

A Disciple Commits to Spiritual Practices
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*Living God, may your word be proclaimed and may we claim it with joy for our lives today.
Continue to speak to us through my words or in spite of them. Amen.*

1 Timothy 4:7b-16 (CEB)

Friends, this is weird for me.

I mean, I am a millennial. That means I'm a part of this generation of people who are fluent in technology and use it as a primary vehicle for communication. That said, I've never done this before. Today is my first time preaching in ZOOM Worship. I really have no idea how this will go. It's weird.

But here we are. And today, I give thanks for the weirdness. I am grateful that we are still able to gather and worship together even while we are apart. I am grateful for the weird, creative ways we are "doing church" that help us remember in this moment that we are still the church, and we are still called to love God and one another. Thank you for showing up to worship today.

In this season of Lent, we are taking the time to explore what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We are looking at the characteristics of a disciple: The first week, Pastor Steve helped us think about what it means to worship as a disciple. Then, last Sunday, we talked (rather appropriately) about what it means to be in community as a disciple. And based on today, I'd say you all are doing pretty well at both of those. Today, we are talking about the third characteristic of discipleship: A disciple commits to spiritual practices.

Spiritual practices. That may be a term that's unfamiliar to you. Sometimes we call these "spiritual disciplines." I don't know about you, but I generally don't like anything with the word "discipline" in it, so let's stick with "spiritual practices".

Spiritual practices have a long history in the Church and beyond. The early Christian hermits we call the desert mothers and fathers were known for their contemplative spiritual practices — prayer, recitation of scripture, intentional stillness, pilgrimage. Spiritual practices also aren't limited to Christian history, as other religious traditions have given us practices such as yoga and meditation.

We can also find plenty of spiritual practices in our tradition as Methodists. Think about the name *Methodist*. The early Methodists were called that because they were so *methodical* in their practices. John Wesley, one of the co-founders of Methodism, focused on practices such as prayer, reading and studying the Bible, meditation, fasting, serving others, and hospitality. He called these practices *means of grace*.

But naming out all these spiritual practices doesn't really tell us what a spiritual practice is. As I was wrestling with this question this week, it occurred to me that it might be helpful to start with unpacking the word "practice." To get some help with this, I decided I needed to interview some experts this week, and one of our first graders was happy to help me out.

Liam has played t-ball and soccer, through our very own Meridian Street Sports, so I interviewed him this week via FaceTime. He was kind enough to take a break from his e-learning to teach me about practice. Liam told me that practice is when you keep doing something over and over again so that you get better at it. I asked him why practice is important, and he told me it makes the sport easier and even "funner". Liam told me that practice is something you have to do consistently or you'll lose it. Perhaps most importantly, Liam gave me this advice: "Practicing can be hard, but when you practice it gets easier." Those are pretty wise words from a seven year old.

After Liam, I turned to Marsha Pappas, our instructor at our very own Meridian Street Yoga, since the yoga world talks a lot about "practice" too. Marsha told me this: "The original purpose of yoga practice was to help us release the things that get in the way of us discovering our true spiritual nature.... We learn to sit with discomfort and not push through it or back off from it. We learn to pause, experience the moment fully, and really ask ourselves how we feel and what we need." I love the idea of practice bringing us into the moment of what's actually happening in the present.

Finally, in my research for this week, I thought about my own experience with practice. For me, it evokes memories of sitting at the piano as a child. I'll be honest: I hated practicing. It was the worst part of taking piano lessons, and I regularly threatened to quit piano over it. My mother is a very wise woman, though. I would tell her I wanted to quit. She would give me her speech about commitment and how I had to see it through to the end of that school year before I could do so. And, of course, we'd get to the end of the year, and it would be RECITAL TIME. Turns out, I loved the recitals. They would make me temporarily forget my disdain for practicing. I'd sign up for another year of lessons, and the cycle would repeat. Again, my mother is a very wise woman.

But in between those recital times, there was practicing to be done. In our house, it would work like this: My mother would set one of those old kitchen timers on the piano and wind it up to whatever amount of time I was supposed to devote to practicing that day. She would then tell me I had to sit on the piano bench until the timer went off. She wasn't going to monitor what I did with that time, but I had to spend it on the piano bench. It worked. Eventually, I'd crack open my lesson books and start playing. Turns out practicing actually makes a difference when it comes to musical ability, so I became a pretty decent pianist.

