

**Romans 12:1-8**

12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.

12:3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

12:4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,

12:5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

12:6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;

12:7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;

12:8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

**Proclamation of the Word**

You have heard the old joke.

The musician asks the cab driver: How do I get to Carnegie Hall?

Cabbie: Practice, practice, practice

Practice- we do it for everything. Practice our scales to play piano, practice drills for football, our lines for a play. We practice a foreign language and do practice questions for the SAT. Our choirs practice every week on Wednesdays.

We say Doctors are practicing medicine. Lawyers practice the law. Your pastors have Masters of Divinity degrees. I suppose pastors practice divinity? (If we ever do master Divinity, I am sure it will be the end of all time and Jesus has returned.)

In business and organizations we speak of "Best Practices" for success.

Picture the graceful gymnast. She elegantly balances on the high beam, lifting herself up on one tiptoe and down again, bows low with effortless balance. She moves with ease and deftly maneuvers a beam only inches wide. She leaps and smiles landing securely on the beam, defying gravity, making it look easy. How does she do it? She has worked at it so hard. Practice and hundreds of thousands of repetitions of the moves. Over the years, her muscles develop memory and her athletics are matched by the graceful art of her sport. The reason she looks so skilled and natural? Practice.

Or picture a little league baseball practice. Awkwardly wearing a glove to try to catch a fly-ball or any ball for that matter, the kids begin to work at the skills to play the game. They spend hours hitting, learning to run to a base, then all the bases. And then there is throwing. Contrast that with professional players. They make everything look smooth, easy, effortless. My brother, a third baseman, used to practice throwing the baseball in the back yard for hours in addition to team practice. I heard the balls hitting the brick wall while I was watching after school cartoons. He didn't practice in 9th grade and coast for the rest of high school. A major league baseball player never says I learned it all in high school and never practices. Practice never ends.

Christian faith practices are those habits that deepen faith. They are actions we repeat over time in order to grow. They create openings for the Holy Spirit to move in and take root in our lives. We become "doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (James 1:22). We are not saved or made right with God by our works, but we can be reshaped and remade in the image of Christ through spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are related to the word Disciple. A well-known writer on Christian spiritual disciplines, Richard Foster, has emphasized that Christian meditation focuses not of the emptying of the mind or self (like in Buddhism), but rather on the filling up of the mind or self with God.<sup>i</sup> Christians empty themselves to be filled with the Spirit. These disciplines form us as disciples.

Fort Hill's mission is Glorify God, Grow Disciples, and Meet Human Need. So the elders, the session decided to commit to Faith Practices as a congregation that help us grow as disciples and live our mission. They are, not in any particular order:

Worship Weekly

Serve Eagerly

Build relationships intentionally

Study Scripture Purposefully

Pray Daily

Give Generously

Share the Good News Joyfully.

These are just some of the habits that shape us into Christians. They are just the basics, the starting point. Over the next seven weeks, you are asked to explore these disciplines and commit to them as part of our church family.

The church has encouraged spiritual disciplines over the centuries. For Protestants, spiritual disciplines generally include any combination of the following, in moderation: celebration, chastity, confession, fasting, fellowship, frugality, giving, guidance, hospitality, humility, intimacy, meditation, prayer, reflection, self-control, servanthood, service, silence, simplicity, singing, slowing, solitude, study, submission, surrender, teaching, and worship ---all good disciplines, but we are starting with the 7

most critical habits- worshiping, praying, serving, studying, building relationships, giving, and sharing the Good News.

Our beliefs and behaviors go together. Paul spends the first 11 chapters in Romans on what we believe, and we pick up at chapter 12 which describes how we live the Christian life. To this point Paul shows us what God has done in Jesus Christ to save us by grace through faith. We are beloved and saved by the mercy of God. How we live is our grateful response to God. Listen again to the first couple of verses:

*12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

Our whole life is an act of worship- a living sacrifice. We think of sacrifice as negative usually- giving something up for Lent or sacrificing our family's time and money for our potential Olympic athlete child to train. Or we think of sacrifice as loss of life, a death, as in soldiers gave the ultimate sacrifice. Here Paul gives us a positive sense- a living sacrifice. God's gift to us of redeeming love and mercy, makes us want to respond in self-giving love to God and neighbor.

We strive to live the Great Commandment, loving the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, and strength and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

We do to others as they we would have them do to us.

We seek first the Kingdom of God.

We ask "What would Jesus would do?" in each circumstance.

We develop into Christians when we practice the faith.

Our character is shaped by the habits we develop. Our goal is Christian character.

We learn Christian faith by being a part of a faith family that models, teaches, and lives the faith.

We are living sacrifices- body, mind, spirit- whole persons living in the presence of Almighty God. Our lives are an offering to God. We the body of Christ, his church, are an offering.

The first Christians were not called Christians, you know. They were called "People of the Way." Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life"....we follow Jesus in the ways of life. We do so to become the people that God desires us to be.

We follow Jesus who practiced the faith all the time. His ministry was grounded in personal practices: prayer, solitude, conversation, study of scripture, serving others, worship, engaging suffering, and generous giving. These practices sustained a ministry that opened people to God's mercies, transformed human hearts, and changed the circumstances of people in need. He opened hearts and minds to the Kingdom of God, invited them to follow in his steps, and set them on a path toward God. Jesus knitted them into community, interlaced with the Holy Spirit, and wove them into the Body of

Christ, the church. By story and example, by lessons and parables, and by inviting them to practice and live the ways of God, he sent them out in His name. Jesus made faith and growth in God irresistible and life-giving. People were set free by living the way of disciples.<sup>ii</sup>

Transformation is still the goal of Jesus. Paul puts it this way,

*12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Paul writes "be transformed." Transformation means change.

We usually balk at change. You may have heard the joke.-

***How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?***

***CHANGE?***

Sometimes we are the worst at change.

But some of us are dying for change. We are stretched thin, miserable, lonely, and even afraid. We want freedom, love, abundant life- not more stuff, more stress- but more of well, God- the truly Good Life.

You and I have so many options, so many things demanding our attention, our love, our time, and our money. Transformation means discerning how you spend those treasures, those gifts of time, love, and resources. Being transformed means that we cooperate with God through the Holy Spirit to become who God wants us to be.

I walked in the Botanical Garden this week. That's one of my spiritual practices. I was in the Butterfly garden pondering transformation and today's Scripture. Butterflies were buzzing. They are so beautiful and so varied. For some reason, I stopped to read the sign about the Life-Cycle of the Butterfly. I read that in order for a caterpillar to transform into a butterfly, "the tissue of the caterpillar must be reorganized." That sounds painful- "the tissue must be reorganized." Metamorphosis and transformation from the old life to the new life requires total reorganization.

In order to do the Fort Hill Faith Practices, our lives have to be reorganized. We have to make God-centered priorities. Sometimes that means letting go of old habits to make room for new ones. For instance, being in worship requires me getting to bed at a decent hour on Saturday- probably helps you, too. Building relationships intentionally means spending time with other disciples in order to grow together. That means I invest time in being in community with others in a small group, a choir, a service project, or ministry team. Transformation means reorganization.

*Get a Life! some say.*

***I say get a God-centered, love-driven, transformational life.***

Jesus says, "<sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

So here is your challenge from Paul, but in the words of Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

*The Message Place Your Life Before God*

12 <sup>1-2</sup> *So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.*

**May our lives- our everyday, ordinary lives be an offering, a living sacrifice.**

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<sup>i</sup> Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 1998)

<sup>ii</sup> adapted from Robert Schnase, *Five Practices for Fruitful Living* introduction (Abingdon: Nashville, 2010)