



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN

CHURCH

January 29, 2017

Second Sunday after Epiphany

Psalms 63:1-9; Matthew 4:18-5:12

A Rule for Living Faith—with God

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We humans like our habits. We need our routines. What is it for you? Morning alarms the same time every day? The cup of coffee to get going, or is it cups?! Our favorite foods or feeding on Facebook, websites, news? Music playlists or CDs that speak to our hearts? Sharing events of the day at dinner or a phone call to a beloved child farther away? The regular schedule for walking the dog, feeding the cats, taking our pills, running, tennis, therapy, bridge, grocery shopping, laundry? At work and at home, among family and friends; for our health, our happiness, and simply getting done what's needs doing ... our habits and routines bring our lives meaning and purpose and pleasure. And sometimes we fall into patterns of living and relationships that aren't as good for us. Food, conflicts, fear, addictions, answering e-mails and text messages at virtually any hour of the day and night – do you know what I mean?

I was at Catalyst University this past Thursday. One presenter asked: within the first five minutes of waking up, even before getting out of bed, how many people check their e-mail? I was amazed! Within the first five minutes, before getting out of bed, how many people kiss their spouse? If the first is more frequent than the second, he joked, we might consider what that means!

Habits, routines, patterns, for good or not so good, they are conscious choices we make, at least at first. We shape our days, our preferences, our priorities. Which flavor? How much time do I need? Do I answer now or not? And after a while, we know they can turn into more thoughtless behaviors which shape who we are. How much time we spend. How we feel after we eat. How we

really connect or slip into greater distance. We humans are creatures of habit. What matters are patterns we choose and priorities we pursue.

I struggled with whether to go to Catalyst University or not. Church members generously offered a ticket. But so much to do. Thursday is sermon writing. I had meetings all afternoon. Still it sounded interesting. Maybe it could be good. I didn't expect connections with the very sermon percolating this week! Yes, I've heard you joke everything can become a sermon. I suppose so, when my heart is open and I'm paying attention. Actually, in a way, isn't that the question for all of us? Amid all our activities, stresses, responsibilities, all our habits, do we open our hearts to God's presence, to the Spirit speaking?

I'm not sure Ron Kitchens envisioned his introduction to the Catalyst day as the voice of God's Spirit. He talked about the over-abundance of stuff, words, responsibilities, and the power of our fears. Both in their way limit the fullness of life we can share. The first speaker picked up from there. Charles Duhigg wrote a book about habits—all the things that fill our lives, thoughts, and feelings. We may want to block it all out, wall it off, escape. Maybe that's good and necessary sometimes. The real key to a better life—he probably meant success, I'd say richer, more meaningful, peaceful—the real key is to train ourselves to think differently, more deeply amidst it all. We need contemplative routines, he said. Wait! What? Sitting way up in the dark, top row of Wings Stadium, among 2500 business people, did I hear right? "Contemplative," he said again! We need rituals and routines to help us attend to present realities, and envision other possibilities for what's happening and what to expect. We need to create new narratives, imagine new stories, with specificity to train our mind to think differently, and act assertively. That's contemplation, he said. Then he told us about a Qantas Airlines pilot of a huge plane out of Singapore. I can't recall all the details. ... engine blows out, rips a hole in the wing, riddles the fuselage, cripples 14 of 16 crucial operational systems. Screaming alarm bells fill the cockpit. And the pilot took a moment, closed his eyes, and

imagined something much simpler—flying a tiny Cessna. I can't draw out suspense like the speaker. Miraculously, all ended well. And no one's been able to simulate it since. What distinguished that pilot is how much he practiced contemplative imagination before the crisis came.

Facing reality, telling stories to train ourselves to think differently, to live fully. It was great. I'm glad I went. And as I listened, I thought this isn't quite new. That's what Jesus did all the time. That's the crux of living faith. Training ourselves to see the world as it is, other people, and envision other possibilities. I'd say it's an exercise of the heart at least as much as the mind. More about how we feel than just what we think. We can feel overwhelmed with all the words and all the change in society; everything to keep straight in our personal lives; all the expectations and responsibilities in relationships. We wonder whether to do this or that, as habits and routines propel us along. That's when we need contemplation; new stories and intentionality to help us envision and live into a fuller, richer life with God.

