive force as well. God is a disruptor of our attempts at control. The image many of us carry of a life engaged in spiritual practices is of blissful mountaintop experiences of unity and oneness. Those happen for sure. Most often though engaging in spiritual practices begins with discomfort and sometimes pain. The bliss, the feeling of unity comes because we’ve surrendered. We’ve let God disrupt our lives, we’ve set our egos aside, we’ve given up control, we’ve surrendered our agendas, we’ve faced our fears and our failings, we’ve taken off the masks we wear, we’ve faced the things we hide from ourselves and others. Engaging in spiritual practices is about losing yourself in order to find yourself. This is not an easy journey. You need to be willing to lose those things, some of them precious that stand between you and your true identity as a child of God. That’s why it’s important to do these things together, in community. That’s the note of caution.

Let’s get on to today’s topic—why bother? Why bother with any of this? Life is so hectic and busy; we can get stressed and depressed wondering how we can fit any of these practices into our lives. Why bother? Here is another question, who or what do you want to shape your life? “Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my

hand...”¹ says God to the nation of Israel through the prophet Jeremiah. For Christians the God we have come to know in the stories of Israel, the life of Jesus and the movement of the Holy Spirit is the shaper of our lives. We need spiritual practices because if we don’t allow God to shape us then other gods will shape us.

There is no such thing as a neutral life, there is no such thing as not choosing whom or what will shape you. If we don’t intentionally choose the shaper of our lives we will, by default, be shaped by the values and the culture of our time. We are created in the divine image, but many of us allow ourselves to become mis-shaped because we have lost touch with the shaper of our lives and so we allow other forces to form us. Marketers turn us into consumers, governments make us into taxpayers, jobs turn us into employees, children turn us into parents, schools turn us into students, ill health turns us into patients and on and on. Why bother? Because the truth is that we are not just roles, objects or parts in this life, we are created in the divine image, children of God. We are meant to be whole and the only way to live in that truth, to grow in that image, to be shaped by God is to intentionally choose to do so through the practices of our faith. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Romans, “don’t be conformed to the world, but be transformed by God.”²

Why bother? Saint Augustine put it this way; “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”³ I put it this way, “we are hard wired for God”. Why bother? Because something in us yearns for meaning, a purpose to our lives, and the fulfillment of that yearning and purpose, we believe as Christians, can only be found in relationship with God.⁴ Why bother? Because if we don’t own up to our hunger for God we will try to fill it in other ways. Addictions give us highs that are fleeting and consequences that are disastrous. Consumerism gives us pleasures that fade and enslaves us to debt. Success and power give us approval from society but often brings on loneliness and emptiness from the violence of never being sure of one’s place in the world and always needing to be better than others.

Why bother? Because our very lives are at stake. Because it is possible to be alive and not really be living. Christian spiritual practices hold out the promise of the new life that is promised in the gospels. Instead of seeing a world that we can manipulate for our benefit we will see a world that is sacred and worthy of reverence. Instead of power and status, we will seek humble and joyful service. In place of retribution and revenge, we will aspire to forgiveness and reconciliation. In the midst of grief, disease and death we will see possibilities for healing and new life. Instead of fear and anxiety we will trust

¹ Jeremiah 18: 6

² Paraphrase of Romans 12:2

³ Augustine, *Saint Augustine: Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

⁴ Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) p.5.

more readily. We will be released from the false god of self into the embrace of community, leading others who yearn for what we have claimed.⁵

Why bother? Because we all need a place of rest and belonging, a home. Because we all need to know that we are loved not for anything we achieve or do but simply because we are. I invite you to take this journey with Fred and I over the next several weeks. Some practices we have more experience with than others, we are by no means experts. We are simply fellow pilgrims who can't shake our restlessness for God. May God richly bless us in the weeks to come. Amen.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

⁵ Thompson, p.16