



## Why are we Talking About Practice?

### SESSION ONE

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*This talk can be accompanied by this powerpoint presentation, created by the Revs. Marcus Halley and Susan Daughtry. You're welcome to use it in your faith community! Find more at [www.creatingbelovedcommunity.org](http://www.creatingbelovedcommunity.org)*

This year our mission opportunity asks us to connect the seven practices of the way of Love with the notion of Beloved Community. So, this morning we get to offer a space and a framework for reflecting on our experience of worship last night, and for putting the Way of Love together with Beloved Community in practical ways.

We'll turn first to this video from the Presiding Bishop [<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/way-of-love>].

I invite you now to turn to a neighbor, introduce yourself, and then consider these questions together. What did you experience in those practices and resources last night? What might change if we emphasized these practices as part of our faith? Please take turns listening and sharing your responses.

Thank you, friends. You've probably noticed, in these Way of Love materials, a word that keeps coming up over and over again. It's the word practice. This morning we're going to unpack that word to get at the wisdom underneath the Way of Love. And to start, let's review a little bit of our history.

The earliest community of Jesus' friends and disciples called themselves The Way. You can see it several times in Acts. That earliest community saw themselves taking on a way of life -- habits and choices -- because of their experience of God in Jesus, and because of their desire to live like him. We are inheritors of their tradition -- the Way of Jesus.

As the early Church spread beyond those with a primarily Jewish identity, and as it flourished in the cities and trade routes of the Roman Empire, it was inevitable that they'd mix with and be impacted by the Greek and Roman thought of the day. Among the many ways Christianity was enculturated included the lens of Greek philosophy. Platonic and Aristotelian concepts fused with Christianity in ways that are so

commonplace in our current experience of Christian theology that we often can't even see their influence. For example, concepts like God's omnipotence, God's omniscience, were not native to the Semitic culture of Judaism in first-century Palestine. That philosophical toolbox and lens was one of the mixed blessings of the spread of the Roman Empire.

As time went on, Western European civilization was built on the mixture of Christian theology, Greek philosophy, and Roman Empire. Still later, the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, took those tangled threads and strengthened the emphasis on right thought. According to Enlightenment thinkers, Reason is the primary source of knowledge. I think, therefore I am.

So, for people of faith, how you thought about God became even more important as an indicator of your belonging. Adhering to the right ideas about God, the correct doctrine, became even more important as the marker of what it meant to be a Christian. Belief came to be understood less as how you live in response to God and more reductively understood as mental assent to an idea about God.

Fast forward to today. That legacy of emphasizing doctrine and thought at the expense of practice has influenced global Christianity in profound ways.

What I'm hoping to draw for you here is that belief cannot simply be mental assent to an idea about God. Belief would be better understood as: what you'd stake your life on. Belief is how we live in response to the story we tell about God. Our lives as followers of Jesus have to include both theology and practice. The problem is that, thanks to the dominant culture we've inherited, we tend to err on the side of thinking and ideas rather than practice.

If that's true, it's time to integrate our notions about God with the practices of our daily lives.

So let's unpack the notion of practice.

What's something you practice? Basketball. Piano. A new language. For each of those, you practice in order to improve your skills.

When we talk about practicing a religion, 'practice' isn't about improvement. Here, practice includes repetition but not accomplishment. Religious practice is not about achievement or a state of perfection – it's an action through which we are shaped. Religious practice is an intentional way of opening ourselves to the presence of God, an action in which we might even meet God.

Our friends in other religious traditions have some very robust concepts of practice. For example, people don't say that they believe in Buddhism – they say that they practice Buddhism. This eastern religion doesn't place a high priority on 'faith' as much as it emphasizes the practices that shape our understanding of ourselves and the world. Buddhism can be pretty heady, but notice here in the Noble Eightfold Path – right

speech, right action, right livelihood. Those are actions we do with our bodies in the world in relationship to other people.

Likewise, our Muslim friends are clear on what the five pillars of Islam are. They are practices, some daily, some yearly, some once in a lifetime. Spoken belief, daily prayer, charitable giving, fasting, pilgrimage, these five pillars shape your life as an adherent of Islam. Most of them are experienced not as solo practices but as actions you take in community, impacting others around you.

The secular spirituality of our popular culture also has a real interest in practices – practices that are mostly focused on self-improvement. For example, there are endless articles sharing daily practices for losing weight, for being happier, calmer, more organized, more assertive. You know - - it's all about how to be YOU – but better. You, 2.0.

This, my friends, can be quite useful. I read my share of these articles and I love them. But let's be clear: You 2.0 is not the Good News of Jesus Christ. This gospel of self-improvement sits on a foundation of shame, anxiety, individualism, and consumerism. It wants us to think that the best gift we can offer the world is our own fully realized, completely organized, most mindful self. And in this worldview, you, the individual, become the end goal of every project, the most important ethical value. This a far cry from the path of belovedness, offering, death, and resurrection that we see in Jesus of Nazareth.

So as we talk about Christian practices, instead of imagining yourself 2.0, imagine a trellis.

A trellis is a form that allows a plant to grow up off the ground. A trellis determines the shape it can take, the way it will bloom, the ability to reach further up or across a space. It's not about making the plant a better plant; the trellis simply gives it support for the shape the gardener wants it to take. Christian practices are a trellis – they are a support structure that gives shape and reach to your life.

Slide: What are key practices for Christians?

So we're finally at this question: What are the key practices for Christians? Unlike our siblings who are Buddhist or Muslim, Christians, broadly speaking, don't have the kind of shared clarity about the actions that define us as followers of Jesus.

Is it going to church? Is it baptism? Is it eucharist? Is it reading the bible? Is it loving your neighbor? Is it giving? What do we mean by 'the way of Jesus' ? How might a person 'practice' it?

We aren't the first to ask that question. Christian communities since Jesus' first followers have worked to answer it. And in recent years, theologians and leaders have laid some groundwork for twenty-first century Christians that I can share with you this morning. The spoiler alert is: it's kind of a mess. There isn't one unified list of Christian practices. There are lots of lists. So let's walk through just a few of them. And if you see a few things here that intrigue you, I encourage you to jot them down.

Dorothy Bass is one leader who has done deep work on this topic. Here's her list of key practices. Bass believes that "Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God's grace to all creation through Christ Jesus.

When we live the practices of Christian faith, we join together with one another, with Jesus, and with the communion of saints across time and space in a way of life that resists death in all its forms - a way of life that is spilling over with the Life of God for creation, for our neighbors, and for ourselves."

A leader with a slightly different take is Brian McLaren, a prolific author and speaker whose name you may well know already. His book *Finding Our Way Again* divides Christian practices into three main categories: Contemplative, Communal, and Missional. The contemplative practices mostly line up with what you might think of as ways of praying. The communal practices McLaren outlines describe what we do in our shared worship, and at other times of gathering. Missional practices, for McLaren, have to do with how we live our daily lives in relationship to neighbor.

Speaking of Missional, Alan Roxburgh is one of the leaders of the Missional Church movement that seeks to help our faith communities reconnect with God's mission. He and others have some ideas about congregational practices for mission – listening, to Scripture and to our neighbors. Discerning how the Holy Spirit is moving and how we might join in. Then testing and experimenting with those notions, learning from them, and taking bold steps forward as a faith community.

Then there are other leaders in the faith formation world who have done great work on how families practice their faith together. This is another way followers of Jesus are reclaiming their faith through practice – when we make household practices of faith, we're returning to our roots as people whose primary locus of faith is in our daily lives.