

## WRAPPING UP THE SERIES

Today we wrap up our series on [Faith Practices](#), a series of conversations that began with two declarations. First, that

*We are a people of faith.*

Faith specifically in the lordship and living presence of Jesus, our Christ. Faith as a belief that shapes action, in Jesus who is King, ruler, in-control of, all things, who is alive, having overcome all things that oppose our humanity. Faith in this Jesus is meant to transform us, to change the very fabric of our being, the way we comprehend the world as well as how we live in it. This faith is meant to free us to live in the fullness of our humanity in relationship with God and towards one another without fear, envy, or oppression in selfless love.

And yet, while we declare that we are a people of faith,

*We also struggle with faith; to keep it and let it do its work on and in us.*

Many of our prayers, conversations and frustrations circle around the theme of living in the reality of our faith, of our identity and union with Christ. Sometimes our struggles manifest in heart break and doubt—having perceived God and life with God one way we have experienced the difficulties of daily living and are **disillusioned** in our faith. Doubting if faith can change us, change our situation, change our world.

For others the struggle manifests in connecting the dots of faith and every-day life, career, family, purpose. Faith is important, but how does it not remain something separate from the ordinary. The question of how is faith more than personal belief leaves us feeling **disconnected** from God, one another, longing for something deeper and/or more experiential. Ever looking for the next program, mystical awakening, book, study, worship service, or actual service that will allow us that will satisfy the aching within us for connection to the divine.

And, for most of us, our faith struggle has been in the pursuit of clarity. Our faith—what we believe about God, how he works, what he expects of us and what we can expect from him—is tested as we pursue spouses, families, education, careers, preferences, and calling. As we grow restless in our waiting and confused in how we participate, our faith seems wanting, not strong enough to live on or **disoriented**, searching but not finding what we are looking for in God and his family. So while we are found we still feel lost.

Because we are both a people of faith and a people who struggle with faith, we have spent the last several months trying to answer the question that our two declarations raise:

*How do we remain steadfast in our faith amidst the waves of disillusionment, disconnection and disorientation?*

In his book *Ruthless Trust*, Brennan Manning shares a story that helps us get to the answer:

“When the brilliant ethicist John Kavanaugh went to work for three months at ‘the house of the dying’ in Calcutta, he was seeking a clear answer as to how best to spend the rest of his life. On the first morning there he met Mother Teresa. She asked, ‘And what can I do for you?’ Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him.

‘What do you want me to pray for?’ she asked. He voiced the request that he had borne thousands of miles from the United States: ‘Pray that I have clarity.’

She said firmly, ‘No, I will not do that.’ When he asked her why, she said, ‘Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.’ When Kavanaugh commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, ‘I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.’”

The simple answer to steadfastness is trust. I would love for the answer to have been something more tactile, more rhythmic, more visual than simple trust. Don’t get me wrong, I know that trusting God is important, but it is also difficult; especially when my **expectations and experiences** of everyday life and even life with God leave me disillusioned, disconnected and disoriented.

*When the picture I have in my mind of what life with God and one another is meant to be does not match the life that I am actually living; my faith struggles.*

And yet, my struggle is not new. The psalmist in Psalm 13 expresses...

*...this longing for change of circumstance, deeper connection and certain clarity with an answer only in trust...*

...when he says,

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed over him,’ lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

It’s important to recognize the goodness of the crying out. To recognize the need for the confession that we at times feel abandoned, confused, alone, overwhelmed.

*It is in the crying out that we are moved into something deeper, something surer: a relational, non-circumstantial trust of God’s greatness, goodness, gloriousness and graciousness.*

Like Kavanaugh and the psalmist, we carry an anxiousness in our faith and a sorrow of dissatisfaction, disillusionment and disconnection in our faith. And like Kavanaugh and the psalmist, the answer to our plea for change of circumstance, easy connection, and unmistakable clarity is met with a firm but whimsical 'No, this is exactly what you must let go of so that you can trust my child!'

