“Are you a practicing Christian?” a friend asked in the course of a conversation. “No,” I laughed, “I got it right the first time.” The truth is that I need all the practice I can get. “Getting it right” is exactly the wrong way to think about faith. Faith is more a matter of “being got” than “getting it.” American philosopher of religion H. Richard Niebuhr put it this way: “We sought a good to love and were found by a good that loved us.”¹ The words of the hymn “Amazing Grace” put this truth to music: “I once was lost, but now am found.” Like a flare from a foundering ship, practices position us to be found. What are the faith practices of practicing Christians? Is there a uniquely Lutheran perspective on them? What are the faith practices that will lead the church into the next millennium?

Faith practices confer identity

Though practices seem to tell us what to do, in reality they tell us who to be. They confer identity. Approached by a group of young people who wanted to know what it meant to be a Catholic, Archbishop Rembert Weakland replied: “Go to mass every Sunday, and work in a soup kitchen every week for six months. Then you’ll know what it means to be a Catholic.” He did not recommend reading Thomas Aquinas or the latest papal encyclicals; he did not assign the Baltimore Catechism. He told these young people to commit themselves to a regular discipline, sticking to it whether they felt like it or not. He invited them to immerse themselves in those God-shaped and God-shaping activities that were central to the faith. This is how they would know what it meant to be a Catholic.

As God-shaped and God-shaping activities, faith practices both bring us into a tradition and serve as the face of that tradition in the world. Because they bring us into a tradition, practices help us know who we are: we know ourselves as the people who do these kinds of things. For example, a friend is a writer, and he is a writer because he does the things that writers do. He became a writer by living the discipline of daily writing, whether he felt particularly inspired on a given day or not. Stretches of not being able to be at his writing desk leave him frustrated and wondering who he is.
I am a Christian. Part of the reason I know I am a Christian is because I do the things
Christians do: show up in church, study Scripture, pray for my neighbors. These prac-
tices are not usually mountain-top experiences — in fact, they rarely are. The everyday-
ness of my faith practices is hard news for some. It certainly was for the young man
who abandoned the church of his childhood because it was not “doing anything for
me anymore.” Had he given his childhood faith a chance to mature? Fitting mature
life-experience into the faith of a child can be a lot like fitting a grownup’s foot into a
baby shoe. Could this have been what Paul referred to in his letter to the Corinthians?
“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;
when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (1 Cor. 13:11). Is the question — “What will this do for me?” — even the right question? More than doing something
for us, living a set of faith practices over time and in a committed and disciplined way
does something to us. Most important, our faith practices bring us into the way of life
called “Christian.” As we move more deeply into them, the Spirit uses these faith prac-
tices to mature our faith. Through practices, a tradition enters the heart, mind, soul
and spirit. Practices provide the soil for our ongoing and lifelong religious experience.

Faith practices also serve as the public face of a tradition in the world. They not
only identify us to ourselves; they also identify us to others. Campaigning for the civil
rights of African-Americans in the 1950s, Martin Luther King, Jr., did not try to speak a
religious language that would mask his unique upbringing. No one would have
remembered words like “I have an idea that I would like to share with you....” King’s
vision was more than an “idea,” it was a “dream.” Behind that
dream were words from the prophet Joel, for those who had ears
to hear:

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2:28-29)

Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke in the very particular images and metaphors of his
tradition. He spoke in his mother tongue, and he had a religiously tutored first lan-
guage to use. The language of faith expressed his deepest convictions and gave him
concrete images that spoke across traditions. King did not talk about oppression in
general or hope in the abstract. Rather, through particular biblical images, he talked
concretely about what bound him as a black man and what he hoped for his children
in the middle of the twentieth-century United States of America. Drawing on biblical
images and metaphors, King evoked in his hearers their own concrete examples of
oppression and hope.

We need to give our own children no less. They do not need the freedom to
choose their own religious faith practices; they need a first language of faith. If they do
not have a language for religious experience, they will have trouble identifying it. After
all, how could a child of the desert begin to describe snow? Why would she need to?

