

Practicing Our Faith

*A sermon preached on Acts 2:42-47 on Sunday, August 16, 2026,
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*
I.

Yesterday morning, Kelly Auditorium was a swarm of activity. Many of us gathered for Serve Together, a morning spent putting hands and feet to our commitments of faith. Together, we created backpacks for kids who live with food insecurity and toiletry bags for the imprisoned. We wrote notes to the anxious and hurting and postcards to our congressional leaders in support of religious freedom for all. We made bookmarks for single moms encouraging their efforts, rebuilt a blessing box where anyone can find food if needed, and tended to immigrant families in our community at a place of hope and belonging. We met our mission partners, and felt inspired all over again by their work and impact. And we enjoyed about the best taco bar in town, thanks to the tireless efforts of our Missions Committee and Pastor Kyle who prepared it. It was a great day serving together, of course, in part because it was a day to practice our faith.

II.

Today, we begin a journey through this fall season of focused conversation and action around the practices of the Christian faith. Prompted by the thoughtful work of Dorothy Bass and a host of Christian practitioners in their book, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, we'll consider together the things we *do* (not just the things we *think* or *believe*) that make our lives – personally and communally – lives lived in the abundance of Christ. Dorothy Bass says that “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of

God's active presence for the life of the world in Christ Jesus.”¹ The practices they describe are ordinary, the stuff of everyday life: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, singing our lives. But as she reminds the reader, each of these practices emerge from our experience with the presence of God, and when woven together, these practices “suggest the patterns of a faithful Christian way of life for our time.”²

Adding to that, practices of the Christian faith, theologian Craig Dykstra says, are “habitations of the Spirit. They are not, finally, activities we do to make something spiritual happen in our lives. Nor are they duties we undertake to be obedient to God. Rather, they are patterns of communal action that create openings in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us. They are places where the power of God is experienced. In the end, these are not ultimately our practices but forms of participation in the practice of God.”³

You hear some common themes in these various definitions, as the word “practice” is key here. For those of us who are perfectionists or driven by a need to succeed, to do things right, well, efficiently and comprehensively, do note that we’re talking about *practices*, not *perfections*. The point is not to master them, but rather to engage them, to let these things we do inform our daily living. Think about the language we use around sports — football practice, yoga practice — or even some professional endeavors — practicing

¹ Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, p5.

² Ibid.

³ Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed., p66.

medicine or law. In similar ways, the Christian life is built on a series of practices that, if done, have the capacity to inform every part of our lives.

Let's note that practice requires participation. You can't practice a life and also let it just slip by, unnoticed or mindless. Practice insists on actual things that you do, sometimes throughout the day, sometimes every day or every week, sometimes as the spirit leads. Indeed, one becomes a runner by running. (I'm told.) One becomes a basketball player by playing basketball. One learns to knit by knitting, to drive by driving, to cook by cooking. You might even say that one learns to be a Christian by Christian-ing, which is to say, by doing the things that Christians do.

We know, though, that following Jesus might start in your heart, being swept into the passion of responding to his love. Or maybe for you, following Jesus might start in your mind, thinking your way into the mystery of Love-made-flesh. But it's when a love drops from the mind and the heart into the body that it takes on a new form. When faith involves your hands and feet, your arms and legs, your movements and rhythms and habits, it's embodied. Practiced. Made real. The late followers of St. Francis of Assisi would say, "We don't think ourselves into a new way of living; we live ourselves into a new way of thinking."⁴ And you know that any conversation about practices is but another opportunity to quote the incomparable Annie Dillard, "how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives."⁵

III.

Those first Christians, they knew this. In the shadow of Pentecost when that holy wind of God still fluttered all around them creating something

⁴ As quoted by Richard Rohr, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-new-way-of-thinking-2019-10-03/>

⁵ Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*.

wholly new, the first Christians set for themselves a series of practices — of things they did that made them uniquely Christian. Modeled on the life of Jesus himself, these actions of faith oriented those first followers “who belonged to the Way” of Christ. When the dynamism of Pentecost settled into the dailiness of the Christian life, “all who believed were together,” the writer says, “and had all things in common.”

Some of those things held in common were, well, *things*: possessions used for any in need, and even, as we read later in Acts, their homes and lands. But among what they held in common were habits, practices, and stories, all pretty simple: “devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” It was a way of life so ordinary it’s captured in just a handful of verses, a way David Whyte describes of “doing the same good work,” and watching it mature “in our daily visitations into something we could not fully imagine.”⁶ In such simple, routine practices, their priorities for the Christian life matched the words and confessions used to describe it. Later in Acts, we’ll learn that this early community became known for their great boldness, that boldness will be their distinctive, just as much as a common table, a common rhythm, a common praise, a common unity. Indeed, we’re given a vision here of what church at its heart can and should be.

These practices that they did, though, they weren’t new by any stretch, but now they were imbued with significance and meaning beyond the ordinary. Their prayers weren’t just perfunctory, but rather were opportunities to bind up oneself with one’s brothers and sisters and the God

⁶ David Whyte, “Routine,” *Consolations II: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, p225.

who created them all. Reading scripture didn't just feel like the same old words, but rather were opportunities for new understanding. Eating a meal together wasn't just an ordinary meal, but rather it recalled for them that final meal the disciples shared with Jesus. In these practices of faith, renewed awareness and gratitude had infused them. These were no longer insignificant or rote, but imbued with the kind of Spirit that could not help but to prompt their awe.

