



WHAT ARE FAITH PRACTICES? BY R. KENNETH OSTERMILLER

What do we mean by the term "practices of faith?" By practices, we simply mean those attitudes and behaviors that collectively express the meaning we receive from Christian tradition, the Bible, and the history of the church; and which we seek to live out in the world wherever we are, in and through the life and power of the Holy Spirit.

To give you a picture of what I am referring to, here is a partial list of Christian practices compiled by Craig Dykstra:

Worshipping God together
Telling the Christian story to each other
Interpreting the Scriptures together
Praying
Confessing our sins
Tolerating one another's failures
Giving generously
Suffering
Providing hospitality and care
Listening and talking attentively
Struggling together
Working together

Yes, these are all the types of activities that we as Christian educators have been teaching about for generations. But I wonder if this is where cases of ineffectiveness exist -- are we teaching *about* faith practices or are we nurturing the people in our congregations to *practice* their faith on a daily basis?

Christian practices form us. They shape us into the life of Christian faith. They are about the attitudes and behaviors and belongings that mark us out as

Christian practices are not 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 opening in our lives where the grace, mercy, and presence of God may be made known to us and, through us, to others.

- Craig Dykstra

Christians. Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, authors of *The Godbearing Life*, note that "In Christian tradition, 'perfection' -- Christian maturity, perfect love, sanctity or holiness as different branches of the same Christian family tree refer to it -- is a way of life empowered by the Holy Spirit that enables us to love and serve God and neighbor as we were intended. We practice this way of life. It is not something we achieve: it is a faithful pursuit. It is what we mean when we talk about mature Christian faith."

Practices have extraordinary power to transform. Programs inform, train, instruct, and form, but practices *transform*. Thus they are intended to be practiced, not just considered "covered" in a Sunday School lesson, for instance. **Practices of faith are what we do as Christians; they are the result of intention, a part of life-long learning, and they are ongoing and identity building.** Unlike spiritual practices, which are more personal and often private, practices of faith are cooperative and socially established within the faith community.

Rodger Nishioka, from Columbia Theological Seminary, has identified four characteristics of faith practices:

- they address fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human action;
- they are done together and over time;
- they possess standards of excellence; and
- they enable us to see how our ordinary activities are all tangled up with the things God is doing in the world.

As Dean and Foster state, "Adults, as well as youth need to participate in the practices of faith if we want God to shape us and enter the world through us. Every Christian practice is a means of grace in which the Holy Spirit transforms us into Godbearers for young people as well as for one another."

Let us work—and teach—to make it so.

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