

10/26/2014 SERMON—Julie Spangler

I spent decades going to churches that had all the answers. Each week the pastors would take the Bible apart ‘verse by verse’ and tell us exactly what God meant by it. There wasn’t any need to question what we were taught—it was all spelled out for us: Heaven was up, hell was down, and as followers of Jesus, and our mandate was to go into the world and save as many people as we could from eternal damnation.

I never questioned what I was taught—I accepted it blindly, trusting that every word was true: The earth was created in seven days, the animals got on the ark two by two, three of Daniel’s friends survived the fiery furnace, and millions of people will burn in hell because they’ve rejected Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

The problem with blindly following a teaching like that is it’s a very narrow path and it completely hijacks the message of a loving God who created us to thirst for knowledge. I can’t tell you how many times I walked away from that God who judged and sent people to hell because I felt the full weight of my own sin. Because sometimes God was loving and forgiving, and sometimes He was standing there with my list of failures. When the God you know seems more like a bi-polar relative than a loving parent, it can really mess with your head.

It was on one of those sabbaticals from religion that I ran across a book entitled *Girl Meets God*, by Lauren Winner. In it she tells the story of coming from a place of non-belief, converting to Orthodox Judaism, and then being wooed by a carpenter from Galilee named Jesus. She writes about finding the Episcopal Church, and the way it changed her life.

Having renounced my Lutheran roots when I joined the evangelical movement, I was not prepared for how winsomely she described liturgy and the Eucharist. But her experience buried itself in my heart, although it would be a few more years before I would find my way to an Episcopal Church.

I have a cousin who converted to Judaism about fifteen years ago. At the time, as a card carrying fundamentalist, I was shocked, which I was certain was her reason for doing something so drastic—she's always been the one to rock the family boat. I remember asking her, at some point, what the appeal of the Jewish faith was, and she said it was the arguing. The traditional mode of Jewish study maintains an emphasis on dialogue and disagreement; a typical midrash involves people reading the text, then pairing up to argue, quite heatedly at times... pushing one another to come to a better understanding of what's been read. Their conversation looks at the original context of the passage, the individual words and phrases, and then into hidden meanings, its relation to other texts, and how it reflects or contrasts with the beliefs and values of the reader. That sounded very alarming to me: Just tell me what to believe and let me mold myself to that model. Why question scripture? It was there in black and white, and I had been told how to interpret it. I KNEW what I believed.

Especially on the Hot Topics of Christianity—Evolution, Homosexuality, Abortion-- I had been trained to defend the conservative and fundamental stance, and I took it on with a vengeance, loving the sinner; hating the sin. But something about that always rang untrue. There are a *lot* of ‘sins’ listed in the Bible, but most of them get glossed over even though we all manage to do them so easily. But the so-called ‘clobber verses’—the ones interpreted to defend intolerance and insularity— are kept at the ready. To be honest, I felt like a sinner. I seemed to fail daily in my walk with God... and I felt God must be so disappointed in me. I also felt bad about being so judgmental about others! Aren’t Christians supposed to LOVE?

Eventually I did make my way to the Episcopal Church where the liturgy and the beauty surrounding the Eucharist enchanted me. But something happened as week after week I began to hear things that sounded to me like heresy! Scripture was being interpreted in ways that I’d never considered! Who would dare question the Word of God? I shared my discomfort with the minister at that church in Florida, and she replied, “Don’t you think God wants us to question the Bible? Shouldn’t we work to find out what we believe?”

This was a completely new idea to me, but as I began to relax my grip on what I thought I knew, I realized something that has become transformative:

Knowledge is central to our faith, and not just education for its own sake, but when we truly dig into the beliefs that are embodied in Scripture and tradition, as followers of the Way, we are formed, re-formed, and then miraculously, transformed.

God creates in each of us a hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice, but without knowledge as the third leg of that stool, we balance precariously until, exhausted, we fall over.

Brother Lawrence, the 17th century Carmelite monk, in his classic work, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, wrote, "And, as knowledge is commonly the measure of love, the deeper and wider our knowledge, the greater will be our love."

In this church we have many wonderful Christian Formation opportunities: Youth Formation and Adult Formation offer a multitude of resources for spiritual growth. I believe we choose the word *formation* over education for a reason: *Education* implies a finish: a graduation, a diploma, an ending. The word *formation*, on the other hand, implies an ongoing process as we continue on the journey that is our relationship with God.