IV.

Pastor and author Will Willimon shared a story once of his children and the dinner table. He and his wife were talking about the rhythms of their days, how they fly from one thing to the next – from work, to picking up the kids, to making dinner, to bathtime, to bedtime, to collapsing in the chair before they went to bed and did it all over again. As they were talking, he had this epiphany. “You know what honey,” Willimon said, “we should just feed our kids an early supper and rush them off to bed so that you and I could sit and share our quiet, leisurely, uninterrupted meal!” As he said it, he imagined how nice it would be – just them, without the messiness and unpredictability that children at the dinner table can bring.

“NO!” his wife said emphatically, “how will they learn to eat at the table if they don't get a chance to practice, if they don't get to watch us and learn?”

Willimon reflected on that, saying, “you know, she was right. And what she says about family meals goes for the Lord's meal too.” I hear that story and think of each of us like those children – coming to God's table of love, without a clue sometimes as to what to expect and maybe whining a little about what's on the menu and who our fellow table guests are. Sometimes these practices of the faith aren't always our first choice. I won't ask for a

show of hands of who among us would have rather slept in this morning than making a trek to the church house for worship! Sometimes the practices are difficult, or boring, or laborious, or perfunctory. Sometimes we're just not feeling it. Sometimes we are so weary, we wonder if God would rather us just hole up in a dark, quiet room and rest for a while.

I don't believe it's an accident that in adopting the habits and routines of this Christian life, the writer of Acts tells us that "awe came upon everyone." Living out the practices of faith elicits an emotional response from followers. When our personal and communal lives are shaped by these small but significant rhythms, we are more easily able to see the Spirit of God at work. Even as change descends upon us and calls forth our base feelings of fear or anxiety, protectiveness and isolation, by daily practicing our faith, when we practice our faith, we are reminded that the God we seek and serve is the same God yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

You might wonder, *why are we spending the fall talking about practicing our faith? These are obvious! Don't we all know what we're doing here?* That's why this conversation about Christian practice matters deeply right now. As one theologian says, there's a growing, widespread sense that "daily life is losing its coherence and grounding."⁷ I know you feel this, because you tell me regularly. Anxiety about how much it costs to live becomes every third or fourth thought you have all day, every day. Anger at corruption and inhumanity at the highest levels of leadership stirs in your belly like a poison. Fear infects your outlook for what tomorrow will hold, what the midterm elections will bring, what we'll experience next year, what happens as the world warms and wars and pulls apart at the seams. We doomscroll and

⁷ Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed., pxiv.

disengage and despair, paralyzed in our despondency about where to even begin in charting a different way. Now as it has throughout all human history, practice pulls us from the reverie of daze or despair. Practice aligns body, heart, and mind with the hope of God for this world. Practice, when done together, reminds us of what's possible that we just can't see or know or experience alone.

V.

And so as we begin this semester-long exploration of the practices of Christian faith, I'm giving you a bit of homework. School's back in session now. It's time! But your homework this week is rather simple — first, pay attention to how you already practice your faith. Simply notice what you're already doing. Perhaps for you it's a simple prayer at meals, or in the morning and at night. Maybe you pray in times of fear or crisis, times when you need a divine reminder that you are not alone. Maybe you practice hospitality, welcoming a friend or stranger when you might not otherwise do so. Maybe you practice sabbath, like setting aside time one day for particular rest and renewal. Maybe you find a window of time during the day for reflection and silence. Maybe your practice might be working daily to forgive another person, when they do something as simple as missing a meeting or as tough as breaking your heart.

No matter what your practice or practices are, I want you to pay attention to them this week. Make a list - mental or written. Notice what that practice does for you. Does it calm you or energize you? Does it pull you deeper into yourself or connect you more deeply with someone else? Is it connected to any other practices you've adopted? Maybe you see a pattern of things you do? How frequently do you do these practices? Are there any

particular triggers for them, or are they simply habits now in your day? How does this practice embody for you the Christian life? Rather, how is your faith stronger and more real by doing it? Why do you do it?

Do that first. Then, I want you to notice what practices might be missing from your daily life. Perhaps you always create space for sabbath but you struggle to forgive a partner or child or colleague or friend who has hurt you. Maybe you love to celebrate the lives of those around you in all facets of their living, but you ignore care for your own physical, emotional, spiritual, mental well-being. Start considering what adjustments might you consider doing to make yourself more fully available to that practice. Who in your life do you see practicing it well? What might you learn from them?

I do think our deep dive into Christian practices might change us – personally and communally – from the inside out. It might create new rhythms for your days, or build new commitments for our church. It might open you in ways you hadn't ever anticipated. God only knows! But when that holy love we carry drops from our head to heart to hands and feet, habits and rhythms, into the living of these days, I'm certain that nothing short of awe will come upon us.

May it be so! Amen!