In addition to bringing us into a tradition and serving as the public face of that tra-
dition in the world, faith practices do several other things.
Faith practices reflect and define relationships

Christianity is not primarily about accepting certain doctrines or living up to certain obligations — though those are a part of one’s faith life. Christianity is primarily about being in a relationship. All the rest follows.

For all his great wisdom about relationships, Augustine, the ultimate seeker, wondered how he could possibly have missed this. In his autobiography, he assesses the twists and turns of a rich life. And he discovered that at the very moments when he had been trying to attach himself to Great Ideas — Truth, Beauty, and the Good — he had already been found. He sought a “what” and was found by “Someone.”

This relationship to “Someone” is not a private hotline to the sacred. It shapes all other relationships. The Great Commandment says: “You shall love the Lord with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:38-39). The command depicts a threefold relationship made up of love that embraces God, self, and community. When one leg of the triangle is shaky, the whole pyramid collapses.

The triad — God, self, and community — defines our religious practices. If the relationship to God is left out, practices become mere group activities. These actions that leave God out lose their purpose and simply work to create the sacred in human form. If the loving relationship to self is erased, practices become exercises in false humility and homemade martyrdom. Self-sacrifice, a key virtue in many religious traditions, works only when there is a valued and valuable “self” to freely offer. If the community evaporates, practices become experiments in private spiritual wandering. The presence of a community is absolutely essential to discern the spirits, to test the practices, and to expand our spiritual vision, lest that vision become shortsighted or cloudy.

Faith practices teach and train the emotions

Take a time-honored cultural practice of watching television and look at its impact on the emotions. Tune in during Saturday morning, kid-die time TV, and think about the feelings evoked. A fourth-grade class in Portland, Oregon, took notes: whether kickboxing or punching, shooting or slashing, there was a violent act every 60 seconds. What emotions are evoked? The answers are chilling: fear, aggression, desensitization to violence and desire for more. Practices have the potential to transform or deform the emotions. Just as sinews connect bone to bone, emotions connect people one to another. They are the connective tissue of human society. Depending on how they are trained, they can build up or tear down.

Faith practices train the emotions in ways that are God-shaped and God-shaping. For this reason, sixth century abbot Benedict of Nursia recommended the daily practice of common, spoken prayer. During a week of prayer, the monks would move through the entire book of Psalms. Imagine the impact this practice had on the emotions, and think of the emotions evoked. The psalmists paint with a rich emotional palette that carries all colors of the rainbow. There is room in a relationship with God for everything: rejoicing and despair, consolation and abandonment, judgment and mercy. Reading the Psalms lets the word color us, bringing out the many hues in our experience with God and our neighbor. We find ourselves with an emotional range we could not ourselves choose or expand.
Faith practices are deeply traditioned

Faith practices are done together and over time; they presume community and history. As Christians, we do not need to walk into Holy Week or Advent wondering: “What shall we do this year?” The services follow a flexible pattern which believers have observed for centuries. Following in their footsteps, we join them across time and space.

In the background of faith practices is Scripture; in their foreground is the church’s teachings or doctrines. Each is critical in terms of informing and directing practices. Scripture informs faith practices. Christians trace the practice of baptism back to the command of Jesus; Scripture informs that practice. But if Scripture informs practices, teachings direct them. The church’s doctrines furnish a certain framework for faith; faith practices show us how to walk in that framework. Practices allow us to live out a faith in word and deed. There is a two-way relationship between doctrines and practices. Without the church’s teachings, practices are empty and aimless. We might do them by rote or routine, but we have a hard time figuring out what they are about. Without practices, however, doctrines are merely “head trips.” We might give them lip service, but they have not entered the body of either the believer or the community.

The interaction between teaching and Scripture may suggest some change of practices. Many Protestant churches found the customary practice of ordaining only men to be in opposition to their doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Viewed in light of Paul’s clear statement in Galatians that in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female...” (3:23), that teaching forced a re-examination of the customary practice of ordaining men.