The psalmist and Mother Teresa **know something deeply**. They have experienced the pain of this world—internally and externally—and rather than running from it, they have cried out.

*In their cry they have not received an answer but rather a presence,*

**an awakening to the reality of abundance in the midst of quiet oppression.** Their world has been expanded and thus all things put in perspective!

Our longing for more, is found not in clarity but trust. Not in our action but God's action. Not in change of circumstances but in worship: a recognition that we live and move and have our being in the ever present, gracious reality of God's Story.

Yet to live in God's Story, the very story of reality but a story countered, suppressed, and made to compete with our stories; we need a picture of life that is different. A picture that will reshape the way in which we interact with God, with one another, and with creation. A picture that will help us identify the counter stories and affirm the true story. A picture of a **garden**.

The garden is a crafted environment in which all that we experience, all that we know, and all that we are connected to has its place and season. A picture of the world that does not dismiss pain, suffering and disappointment but keep them in perspective. A picture of the world in which work and time are not competing resources but harmonious partners. A picture of the world in which we are neither ceaseless performers nor mindless consumers but seasonal participants. Where death brings forth life and fallowness brings forth abundance. Where relationship is not reduced to pleasure or profitability but expanded to joyous inter-dependence and selfless collaboration.

Such a picture of the world is not just necessary but **shaping**. We need particular actions to keep us rooted in God's garden; to keep us from distraction and disenchantment.

*We need to learn how to Cultivate. To abound in the labor of the Lord by fostering an environment for flourishing; by working to help ourselves and others grow into full abundance within the garden.*

After all,

*"The cultivated life is one of persevering in our longing. In the garden...grace collaborates with dedication. Our completion [in Christ] comes toward us as we move toward it...Spiritual completion is **not** a matter of willfully*

straining after an ideal. It is, rather, *a relational fullness of life that is forever unfolding and developing*, like the way tree trunks thicken as sun, water and nutrients are imbibed. In our living, we aren't supposed to come to the end of our growing, or even of heartfelt yearning for it. Nor are we to become independent pursuers of growth...Through the lens of cultivation, we see our lives taking place in God's garden."<sup>1</sup>

The ways of cultivating this gracious life are what we call our [Faith Practices](#). In order that we might be ones who recognize and live in response to the all-encompassing story of God's relation, we cultivate grace through:

[Praying Scripture](#) & [Repentance](#), practices which *orient us to the conditions* of God's garden. Reminding us that our story is found in the all-encompassing, gracious, and sure story of God's character and purposes. Awakening us to a much larger world!

[Listening](#) in the Spirit then, becomes the *fundamental act for all work* in the garden. We recognize that the world is neither limited to us nor controlled by us, so in order to walk wisely we must be ones who hear and see God; most evidently in Jesus! Thus, every action in the garden begins in a listening response.

[Stopping](#), through which we are able to *recognize & enter into the rhythmic seasons* of the garden. Discovering a pattern for life that is attuned to how God works in the good times and the bad all for our good and his glory. Allowing us to find stability in what often appears to be chaos.

[Mindfulness](#), a form of stopping, which helps us to *identify disproportion* in our emotions and experiences while helping us to *respond in proportion*. Giving us a daily and moment-by-moment centering that develops an awareness and release from the tension of circus life.

[Sabbath Keeping](#), recognizing this *gift meant to help us flourish* in the most prevalent of all garden activities: *work*, amid the most pervasive of garden resources: *time*. Taking what often is experienced as conflict, and allowing us to live in peace.

[Friendship](#), by which we are enveloped into the *relational fabric* of the garden as we are impressed into the slow and steady *cadence* of life in the garden; helping us to experience depth and vividness in our life with one another and God himself.

