

Chapter 14

PRACTICING A WAY OF LIFE



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Honoring the body. Hospitality. Household economics. Keeping Sabbath. Saying yes and saying no. Testimony. Discernment. Shaping communities. Forgiveness. Healing. Dying well. Singing our lives. To explore the full range and depth of any one of these would take not a single chapter but an entire library, not a single life but many lives joined together in a community that spans generations. Each practice is ancient and new, lived by Jesus' disciples across centuries and cultures and open to us today. Each one calls practitioners into the midst of the heartbreaking pain of the world and also into the life-sustaining embrace of God. Each one holds gracious help to be poured out for the good of all, and each is a vessel that can be broken by hatred or deceit. And other practices, equally deep and likewise necessary to address fundamental needs and conditions, could be added to these twelve. Making covenants. Breaking bread. Giving and receiving gifts. Honoring beauty. We encourage you to reflect on these or other practices that are important in your own community, and especially on practices that you think may be imperiled. We have included guidelines for doing so in the last chapter of this book.

Piling up numerous practices and pondering them one by one could lead us to overlook what is most important, however: the way of life that takes shape when practices are woven together. To engage in only one practice without the others is a way of death, not life. Imagine a community trying to practice hospitality while never keeping Sabbath, or trying to honor the vulnerability and sacredness of the human body without learning to say yes and say no. Because each practice addresses something fundamental to human well-being, each contributes its own distinctive wisdom to every other practice.

But something else, deeper and more mysterious, also draws the practices into a whole that is much more than a collection of separate acts. The source of that unity, as the source of life itself, is God. A coherent way of life cannot be gained by trying to please the many little gods set up by our own preferences and society's demands. Instead it emerges in response to the One who is present in all the parts of our lives, the One who makes, transforms, upholds, and unites all that is.

Two additional practices run through all the others, fostering attention to God, who grounds this whole way of life. These practices are prayer and Bible study. Every Christian practice requires prayer, as Christians doing things together attune themselves to take part, with trust, in the risky activities of God. In prayer, we open ourselves to respond to God's presence and to notice the light of God as it shines in the world, exposing fault yet also promising hope. We pay attention in a special way, focusing our yearning to be partners in God's reconciling love. We ask for God's help in saying yes to that which is life-giving in the deepest sense and in saying the specific no that will loosen whatever chains bind us and others to destruction. We thank God for life and love, and we beg God for mercy and strength, for ourselves and all creation.

Every Christian practice also depends on ongoing, living encounter with Scripture. In each chapter of this book, we have searched the Bible for insight into the practices, but this is only a beginning. You, too, will find it valuable to do this, in small groups and alone, listening and probing, reflecting with the help of Scripture on the fresh questions that are sure to arise as you engage in practices in the world. You will discover there a well of wisdom and the stories of people at practice not unlike ourselves. And you will learn about

what God's active presence and love for the life of the world really look like.

At the most basic level, Christian practices are not our own but God's. In the practice of dying well, we who are human do not claim to master death; in keeping Sabbath we do not control the passage of time; in forgiveness we do not pretend that we can simply brush injury away. Instead, in doing these things together we hope to become more receptive to what God is already doing to sustain and redeem the world. Through such practices, we open our lives to God and one another, trusting that God is indeed making all things new (Revelation 21:5). Practicing, we sometimes discover that God's grace can surprise us even when death draws near, or when we are hopelessly overworked, or when grievance cuts deep into our hearts. As we move together through these dark places, new life can show up just as the risen Christ showed up in the room where the fearful disciples huddled together on Easter night (John 20:19).

In such times we remember what God has done through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus and what the Holy Spirit has done and continues to do through the community of Jesus' disciples. And we help one another remember all this in times of blessing and bounty, too. In this community we find companions for a life-giving way of life, sisters and brothers without whom our perseverance will be too weak, our insights too limited. Some are close at hand; with these we regularly share bread and wine, conversation and service, and a greeting of peace. Others belong to the great cloud of witnesses that encircles this face-to-face community (Hebrews 12:1); these inspire us to look beyond whatever wisdom our own little circle possesses at this particular point in history and invite us to dig for wisdom that is broad and deep.

This community is the church. Body of Christ. School of discipleship. Household of God. Ark on a stormy sea. Hospital for sinners. Assembly of believers, seekers, doers, worshipers. Congregation of children, women, men. A new kind of family. Friends of Jesus.

AT THE DOOR OF THE CHURCH

The authors of *Practicing Our Faith* sometimes imagined ourselves standing in the open doorway of a church that looks out onto a town

square or city plaza. There we would speak for all to hear—both those inside the building and those passing by—about Christian practices and the life-giving way of life they comprise. Our words, we hoped, would help church members see more clearly how relevant what goes on inside the church is to what they do every day. Further, we hoped that our words would encourage those who seldom go to church but who yearn for a life-giving way of life to explore the riches of Christian faith and tradition. We also hoped to reach the many who live somewhere along the border between these groups—a well-populated location in this time of religious and cultural change.