Faith practices train us in the way we see our world

Faith practices become “eye exercises” by which the Spirit corrects our vision, aligning our eyes in communion with God. This “new sight” is finally not an end in itself, but a gift. One can read the works of Aristotle without realizing that there were poor people in the city of Athens. They were simply invisible to him. But had Aristotle’s vision been corrected by the lens of Scripture, he would not have missed seeing “the widow, the orphan, the stranger in your land.”

In summary, faith practices are God-shaped and God-shaping activities that compose a way of life. They identify us to ourselves and to others. They reflect and sustain relationships to God, self and community. They teach the emotions. They are deeply rooted in tradition. They give the gift of new sight, changing the way we see ourselves and everything around us. And when faith practices are practiced faithfully, they balance individual and community. Faith practices are not activities that we choose to do, but, rather, activities which, if we do them in a disciplined and regular way, over time choose us. Faith practices set us deeply within a tradition — a concrete expression of faith.
All faith practices reflect and sustain a connection with a God who has been revealed in Jesus Christ. All share in the goal of communion with God, and each brings its own gracious gift. In response to a course requiring that students commit themselves to a daily faith practice, a student chose prayer; in particular, prayer for her enemies. She readily confessed to using this prayer as a means to an end. She had ulterior motives and expected external goods: insights, eased relationships, some measure of compassion.

Over time, however, the practice itself drew her in. Most unsettling was the way in which she began to see herself as an enemy of God, in her easy ability to generate ill-will toward God’s creatures. As she was drawn into this practice of praying for the enemy, she found other practices made a new and different sense; the utter graciousness of forgiveness in the public order of confession and absolution, the generosity of the Lord’s Supper. Scholars speak of the unity of the virtues. There is also a unity of faith practices. They come together, because they all lead us into the Spirit’s gift of communion with God.

In what way have you been shaped by the practices of your faith? How have you identified and been identified by those practices?
**FAITH PRACTICES AS ‘MARKS OF THE CHURCH’**

**The Spector of Works-Righteousness**

Lutherans have tended to shy away from teachings about spiritual practice or discipline. Anything done in a disciplined or regular manner smacks of works-righteousness! Yet again and again, Martin Luther exhorted his parishioners to practice the faith. What he identified as the “marks of the church” were nothing less than God-shaped and God-shaping activities given to Christians for their lives in the world. For Luther, these practices revolved around the preaching and hearing of the Word like planets whirling around the sun: baptizing and making new Christians; sharing the Lord’s Supper; forgiving and asking for forgiveness; ordaining and commissioning leaders; praying, praising, teaching the people the faith; discipling or following in the way of the Cross. These “marks of the church” signaled where the church could be found in the world; they told “what, who, and where” the church is.

Moving out from these basic faith practices, we find secondary practices orbiting the same core: marrying and burying, confirming, blessing a meal, remembering the dead, singing heartily and well. Somewhere in the outer orbits of this universe of faith practices we might locate the time-honored traditions of coffee hours after worship or potluck suppers in the church basement. As long as these practices organize themselves around the Word of God, they fit in this universe of Christian practices. Faith practices open the way into the heart, which is the place in which the Spirit creates religious experience. Luther was adamant that these gifts were given to Christians and remained in their possession. They did not belong to priests, popes or princes; they belonged to the people who received them.

What Luther condemned as works-righteousness were “self-chosen” works, not these God-chosen gifts. He pointed here to a distinction between practices and techniques. Practices are good in themselves, while techniques aim at some external goal as means to an end. The woman mentioned initially elected to pray for her enemies as a technique to achieve social harmony, not as a practice. Gradually, however, the regular prayer drew her in and became for her a good in itself.