[Nurturing](#), the skill of befriending meant to help one another *discover what story we are living*, what picture is shaping our lives. Creating space to experience, process, and *cultivate story*; so that we might have both abundance and steadfast in the garden life; bearing fruit that reproduces. For "In the shelter of another person's attention and God's all-surrounding grace, telling my story [reweaves] me."<sup>2</sup>

And our final Faith Practice,

**Communion**, the ever consistent practice that helps us *recognize the paradox* of life in the garden; a practice that keeps us from getting lost in the upside-down world of the circus; forgetting the reality in which we actually are friends, neighbors, spouses, children, co-workers and the church: **a people of faith**.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Phillips, *The Cultivated Life*, 35, 37, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 156.

## CONTEXT OF COMMUNION

Let's read together Luke 22:1-46 together.

In each of the synoptic gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, & Luke); what we refer to as “communion” also called the “Lord’s Supper”, amongst other things, takes place during the season of Passover, the time of year used to recognize God’s greatness over all the gods, God’s goodness to rescue, God’s graciousness to spare life and God’s glory that would not be usurped by men or angels.

It is in this time of remembering God’s Story that gave shape to the life of the people of Israel—the single most shaping story in all of Israel’s history—that Jesus introduces us to our final Faith Practice. In remembering God’s Story with those closest to him; Jesus invites them to simultaneously **glory** in the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham to take upon himself the curse in order to restore and bless all the world (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21); as well as **participate** in the new covenant promised by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-40).

*In the power of God and in the promises of God are we rescued from ourselves and sin, restored to his presence forever!*

*In Communion we are invited to glory in the power of God to rescue and participate in the promises of God to renew.*

And, like it has always been, the very glory of God is given to us in the midst of those who would not just reject but betray Jesus, those that loved but would deny Jesus, those that followed Jesus but cared as much about their own place in his kingdom as they did about relationship with him. The power and the promise are demonstrated and fulfilled not because of the faithful; but because of the faithfulness of the one with the power and promises.

It is interesting that in John’s gospel account that Jesus does not explicitly introduce the Lord’s Supper at this final dinner (though he perhaps alludes to the weight of Jesus’ gestures in John 6), but rather focuses his attention on what Jesus did in the dinner.

Let’s read together John 13:1-38 and listen the similarities and differences in his account.

In the midst of recognizing God’s glory in his powerful rescue and being invited to participate in his promises; John shows us most explicitly that we have received God’s glory through sacrifice and service (the washing of the disciples feet), and that to participate in God’s promises is to respond in sacrifice and selflessness (loving one another). As we have mentioned before in greater detail, Jesus would expand this participation in the kingdom by his giving of the Spirit, his union with the Father, his victorious presence forever (Jn. 14-17).

After Jesus’ sufficient sacrifice and triumphant resurrection, we see this practice of the Lord’s Supper or communion as we call it, quickly becoming a normative part of our faith family’s practices. Something that was practiced as a distinguishing mark of being the “church”; a practice that was abused and done without reverence to the detriment of the faith family; but one that was done regularly (1 Cor. 11:17-34).

## PARADOX OF COMMUNION

Be sure to catch this, as Jesus prepares to walk into the agony of his glory,

*Jesus gave his disciples a practice that would help them interpret the things they were about to experience; both his suffering and their struggles.*

Even if only in retrospect, they would come to see Jesus' death not as defeat but as victory; their doubt, disillusionment, disconnection and disorientation given-way to surety of faith. Seeing Jesus' suffering and their struggles not with anger, hatred, loss, and fear; but hope, peace, joy and love.

Like our forefathers in our faith, communion is a practice that helps us interpret the reality rightly, in relation to God's person and purpose. Indeed, our Faith Practice of Communion helps us *recognize the paradox* of life in the garden; a practice that keeps us from getting lost in the upside-down world of the circus; forgetting the reality in which we actually are friends, neighbors, spouses, children, co-workers and the church: as a people of faith.

Think about how Communion shapes our reality:

Death is no longer our end, no longer victorious over our humanity! Since the practice of communion is with bread and drink and not the actual body of Christ; Jesus lives! Our greatest enemy has been defeated, our greatest fear has been shown to be something which cannot conquer; therefore, we can be a people who live in HOPE. We can live with expectation in a better world, the surety of a better reality.