That's why Matthew tells us the gospel story of Jesus. So that, like earliest disciples, we might come and follow him; see our lives and world the way God wants it to be, and then think, feel and act differently than we might otherwise. Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, James and John precisely amid routines of everyday life, functions of work, the fabric of relationships they share. He invites them into a new kind of relationship and purpose and pattern of living. Immediately their internship begins. They meet people whose lives, like that plane engine, have been blown out by disease, sickness, ailments of all kinds, ripping a hole in their dreams and possibilities, crippling their normal relational systems. People come to Jesus. They get healed. And he declares: See! This is what God's reign is all about! Divine Love brings new life where it's lost. This power and purpose is what God wants for the world. Crowds flock to Jesus. And so, the way Matthew tells the story, Jesus pauses for a contemplative moment, something like a catalyst gathering of 2500 people. He talks about

tensions they'll feel and transformations they can hope for. He explains what he just exemplified. He tries to empower them for this life with God. And let's be clear, he changes the narrative of society's values. He gives them a new script to enact. He tries to train their hearts and minds to see realities, to trust Holy Love, and respond with grace and peace.

Some scholars call the Sermon on the Mount Jesus' Constitution for God's Kingdom. If so, the Beatitudes are the preamble, a foundational frame for all the ways they'll try to live together and serve in the world. I'd love to hear what Lin Manuel Miranda could do with it. They aren't really rules for action; clear dictates to do. They're more expressions of being; habits of the heart; like musical strains of Hamilton that get stuck in our minds and draw us closer to God. "Blest are they ... it would be enough." And out of that intimate bond, then rises up what life will be like.

It's something a monastic Rule, like the Rule of Benedict or his sister Scholastica from Medieval Italy; or Franciscans or Jesuits or so many others from earliest centuries and ever since. I serve in a program of the Presbyterian Church, called CREDO, which means "I give my heart." We try to help pastors develop their own "rule of life," giving their heart to God. In good Presbyterian fashion, some pastors give us highly suspicious looks, at first. "I don't like rules." "Don't tell me what to do." Maybe it was bad memories of unfair restrictions, or superficial moralism, or judgmental fault finding, or simply personal insecurity, inadequacy if they didn't fulfill it.

Friends, a Rule for Living Faith is far more than mere rules. Like anything in life when we get to the heart of what's happening, the reasons why we do things, what's really going on inside us, then whatever we do, how we do it, the specific rules we follow make more sense. And if not, even something that seems good on the surface might not be so. "Rule" comes from the Latin word *regula*, like "regularize" and "regulate". It's really about discerning important

values, priorities, visions for life. It's about always trying to center on who we are, loved by God; and then having a frame, a rhythm, patterns, a kind of order for our lives. It's about recognizing habits and realities, and being intentional. It's about training our minds and hearts to see the world the way God wants it to be. And when it isn't, when life's hard, when we're overwhelmed with activities, responsibilities, emotions, it's about empowering us to live deeply into new possibilities.

“We are in relationship to the living God,” writes Brian Taylor, as he introduces a book given to all CREDO participants. Intentional practices or spiritual disciplines, enliven our relationship with God, others, the world, and ourselves in a holistic way. “‘Monastic life,’ said one Trappist monk, ‘is just putting a frame around everyday life. We do the same things everyone else does—we eat, we work, we sleep, we live in community. But we do it with intention towards God, and that makes it holy.’”ⁱ

Part of me feels the appeal of monastic life—simplicity, security, community. But the Presbyterian part of me feels suspicion, resists restriction. And I also like my wife and kids! That's why I've found the Iona Community attractive. It's a group of ordinary people like you and me all around the world trying to be faithful amid everyday realities. I try to follow the Iona Rule in regular routines. I'm not perfect. Some days are better than others. Still, it helps me attend to habits, patterns, choices, and embody my values and priorities. Of course, there is no single right way or expression of faithfulness. I believe some basic frame or pattern of intentional practices could help all of us, creatures of habit, live more deeply, more richly, more peace-fully in God's grace. So this week and the next three, I offer four parts of a Rule for Living Faith which we all may find it helpful to imagine. It's based on Iona, with my own modification.

First, relation with God ... In some way, I believe, St. Augustine was right: “our hearts are restless until we rest in thee, O God.” That's what the Psalmist

conveys. “O God, I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. I gaze upon you in the sanctuary. I call you to mind in bed and meditate on you at night. You are my God, and I will bless you with all of my life.” Scholars suggest this psalm was likely used in some kind of ritual practice. Maybe not unlike our habits of worship or daily prayer—the Lord’s Prayer or other favorite phrases that stick with us. The psalm expresses recognition of how our life depends on Holy Love as the true and unceasing source, and our response of trust and commitment to orient our desires and decisions. It’s been a favorite of many Christian leaders over the ages, who recited it regularly in daily practice.ⁱⁱ