“Self-chosen works” were techniques aimed at pleasing or placating an angry God; practices were gifts of God given to the people of God. Imagine an uncle who wanted to teach his young nephew how to play chess. The boy was uninterested, so the uncle struck a bargain. For every game the boy won, his uncle would give him a piece of candy. Initially, the nephew learned to play chess as a technique aimed at acquiring candy; chess was a means to an end. Over time, however, the game itself drew the young man in. Chess became an end in itself; it was a practice. As he began to play...
Luther feared that Christians would use spiritual disciplines as means to an end: techniques aimed at earning their salvation. Focused on a goal which they could never achieve, they would overburden themselves and miss the gracious gift of God in Christ. This had been his own experience in the monastery; despair drove him to faith. Practices as “marks of the church” differ from spiritual techniques in that they are God-chosen gifts, given to God’s people for life in the world.

"Holy Things” for “Holy People”
Luther characterized the popular piety of his time as a spirituality of “holy people” and “holy things”: saints and relics. Prayer books offered prayers to any number of exceptional and extraordinary people. Courts and wealthy noblemen collected relics of the saints and martyrs, believing that contact with them brought some “holiness” to the owner. Every medieval altar contained the relic of a saint or martyr. “Holy things” and “holy people” dominated the religious landscape.

Luther was both a creature of this world and creator of a new one. He preserved the saints, but pointed out that they were also sinners. He refused to define the church as a place or an office, restricting it to cathedrals, offices and popes. Rather, the church was “the Christian holy people” and “the congregation of the faithful.” These people were not exceptional, extraordinary or dead; they were the fathers and mothers and children, the bakers and brewers and barbers who populated the pews. Saintly and sinful — these were the Christian holy people, and this was the church.

These ordinary saints also had their “relics” or “holy things.” They were the “marks of the church,” gifts God has given to identify the church in the world. Finally, it was Christ’s body, not that of St. Anne or St. James, which sanctified the believer. Luther urged Christians to seek contact with Christ’s body through its marks in the world — the faith practices given by God.

Think for a moment about the body of Christ as a human body; think of the marks that were on it at the time of his death. There were marks in his hands and feet where the nails were pounded. There was the mark in his side where a spear was jabbed. The apostle Thomas would not believe that he was in the presence of Christ until he could see these marks and place his hands in them.

Luther did not expect any of us to do better than Thomas did. We are, after all, neither exceptional nor extraordinary; we are saints and sinners. We, too, need to put our hands into the marks of the body of Christ to know that we are in the presence of the Son of the living God. Graciously that reassurance is given. The marks of the body of Christ in the world are faith practices. They are given to us so that we will recognize the body of Christ in the world.
The Word “Preached, Believed, Professed and Lived”

On different occasions, Luther listed the “marks of the church” differently. His flexibility allowed for changing situations and contexts, but central to each list was the Word “preached, believed, professed and lived.” Indeed, Luther regarded this as the primary mark of the church: “...even if there were no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there...” The other marks of the church revolved around the Word like planets around the sun.

Luther did not restrict the operation of the Word to sermon, to Scripture or to sacraments, but he expected believers to encounter the Word there. Familiarity with the Word, as it was preached and shared in church, helped the believer identify it elsewhere, because the Word was everywhere present: the Word preached in private prayer (and Luther cautioned his barber to listen for it); the Word preached in the works of a Christian’s calling and in the very tools of his trade, as he boldly emphasized in his writings on the Sermon on the Mount:

“If you are a manual laborer, you find that the Bible has been put into your workshop, into your hand, into your heart. It teaches and preaches how you should treat your neighbor. Just look at your tools — at your needle or thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardstick or measure — and you will read this statement inscribed on them. Everywhere you look, it stares at you. Nothing that you handle every day is so tiny that it does not continually tell you this, if you will only listen. Indeed there is no shortage of preaching. You have as many preachers as you have transactions, goods, tools, and other equipment in your house and home. All this is continually crying out to you: ‘Friend, use me in your relations with your neighbor just as you would want your neighbor to use his property in his relations with you.’”