Faith formation is more than just the ongoing practice of religious instruction; it has as its goal the growth of our spiritual selves which is *transformational*. As we are formed and transformed in the process of faith formation we begin to walk out the Gospel in our everyday lives with joy and with the knowledge that God loves us, God loves this community, God loves this world. We go more confidently into our

daily lives with an understanding that everything is ministry; each of us has value to the Kingdom, “on earth as it is in Heaven.”

Faith formation is a lifelong journey that produces a spiritual vitality that is undeniable and inviting. Who can resist the attraction of an intelligent and joyful follower of Christ?

We generally celebrate liturgy and the Holy Eucharist together one day a week, but faith is lived out daily, and just as we must feed our physical bodies in order to preserve our health and ensure growth, we also must find nourishment for our spiritual selves, which includes in no small part, our minds.

The Pharisees in Jesus’ time adhered to a strict interpretation of the Mosaic Law. They were religious leaders who thought of themselves as defenders of both the religious and the academic, so when they come to him in today’s Gospel reading with the question of which commandment of the law is the most important, Jesus, knowing their hearts, tells them, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” He covers all the bases, and confounds them with his answer.

And again in today’s Psalm, we are instructed and encouraged to ‘delight in the law of the Lord’ and ‘meditate on it day and night’.

What does that look like in our world? In the Benedictine model that I shared with those of you who attended the CAT conversations a few Saturdays ago, it reveals that there is a natural progression in our personal lives of faith. It begins with finding a place of stability where we feel at home with our community, the people, and this place as we seek to know God. From there it naturally flows into an area of obedience as we begin to incorporate spiritual practices such as study, meditation, and prayer. This results in a conversion of life as we understand that we are continually being called into a deeper walk of faith with a willingness to grow and a personal commitment to our *own* transformation and that of our faith community, and the world!

Without spiritual formation—without the ongoing process of constantly renewing our understanding of God’s unchanging love for us in our ever-changing lives—we find ourselves stagnant and useless. The Psalm today talks about being like a tree planted by streams of water.

As you drive down 525 toward the ferry, just before you get to Crawford road you might notice some acres on the right side of the road where quite a number of species of plants and trees struggle to survive. Many of those trees have lost that battle and their bare limbs stand there as ghosts of their former selves. The area there is a bog. In fact, it’s such an impressive bog, that the University of Washington brings horticulture students there to study it.

A bog is an area filled with water and decaying materials. It has its own merits, of course, but it is the antithesis of living water. When a tree is planted by streams of water, a variety of new matter comes to it daily. A tree draws nourishment into its roots and growth is the result. In the same way, we are encouraged to draw our nourishment from sources that offer a variety of thoughts and challenge us in our thinking. We don't want to get 'bogged down' in ignorance and complacency; there is an ever-changing world out there that desperately needs thinking Christians.

My father, who is one of the most learned people I know, has sadly become an example of how sitting in a bog will eventually suck the life right out of you. His love of learning has been reduced, by choice and by circumstances, to watching FOX news all day long, and reading only conservative publications on world events. While it's not wrong to take a political or moral side and defend it—our country was founded on that principal!--it is tragic to see someone with such a vibrant mind completely discount any point of view other than his own. It has effectively shut down any ability to have a pleasant conversation with him, as no one wants to hear the diatribe. In his opinion the country is spiraling out of control—why aren't we doing something? The country, *in its natural progression*, continues to change, but he will not change with it, therefore everything threatens the status quo. Those who choose to stay in that mindset are finding themselves left behind. Again, it is an ever-changing world that desperately needs thinking Christians who can offer an intelligent and compassionate response to new situations and demands.

It's also a post-modern world-- a culture that is skeptical of anything that smacks of reason or concept. In a world like this, how do we live out our faith? I think especially of families these days raising children who are living in a culture that eschews religion, and who are bombarded beyond imagination by images of hatred, terrorism, and excess; of young people growing up in an increasingly materialistic and dangerous world. Where does faith fit into that, and how as 'followers of the Way' do we make an authentic case for faith?

A 2005 study was published in a book entitled, *How Highly Religious Families Strive to Fulfill Sacred Purposes*. In the book 60 "highly religious"" families of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths were discovered to have eight common life-practices that were significant, and that I believe are *core faith practices* we can all seek to emulate. While these findings are geared toward families, I am expanding on them in a way that speaks to each of us:

1. The first 'life practice' is a visible turning to God both in times of need and in times of gratitude: When our family members or even our friends see us doing this, they are impacted by our faith. Seeing or hearing someone acknowledge a higher power makes an impression. Grace before a meal may seem prosaic, but we don't necessarily pray because God needs to hear us, we pray to remind our hearts to be grateful.

