

Spiritual Practice

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Micah 6:6-8

For the most part, we are pretty good at proclaiming God's love for us. Throughout my life, in my Meeting and within my family, I have heard this message, and taken it to heart. God loves *me*. What I am less good at emphasizing, and what I find more difficult, is *expressing* my love for God.

What does it mean to love God? I would suggest this morning that the answer is found in the words—**Spiritual Practice**. *Practice* is about *living* our faith, which means paying attention to who God is, and what God wants us to be and to become. With the help of Marcus Borg, Jesus scholar and theologian, I would suggest that there are at least three practices that help us to identify what God wants us to be and to become...

First is the practice of paying attention to God in our lives and in our world. As I have shared here before, I do not know of any other reason why we are on this earth except to grow spiritually. Of course this growth has many different dimensions, but it at least requires us to ask in each and every experience of life, “How is God working here?” and “What spiritual lesson or lessons am I learning?”

Paying attention to our relationship with God while asking these important queries, will *shape* who we are.

A second, practice is about spiritual nurture and the formation of character.

Worship is nourishing. We gather in silence as a community to be spiritually nourished by God and one another...to be made *whole*, and to recognize a world beyond just “me” to a world of “we.” It is through spiritual retreats, practicing the spiritual disciplines, spiritual nurture groups and worship that our spiritual character is formed. It is by following these practices that we move from a limited self to a larger self, where we learn patience, openness, love and care for one another.

A Third practice is about compassion and justice. Compassion and justice are God’s passion. To love God means to participate in God’s passion. This practice is important both within religious institutions and in the world beyond such institutions. Within our faith, and for that matter within all faith traditions, ***compassion*** is the primary virtue that shapes our relationships in the Beloved Community. In matters of justice, we are constantly working on various issues, with two of the most recent being justice for the immigrant and support of the sanctuary movement, and becoming an Open and Affirming community, where we express justice for those of differing sexual orientations.

The practice of compassion means both charity and justice. Marcus Borg writes, “The distinction between these two is important.” In quoting Vida Scudder, he lists three ways that Christians can respond to a growing awareness of human suffering: **1. Direct philanthropy, 2. Social reform and 3. Social transformation.** Direct philanthropy means giving directly to those who are suffering...Social reform means creating and supporting organizations for their care, and social transformation is about *justice*, or changing society so that the structures do not privilege some and cause suffering for others.

Historically, Christians have been very good at supporting the first two but come up short on the third. This is easy to understand...Charity never offends, but a passion for justice often does offend. Charity means helping the victims...Justice asks, “Why are there so many victims?” Following the asking of the question there is usually an effort to *change the causes* of victimization. And this part can become offensive. As a Roman Catholic Bishop from Brazil said, “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.”

Compassion and justice are central to who we are as a faith community. We are called to participate in the passion of God, loving that which God loves, and God loves compassion and justice.

In summary, the purposes of spiritual practice are three: *To help us pay attention to God...to help form spiritual character and nourish the life of the spirit...and to sensitize us to be compassionate and justice seeking followers of Jesus.*

In a few words the passage which I read from Micah earlier combines the practice of paying attention to God with kindness and justice. Micah asks, “What does the Lord require of you?” His answer: “To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.” Spiritual practice is about walking with God, becoming kind or compassionate, and doing justice. You see, practice moves us beyond just *believing* in God and being a “good” person. **Practice is about how one becomes a good person through the practice of loving God.**

I close with these words attributed to the French Quaker, Stephen Grellet, a man who lived a life of spiritual practice: *“I expect to pass through this world but once. Any good thing that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now; let me not withhold or defer it, for I shall not pass this way again.”*