These connections have been prominently displayed in every chapter of this book. In writing, the authors traveled in and out the open church door again and again, and now readers have made these journeys too. Stephanie Paulsell has taken us to a baby's baptism and a bathroom sink (*Honoring the Body*), Amy Plantinga Pauw to a Christian funeral and the killing fields of Cambodia (*Dying Well*). Biblical stories have been enacted in the streets of San Francisco in Ana María Pineda's chapter (*Hospitality*), in suburban malls in Dorothy Bass's (*Keeping Sabbath*), and in daily choices in Shawn Copeland's (*Saying Yes and Saying No*). With Larry Rasmussen we have visited both hearings of the Environmental Protection Agency and a congregational business meeting that ends with Holy Communion (*Shaping Communities*), and with Thomas Hoyt we have heard sermons, advertisements, and courtroom evidence (*Testimony*). John Koenig has written of medieval hospitals, contemporary caregivers, and congregational support groups (*Healing*). Sharon Daloz Parks has helped us see the close ties among our several households—private and planetary, societal and congregational (*Household Economics*). Frank Rogers has shown how Jesuit spirituality can help a woman as a marriage ends (*Discernment*), and Don Saliers has had us humming playground chants, protest songs, and hymns (*Singing Our Lives*). With Gregory Jones, we have pondered sin and brokenness of many kinds and have heard God's call to restore communion (*Forgiveness*).

Connections now abound. Connections between Christian faith and all the supposedly separate parts of our lives, which turn out to be not so separate after all. Mutual interdependence among the various practices, which would surely wither if isolated from one another.

Ties among past, present, and future, and ties between the local and the entire household of earth. A community of people in relationship, loved by God and learning to love God and neighbor more fully while growing together in a life-giving way of life.

All these connections intersect when Christians come together over an extended period of time to worship God and to respond together to God's call to a life-giving way of life. Everyone is welcome to visit these gatherings. We urge readers who are not part of such a community to "come and see," as Jesus invited the first disciples to "come and see" his own dwelling place at the beginning of his ministry (John 1:39).

THE CHURCH, GATHERED

The passage to full membership—becoming members of Christ's body, as arms and legs are members of a body—leads through the waters of baptism. In some churches, baptism is offered to people of all ages, including infants, so strong is the conviction that the blessing of this sacrament comes entirely by the gift of God rather than by our own desire and action. In other churches, the believer's own mature decision to be a disciple of Jesus is required. Yet water and words of promise flow in all these places as God gives new birth to those who are baptized and joins them to the body of Christ. The minister gets the new Christian wet—in some places by complete immersion in a river or indoor baptismal pool, elsewhere with a handful or a big pitcher of water. And the minister speaks the Word of God: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

In baptism, the grace to which the entire Christian life is a response is presented in water we can see and feel and hear, and in God's Word of promise spoken in the midst of a community of believers. Here all the practices are present in crystalline form: a human body is honored, a community is shaped, sins are forgiven, songs are sung, faith is testified. God says a great yes to the baptized one, while those gathered say yes to God and no to all that would separate them from God. Baptism upholds all these practices, but it also reaches farther and goes deeper than any one of them. Baptism discloses the contours of a whole way of life.

Water is dangerous. It can kill, robbing us of breath or forcefully sweeping us away from safety. Under water, we cannot secure our own lives. Yet water is also the very stuff of life, an element essential to everything that lives. In Scripture, God works through water again and again. God's spirit hovers upon the face of the deep at the beginning of creation. God renews the earth with the waters of a great flood and leads a people across a sea, liberating them from bondage and making with them a covenant. Jesus begins his public ministry in the Jordan River and finds followers in fishing boats and beside a well. The new creation set in motion by Jesus' resurrection anticipates a city where the river of the water of life nourishes the roots of the tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (Genesis 1:1–2; Exodus 14; Mark 1:9, 16–20; John 4; Revelation 22:1–2).

When a new Christian rises from the baptismal water, human needs have not been merely met. They have been transformed. Even the need not to die no longer overpowers all other needs, for death itself has been reframed. “We have been buried with Christ Jesus by baptism into death,” the apostle Paul explains to the early Christians, “so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). After such a bath, the true freedom of a life formed in love, justice, mercy, and hope is no longer too frightening to embrace.

When Christianity was first emerging in societies under Roman rule, Christians could scarcely ignore that baptism meant dying to their former ways in order to “walk in newness of life.” Becoming part of a community that practiced hospitality and forgiveness, a community where there was no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3:28), entailed a radical step away from the violent culture of Rome, a step that might even bring physical death in times of persecution. Those who wished to join the church often spent months or years as “catechumens” who received mentoring and instruction in preparation for baptism. When some were deemed ready, the church gathered in the darkness of Easter Eve, celebrating the night when Jesus passed over from death to life just as the catechumens were about to do. The new Christians confessed their faith and were led into the water. Then, in white robes and carrying lighted candles, they shared, for the first time, the kiss of

peace; they joined, for the first time, in all the prayers and songs; they ate and drank, for the first time, the Eucharist.