Some of you know that, in my pre-ministerial life, I was a professional musician. I have a couple of degrees in music performance — in harp, not piano. Oftentimes, I have conversations with non-musicians, and they'll make a remark about how I must be naturally gifted to do what I do. I'm going to let you all in on a little secret: While it may be that professional musicians have some natural aptitude for playing their instruments, our success really comes down to this: how much and how well we practiced. When I was working on my music degrees, hours of practicing were

built into my daily routine. I no longer had a mom setting an egg timer for me, so I had to rely on my own self-discipline to put in the time on my instrument I needed. Sometimes, I was eager to settle in for a multi-hour practice session. After all, I did willingly choose to study music, so I obviously like playing my instrument. Other times, though, practicing felt like a chore. But I still did it, because I understood that time in on my instrument was the most important thing for my development as a musician.

Over the years, though, I learned another important lesson about practicing: It's not just the amount of time you put in. It's equally or even more important the *quality* of practice you put into that time. You see, I could spend four hours in a practice room mindlessly repeating the same passage over and over again. And, to be honest, it would do me some good. Muscle memory is a very real thing. However, if I chose instead to practice strategically and with intention, I could accomplish a lot more in less time.

My undergrad harp professor assigned me a book to read as part of my prep for a degree recital: *The Art of Practicing* by Madeline Bruser. In this book, she talks about this tension musicians feel. On the one hand, we want to play with creativity, emotion and in-the-moment expression. On the other hand, we know that disciplined, sometimes monotonous practice is a part of the deal. She suggests that these two things are not at odds. Rather, it's the discipline of practicing and leaning into the *curiosities* that practice sparks... that's what makes room for us to find the freedom and confidence we desire in performance. She writes:

"Comfort, ease, and joy can be cultivated through practice. To do this, we must give up excessive ambition and the desperate struggle for results, and let ourselves feel the pain of our longing, of having to wait to make music the way we want to. We can learn to relax with this longing and to enjoy its soft, warm presence in the heart. This warmth will then shine through the music we make and touch the hearts of others."

- Madeline Bruser, *The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music from the Heart*

Perhaps there's something to be gleaned here for our spiritual practices. Giving up the desperate struggle for results and instead relaxing into them so that we might feel our hearts strangely warmed by the work of God in and through us. Perhaps spiritual practices are less about what we're doing and more about where we're going.

I told you earlier it wasn't enough to just list off a bunch of spiritual practices. We need a definition we can cling to. Lacy Ellman, a spiritual director whose work focuses primarily on the practice of pilgrimage, suggests this definition: "A spiritual practice is a regular rhythm that calls us to return and remember — to return to our intention and remember what it is that we seek."

A regular rhythm that helps us return and remember. That's what spiritual practices are all about. They help root us in our history and tradition, while also propelling us forward on our journey of discipleship. It's in the discipline of these practices that we discover an invitation to something new. These practices help us create space to hear God more clearly and allow the Holy Spirit to work within us so that we might be transformed more and more into the disciples of Christ we were created to be.

Do you remember what it said in the scripture reading today? “Train yourself for a holy life! While physical training has some value, training in holy living is useful for everything.” Or, I like how Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*: “Exercise daily in God — no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever.”

This week, I saw a lot of articles and blog posts suggesting all of the many ways we might spend our time at home during this time of the coronavirus. The lists are endless: You can spend quality time with your family, you can finally deep clean your house, you can carve out time for that art project you've been wanting to do, you could even learn a new language! All of those are good ways to spend your time at home. However, friends, I would suggest to you that this time we are in is particularly well-suited to exploring a new spiritual practice as we discover what it means to “exercise to daily in God”.

These practices don't have to be complicated. In fact, John Wesley (who I mentioned earlier) encouraged the adoption of *simple* spiritual practices. One that works for me is a reminder on my cell phone that goes off at a set time every day, around lunchtime. That notification simply reminds me to pray. Sometimes, those prayers are short moments of giving thanks to God. Other times, they're long, overdue conversations with God. I've even been known to snooze the reminder for an hour or so.... the point isn't what I pray or even when I do it. It's simply that I make that a part of my daily rhythm and carve out time for God.

Try on a new spiritual practice this week. Or rediscover one that you haven't touched in a while. As Madeline Bruser taught me in her book those years ago... lean into your curiosities. Experiment with a new way of praying or go outside your comfort zone and commit to something you've never done before — maybe it's joining a Bible study or maybe it's meditation. It's not about mastering any of these practices. It's about journeying with them and seeing where they lead.

Remember that advice Liam gave? “Practicing can be hard, but when you practice it gets easier.” Those are good words for us to hear this week.