



## Why are we Talking About Practice?

### SESSION TWO

By the Rev. Susan Daughtry

*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)*

The founding of the Anglican Church took place in a context of deep religious division. The notion that it would be the Prayer Book that would bind us, that our common life would come from common prayer rather than all confessing the same doctrine, sits on a foundation of practice. 450 years ago, when Queen Elizabeth said, "I will not make a window into men's souls," she implied that how we practice our faith is at least as important, if not more so, than what we say we believe about Jesus. Practice is in our Anglican DNA.

The sacrament of baptism reveals our DNA as people of practice, too.

We practice this ancient rite that we learned from Jesus and John the Baptist, a rite that they interpreted and adapted from the practices of their Jewish community. In baptism we receive the paradox of dying with Christ and finding new birth. We profess our belief in the story that's been handed down to us for centuries. We hear that we are beloved children of God, each one of us called to hallow our lives, each one of us destined for resurrection. AND, in response to those beliefs, we dare to make promises of our own. These five questions, part of the Baptismal Covenant, are the Episcopal Church's version of a blueprint for the Christian life, a blueprint that is infinitely interpretable according to any one person's gifts and context.

When we say, "I will, with God's help," we're not promising flawlessness. We're acknowledging that these acts of continuing in community, resisting evil, proclaiming Good News, and striving for justice and human dignity are daily practices. I will with God's help means that that there is no perfection to reach but rather, we seek to practice life this way every day, and we know we need God's help every day to do so.

Forty years after the revision of the prayer book that brought us those questions, our context has changed. Notice the lavender section of this graphic: According to the Public Religion Research Institute, 24% of Americans would say that they

are religiously unaffiliated. That's nearly one in four. That's larger than any other religious group in the country.

We no longer reside in a North American cultural context in which Christianity is a baseline expectation. We live in a post-Christendom world, in which far more of our neighbors either have never been exposed to the story of Jesus, or they have left the faith because it has failed to articulate that story in a way that was Good News.

In this world, we must articulate how what we do connects to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We have to be able to show our neighbors how the life of faith connects to the story we tell about Jesus.

And, given the importance of tradition to how we worship and conduct our lives in faith communities, it's important for those of us inside the church too. Inside this movement, as we reinterpret the Anglican tradition for the 21st century, we have to be able to discern how our choices make us followers of Jesus. We need some plumb lines by which to discern how we imitate him as we live our faith.

That's how I see this tool, the seven practices identified by the Presiding Bishop and his team. Our church is turning toward fresh language for an ancient way of understanding Christian discipleship as we continue to live into our baptismal covenant. This language seeks to connect our daily practice directly to the story of Jesus, in a way that is accessible to those who wouldn't claim an Episcopal identity, people who don't speak Christianese. For those of who see ourselves on the way of Jesus already, this language is a source of new life and deeper connection to God. And it's a corrective, I think, to ways of talking about the Christian life that have overemphasized right thinking at the expense of practice. This tool goes back to the source to point the way forward.

All of this emphasis on practice is very different than the way I was brought up to understand my faith. It's a shift from belief as knowing the right ideas about God, thinking the right thoughts about God, and having a primarily inner experience of God to experiencing God by taking actions and reflecting on how those actions shape us and the world more toward God's vision of the world. And I'd wager that it could change us as a church in some very good ways.

I wonder if there might be more room for doubt and theological exploration while people are practicing the way of Jesus.

I wonder if our shared understanding of evangelism might change. Evangelism might not mean, anymore, 'we have the story of God inside our red doors and if you would just come in and learn to think like us you can have God too.' Instead, evangelism might mean, 'we are people experiencing God in our lives together and we want to hear how you experience God in your life.'

I wonder if our shared practices might be profoundly Good News, not just for us, but for our neighbors.

I invite you now to take a few minutes for your own reflection.

*Questions for reflection:*

What practices already ground you? What Christian practices might you like to try on? Is there one that scares you?

How do you see your faith community inviting people into Christian practice already? How could you imagine amplifying that?