I expect the Beatitudes have served that contemplative purpose, as well. That recognition, that orientation of our heart, our core habits and perspectives ... that’s what Jesus tries to encourage in the first disciples and in us as we try to follow the Way, Truth and Life revealed in him. Poor in Spirit, we don’t arrogantly trust our insights and abilities alone; we look to God’s grace beyond our control. In mourning, we lament all the ways the world is not how God intends it to be—taking life rather than creating and nurturing it. When meek, we renounce violent methods of power. When hungry and thirsty for righteousness and pure of heart we center our whole being, our will, our integrity, our way of life in family and community in the presence of God. As merciful peacemakers we seek forgiveness more than clinging to bitterness; we seek fullness of life for all people and creation. The fishermen left behind their nets. Jesus tries to weave a network of Sacred Love in their hearts and among their relationships. That’s what several people I spoke with this week really wanted—in times of major transition, amid conflict here at church, amid life that’s going pretty well still needs something deeper.

Friends, when all is well, it will make the difference between gratitude and greed. When our minds spin in stress all night, it will make the difference between perspective and peace not anger and exhaustion. When we face times when we’ll be sorely tested in life, it will make the difference between

clarity and courage not fear and despair which threatens to twist our perception and decisions. There will be times when our lives seem to get blown apart by illness, disease, conflict, joblessness, prejudice not unlike people who came to Jesus in Galilee long ago. Times when the future is uncertain no matter how much we long to control it and make it clear. Living faith is not a mathematical equation. There's no guaranteed manual of operations. In the beginning, like Jesus calling the disciples and in the end, like Jesus on the cross, when we strip everything else away, it's clear all we have is who we are in God's love. Our integrity of love, despite faults and imperfections. Our authenticity of love in action. How we choose to live facing crosses of our losses, trusting God's resurrection power to bring new life. So amid all the over-abundances of our life, all our habits of choice or thoughtless behavior, all the news of the week, all the posts we read; challenges at work or in our families; precisely amid everyday mundane routines as we eat, work, sleep and live in community, how do we open our hearts and cultivate such a blessed life with God? What contemplative disciplines of prayer and reading can help train our hearts and minds to keep telling and trusting God's story for us and our world?

Sometimes it's helpful to have a prayer discipline that is set apart from other daily routines. Special times in the morning or evening ... maybe it's reading the Bible or some other devotional book. Maybe it's in a special chair or place in the house, light a candle, journal, take a walk, whatever it is with the sole intention of opening our hearts to Holy Love. No other purpose to accomplish. Maybe it's putting on contemplative spiritual music while we drive not talk radio. That's why we have so many different gatherings here at church—bible studies, prayer, classes, discussions on Sundays and Wednesdays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays. Virtually every day of the week there's an opportunity.

And for some of us, such patterns can seem difficult. Such expectations inevitably make us feel like failures ... not exactly the kind of relationship with God we're going for, right? At Session this past Wednesday night, for our

opening devotion, Pam Zandt shared how she can sometimes struggle with prayer disciplines. She joked about having “monkey brain,” thoughts jumping from one to another never quite able to focus and center. And then she offered a vision of prayer she finds inspirational. Here’s an excerpt:

... Be awake to the Life that is loving you and sing your prayer, laugh your prayer, dance your prayer, run, weep, sweat, sleep, eat, paint, sculpt, and read your prayer, sweep, dig, rake, hoe, garden, build, clean your prayer, wash, iron, vacuum, sew, and pickle your prayer Learn and play, work and rest, fast and feast, argue, whisper, listen and shout your prayer, groan and moan, spit, sneeze, swim, hunt, cook prayer ... breathe your prayer, be your prayer...ⁱⁱⁱ

Dear friends, I don’t care at all for judging what any of us does specifically. I want us all to feel God’s love fill your hearts and guide your lives. I believe the first and foundational part of a Rule for Living Faith is to cultivate such a life-giving connection with God; to fill our hearts with the Divine love, compassion, mercy, grace, strength Jesus lived and wants to give us? Read stories of scripture or some other inspirational narrative, and then imagine new stories and possibilities amid the difficulties of our lives and world. Beyond surface reaction and thoughtless routines, think and feel evermore deeply, trust evermore completely, live evermore freely and joyfully and peacefully, ... rejoice and be glad as we come to follow Jesus into the Kingdom of God!

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Brian C. Taylor, “Introduction” in *Strength for the Journey* by Renée Miller (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2011), 3.

ⁱⁱ J. Clinton McCann, Jr. “The Book of Psalms” in *the New Interpreter’s Bible, volume 4* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 929.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted and abridged from “What is Prayer” by Alla Renée Bozarth, quoted in *Beginner’s Grace* by Kate Braestrup (New York: Free Press, 2010), 175-176.