Therefore, as a people who glory in the power of God and participate in the promises of God with courage and generosity because we HOPE.

Not only is death overcome, but the sting of death which is sin has been removed. Hope in the future is experienced as PEACE in the present. We have PEACE now in Jesus; a restoration with the Father through the Spirit, alongside one another. And yet, communion reminds us that PEACE is only achieved through reconciliation, not selfish avoidance of pain or suffering or loss; but entering into conflict for the purpose of restoration.

Therefore, we can be a people who glory in the power of God and participate in the promises of God with courage and selflessness as reconcilers because we are at PEACE.

The very act of communion is a tactile picture of suffering. A body broken like the bread torn. Blood flowing forth like the drink overflowing. Yet, Hebrews reminds us, as does Jesus' prayer on the Mount of Olives, that JOY was found in suffering; both in the act as well as in what it produced. It was for the JOY set before him, JOY in the Father, JOY in you and I that Jesus bore our guilt and shame, suffered and died; so that our JOY might be made complete in him! Communion reminds us that following the Father for the sake of others is JOYous; even if it is painful. It also reminds us that JOY is found in something deeper and more lasting than circumstances: relationship! What fills us, our longings and our needs, is satisfied in the work and person of Jesus!

Therefore we can be a people who glory in the power of God and participate in the promises of God with courage and contentment in whatever season of life because we have JOY.

Finally, communion is helps us interpret the reality in which we live, to recognize the world of the garden in the midst of the circus life by reminding us that we are LOVEd. LOVE compelled Jesus to enter our world and to take on our stories. LOVE—not the faithfulness of his friends—kept Jesus serving sacrificially. The practice of communion was given to us so that we might never forget that we live in the certainty of God’s gracious and never-changing LOVE; and in turn, that we might LOVE one another in the same way!

Therefore we can be a people who glory in the power of God and participate in the promises of God with courage and sacrifice; Loving because we are LOVEd.

Hope in what seemed hopeless. Peace through taking on conflict. Joy in suffering and Love in sacrifice. Such are the ways of garden life, but not circus living. The paradox of the garden is something we must keep in regular view in order to not be confounded by our expectations and experiences; and Communion is a practice that helps us see the world upside-down; or as it should be! Just depends of your perspective!

These paradoxical realities of the garden life, HOPE, PEACE, JOY and LOVE will be our focus in Advent; in the expectation of Jesus! Yet, what we will have a dedicated season in our church calendar to observe, can and should be recognized regularly in our life together.

## COMMUNION SHAPES REALITY

- HOPE in what seemed hopeless
- PEACE by entering into conflict
- JOY in suffering
- LOVE in sacrifice

Therefore we can *glory in the power* of God and *participate in the promises* of God by

- Living with courage and generosity
- Living with courage and selflessness
- Living with courage and contentment
- Living with courage and sacrifice

## PRACTICING COMMUNION

I believe, that Paul's exhortation to take communion seriously with self-examination in 1 Corinthians is because our Faith Practice of Communion is so formative—helping us *recognize the paradox* of life in the garden, a practice that keeps us from getting lost in the upside-down world of the circus, keeping us from forgetting the reality in which we live as a people of faith. Only when it is done with soberness are we able to experience and appreciate the depths of where Communion grounds us; the transcendence of where Communion takes us.

Yet, soberness and seriousness does not require pomp and circumstance. We can practice regularity with simplicity and admiration as often as we gather as the "church", as Gospel Communities. The following practice I think will help us make communion both more regular in our life together without losing the reverence which such a practice deserves.

Communion is RECEIVED in the context of recognizing Jesus, confessing our need for Jesus, accepting what Jesus offers us, and extending that invitation to one another; after all we cannot practice communion alone! Thus, communion keeps us together, keeps us recognizing reality, keeps us living by grace; keeps us *cultivating grace always*.

Let's break up into small groups (4-6) and once you have your groups we'll communion together.