In his counsel, Luther reflected occupations from the daily lives of both women and men; everything from thimbles and needles to scales and measures. We could add to his illustrations with the tools of our own trade: computer screens and chalkboards, mops and scrub-brushes, rulers and compasses, coloring books and tricycles. Whatever the tools, the point remains the same. We find the Word surrounding us if we would but stop to listen. The presence of the Word “preached, believed, professed and lived” signals the presence of the church in the world.

Seven Faith Practices for the Next Millennium

What does it mean to “preach, believe, profess, and live” the Word in this new millennium? We have sermon, Scripture and sacraments; we have the tools of our various trades. In addition, there are seven basic faith practices that mark the life of “the Christian holy people” in the new millennium. These seven faith practices, emphasized in the ELCA-wide Call to Discipleship, revolve around the Word of God like planets around the sun.
PRAY
The regular discipline of personal and corporate prayer marks the lives of Christians. Prayer places us in the presence of God; prayer allows us to intercede for the needs of the neighbor. Luther himself daily prayed the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed. He found that the busier he was, the more time he needed in prayer, and he acknowledged days on which he was so busy, he could not get by without spending three hours in prayer! It took that long for the day’s anxieties to drain away so that he could be in the presence of God.

In his daily practice of prayer, Luther stood in a long tradition of prayer that had communion with God as its goal. But Luther altered and refocused the practice toward service in the world. While much mystical prayer led to contemplation and sought ascent to God, Luther directed prayer to being sent into the world. Not contemplation, but temptation and suffering were the final issue of prayer: “in the world “by his assaults [the devil] will teach you to seek and to love God's word.”

Engagement with the Word sustains Christians in the world; engagement with the world drives Christians back to the Word. The daily discipline of prayer nurtures Christian disciples for service in the world.

STUDY
In the ancient church, most new Christians were adult converts to Christianity. They went through a process of initiation into the faith which involved study of Scripture, instruction in various forms of prayer, and explanation of the symbols and actions of the liturgy. The process culminated in the Easter Vigil, where the new Christians were baptized, anointed with holy oil, and given their first communion.

As the practice of baptizing infants became more and more prevalent in the fifth and sixth centuries, this process of initiation disintegrated. Baptized at birth, medieval Christians were taught visually; statues, paintings, altar pieces, and the various symbols in the church taught them the language of faith and the stories of Scripture. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the invention of the printing press and the growing number of people who could read provided access to the printed word as a tool in religious education.

Disheartened by the state of parish education in a visit to all the churches in Saxony in 1527, Luther prepared the Small and Large Catechisms for instruction in home, school and congregation. Christians were to be lifelong learners. Study informed discipleship. Luther envisioned his Small Catechism as the foundation of learning for life. It told Christians what they were to do (the Ten Commandments), what God had done for them (the Creed), and finally, what and how to pray (The Lord’s Prayer). The Small Catechism could be easily memorized and inscribed on the heart.

Then and now, biblical preaching familiarizes audiences with the stories of Scripture. But, unlike Luther’s parishioners, we own Bibles and can read them on our own. In addition to its place in private prayer, Scripture offers us stories of the ordinary saints Luther so loved to describe in his biblical commentaries: Joseph, Mary the Mother of God, the prophet Isaiah, and others. Entering the world of Scripture initiates us into a story-shaped world and offers us a way to understand our own. Study of the Catechism and Scripture mark the life of Christian discipleship.

What part does study play in your Christian life?
What might it mean for you?
What can it mean for your congregation?
WORSHIP

Corporate worship offers a unique way to come into the presence of God and to praise the God who called all of creation into being. Luther regarded prayer, public praise and thanksgiving to God as one of the “marks of the church.” The hymns he wrote for worship often reflected Christmas and Easter joy. Worship made of the congregation a Mundhaus; literally, a “mouth-house,” as people raised their voices in song, petition and praise.