During subsequent weeks, these new Christians engaged in further reflection. “Mystagogy,” it was called—teaching about the mysteries just experienced, teaching intended to unfold the meaning and implications of these awe-inspiring rites for the lives of those just baptized. Now, as full members of the church, the newly baptized were being sent back into their daily lives with a new identity. They would return weekly, at the least, to worship with the community—to pray, to hear God’s Word, and to be nourished by bread and wine at Jesus’ table. But their immediate and ongoing challenge would be to live in the world, each day, the life-giving way of life into which they had been received.

THE CHURCH, SENT

Mystagogy takes place at the door of the church, as the newly baptized ponder what they have experienced and its implications for the new life they have been given to live in and for the world. What difference will this make, they now ask, as we are sent out to love and serve God and neighbor? As an effort to explore this same question, *Practicing Our Faith* is part mystagogy. In this book, we affirm what early Christians likewise knew: answers rarely come easily, and to embark on the Christian life is only to begin a learning process that continues all our lives. Yet the baptismal call to walk in newness of life is not an arduous job but a liberating gift: a gift to those who have gained sisters and brothers in Christ with whom to share the questions and meet the obstacles that will surely come; and a gift to their neighbors in society, Christian or not, whom they will serve through practices shaped to reflect and respond to God’s grace for all.

And so we go out clothed in the new life of baptism. And yet the water still dripping from our bodies will likely prove dangerous as well. Death will surely come, our own and that of others—and sadly, we will even contribute to death at times, through things we have done and things we have left undone. Some, following Jesus, will encounter actual death in the midst of practicing our faith in

costly acts of testimony, hospitality, or forgiveness, as other Christians have lost their lives in the past. And all, following Jesus, will encounter countless other deaths. Walking in newness of life, we die again and again. Our treasured schemes of revenge against those who have wronged us? Dead. Our entitlement to more than our just share of the world's resources? Dead. Self-esteem built on supposed superiority to others? Dead. All this and more, dead. But right in the midst of this dying, we are also given new life beyond our imagining. Buried with Christ into death in baptism, we rise from the water sharing in the power of the resurrection, full of life we can give away in love and service to others. Saint Francis, it is said, put it this way: "In baptism we have already died the only death that matters, leaving us free to risk every other death for the sake of life." Leaving us free to go into the broken places of a suffering world, bearing God's mercy, God's healing, God's love.

Today some congregations are reclaiming the catechumenate as a way of incorporating new members, encouraging those already gathered to ponder faithful living, and fostering in both groups a deeper sense of faith as a way of life. Other congregations encourage different approaches to growing in the life of Christian faith, including faith-sharing groups, discipleship classes, or covenant circles offering mutual support and accountability. Here, in prayer and Bible study, silence and conversation, they support one another in practicing our faith.

Members of one small congregation devised a wonderful way of supporting one another in prayer, study, worship, and practice. The method emphasized the great importance of the members' constancy and commitment to each other in these things, for the sake of their faithfulness in God's world. Its visible emblem was a simple black loose-leaf notebook, which sat on the communion table next to the bread and wine and offering basket. The cover was inscribed "The Book of Disciplines of the Community of Christ," and inside were covenants and promises written and affirmed by members of the congregation. Every six months, these had to be renewed or changed. Some of the promises or covenants were shared by the community as a whole and were affirmed by each member with a signature; other promises, added beside the signatures, expressed individual vows. Sometimes the notebook was opened and read, sometimes not. But

everyone knew it was public, and everyone also knew—from Discipline No. 1—that she or he was remembered in prayer by name by each of the others every day.

Commitments like these raise our hopes for renewal, for fullness of life. It is good and right that they do. But it is important also to acknowledge—as the members of this community surely would have—that even groups of people with commitments such as these will be far from perfect. They will experience pressures from without and from within, some of them very painful. They may also, we hope, grow in their capacity to engage in Christian practices, including the practice of forgiving and receiving forgiveness.

Baptism and communion, prayer and Bible study, worship and Christian friendship: these are integral to life with God and to the faithfulness of the church. In a Christian congregation, all of these are interwoven with the practices in this book. But none of these exists for the good of the church alone. The love and mercy Christians receive through these gifts from God are meant to be poured out for the sake of the world. The finite, fragile practices we do together, over time, responding to creation's needs and God's great love, are vessels through which the love and mercy shown to us will flow to others.

In humility and hope, we and the other authors of this book invite you to join us in exploring and living the practices of faith. Taking up this way of life, we are instructed by the wisdom of an ancient, global, and still developing tradition. We are surrounded by other human beings who share our hungers and joys. We are sustained by a creative and redemptive God. In trust, relying on God, we go out into the world to live in ways that express our grateful response.