2. The next life practice is living your faith at home: This might be along the lines of ‘walk the talk’. Nothing turns a teenager or a skeptic off more quickly than a hypocrite. We shouldn’t be one person at church and another at home or work. If our personal and spiritual lives are not matching up, some self-examination might be in order. Another way of living your faith at home is by displaying sacred objects in the home; creating a personal space that honors your faith. I created my own sacred space in a spare room this past year and have found it to be both comforting and holy. It’s a place to meet God that is tangible and centering.
3. The third life-practice is resolving conflict with prayer, repentance, and forgiveness: Pride is *surely* the original sin, and nowhere is it more prominent than in our inability to humble ourselves within our relationships. Saying, “Will you forgive me?” is standing on Holy Ground. It also stands in stark contrast to a world hell-bent on saving face.
4. The life practice of serving others in our family, our faith community, and in this world is something we tend to do very well here at St. Augustine’s, and when our children or our neighbors or even complete strangers see us serving with joy, we are ministering the Gospel in a way that cannot compete with words.
5. The fifth life practice is overcoming challenges and trials through shared faith: Asking others to join you in praying for and rejoicing in life’s trials and circumstances blesses everyone involved. Contrast that with those who suffer alone, and you’ll understand the importance of sharing your challenges with those in your faith community.

6. Morality is a touchy subject these days, but these families found setting moral boundaries to be of great value. Morality *is* a subjective topic, but in our families and in our community, we do need to know what we stand for, and we need to be able to intelligently defend that moral stance. Those within our realm of influence may be *challenged* by our moral boundaries, but when they are intelligently and compassionately enforced, they offer comfort and stability to those in our lives.
7. The sacrificing of time, money, comforts and conveniences for religious reasons is the seventh life-practice. The early followers of Christ were known for the care they gave to others. When we model true sacrificial giving to our children and our friends, we become a transforming force within our realm of influence. Giving from a place of ease or plenty is not going to change you. I'm not saying it's not important, but *sacrificial giving* creates a ripple effect that can, and has, revolutionized the world. Modeling it for your family plants a seed that will take root and grow with the next generation.
8. And the final life-practice of highly effective families and individuals is: Nurturing spiritual growth daily through examination, teaching, prayer, and discussion. Do we have a private time of meditation and prayer each day? Have we taken time to explore the tremendous spiritual resources of our library downstairs? Are we taking part the variety of classes offered at St. Augustine's? The church has an intrinsic responsibility to the faith formation of its members, but WE have been given the glorious

privilege of finding ways to nourish our spirits through prayer, meditation, study, fellowship, and service.

When we set as our goal the willingness to learn, we find opportunities everywhere. The commitment to being open simply involves making choices to surround ourselves with new ways to be stretched both academically and spiritually. When we are challenged by a thought or theory with which we disagree, we benefit from the practice of learning more about this opposing ideology.

Rachel Held Evans, another author I admire, recently wrote a book entitled, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*: and subtitled, *'How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband "Master"'*, which, as you can imagine, garnered quite a heated response from liberal Christians. She recently blogged about the fact that the most vitriolic attacks on the book came from people who, when asked, admitted they hadn't even read it. They just hated the title. If they'd read it, they would have found a tongue-in-cheek essay challenging the idea that women should be held to the ridiculous standards that continue to be imposed by some evangelical communities.

The point is we can be opposed to something without knowing anything about it. How might our communities be strengthened if we made more of an effort to know those outside our social order? How might our country be healed if we chose to truly *know someone* of another color or culture? What if knowledge and wisdom were valued more highly than status and wealth?

How open are we to learning something new about someone or something outside of our comfort zone? I know that as I have made the choice to begin to open my mind to things I that found previously unacceptable, I have found tremendous freedom and joy, not only in my faith, but in my life. This is in sharp contrast to the lives of my friends and family members who are still living in the darkness of sedentary complacency. My hope is that by seeing the delight I experience in my newfound faith it will one day lead them to question something, *anything*.

I came to the Episcopal Church because I sensed something that went beyond emotion and dogma. I stayed because I discovered a model for faith that offered stability; that lent itself to an obedience that did not require me to check my brain at the door; that was heavy with promise and potential. Being an Episcopalian offers me a way to be a disciple of the God who loves me as a mother, and gives me freedom to be both faithful and to wrestle with doubt. Here I have found a home where all are welcomed, all are fed. Where broken people find healing, and wholeness is offered by a loving Christ. This faith tradition invites me into the mystery of not knowing, and delights me with the idea that there are different answers for different times.

The God of my newfound faith is the God who says to me, "It is good. It is very good." And then she smiles and invites us all into the Mystery.