Through the ancient prayers and songs of Christians across the centuries and around the world, we enter into a community that goes beyond the barriers of time and space. As we join that throng, we are shaped by the liturgy. Prayers follow a pattern of praise and petition; we acknowledge who God is and what God has done; we plead for God’s continuing action in the world. Look at the Collect for Easter Day in the Lutheran Book of Worship:

O God, you gave your only Son to suffer death on the cross for our redemption, and by his glorious resurrection you delivered us from the power of death. Make us die every day to sin, so that we may live with him forever in the joy of the resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Praise precedes petition. We give thanks for who God is; then we ask for God’s continuing blessing. Intercessory prayer offers to God the needs of the neighbor and the concerns of the world. We ask for the neighbors’ prayers for us, even as we assure them of our petitions for them.

Corporate worship features the preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments. Read, preached, sung and recited, the Word of God vibrates around us, tuning our souls. In the Lord’s Supper, we receive Christ himself, in, with and under the elements of bread and wine. By sharing in that sacrament, we receive again the food that sustains us for service. As we daily return to baptism we are made new. Participation in the sacraments helps us discern the presence of the sacred in our daily lives; through the experience of God’s presence in public worship we can trace the extraordinary presence of God in our ordinary lives. We know both where to look and what to look for. Worship sets us on the path of the cross-shaped life of discipleship; we acknowledge God’s participation in our lives, and we offer ourselves in service to the neighbor.

INVITE

In private and in public worship, the Spirit calls us through the Word to “preach” our faith as we serve our neighbor. But where are our pulpits? Words from the Gospel of Matthew still challenge each one of us today: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19)

The Great Commission impels us to the practice of invitation or evangelization. It names baptism, it names us and it becomes the lens through which we are invited to view and approach others. Baptism makes explicit who we are and whose we are: we are God’s. Baptism moves us beyond our families of origin to sense our identity as members of the whole family of God. Faith-inspired compassion for our “sisters” and “brothers” moves us to share our faith and love with conviction.
The mission we have been given is at the very heart of our life of faith. We have not been called into God’s family to simply enjoy being called a child of God or to gather with others who have been baptized to celebrate what we have received. We have been sent. We are to “tell what God has done for us” in a way that invites those who are not yet baptized to know the God who loves them and has redeemed them in Jesus Christ. More than just a practice, the gift of invitation is the very way we live in relationship with others who have yet to hear and believe.

**ENCOURAGE**

Early Christians were like any other family — mealtimes were often the occasion for division and disagreement! Writing to Christians at Rome, the apostle Paul chided those who were quick to judge the table manners of their fellow Christians. The meat-eaters disparaged the vegetarians; the non-drinkers put down the drinkers.

To this community of disgruntled diners Paul directed sage advice: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you...” (Romans 15:7) His injunction carries the weight of “Befriend one another...” In the etiquette of the Ancient Near East, the people with whom a man dined were his friends, and his friends were the people with whom he dined. Paul’s counsel reminded the Christians at Rome of the fellowship they shared in Christ, who had made them not servants, but friends (John 15:15). He appealed to the office of friendship, which was characterized by benevolence; literally, wishing the other well. “We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor” (Romans 15:1-2).

Luther captured the importance of this practice of encouragement in his explanation of the Eighth Commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Characteristically, he turned a negative “thou shalt not” commandment into a positive “thou shalt” commandment. Not only should we refrain from betraying, slandering or defaming the neighbor, but we should “apologize for him, speak well of him, and interpret charitably all that he does.” Luther knew the corrosive effects of negative thinking and gossip on the fabric of community. He also knew that we can often inspire people to act better than they might otherwise act. He regarded the practice of encouragement as one way in which the Gospel itself offered counsel. Citing Matthew 18:20, “…where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,” Luther commended the practice of “mutual conversation and consolation of brethren.” He envisioned a community of friends, called together to listen to the Good News and challenged to be a mouthpiece of that Good News to one another in speech, comfort, and friendship.

Luther’s community of friends would also encourage each other in the lifelong task of Christian education. Christian education or catechesis (from the Greek katechein, “sounding back”) is teaching what God “wishes us to do or not do” (Decalogue), a “setting forth all that we must expect and receive from God” (the Creed), and a demonstration of “how we are to pray” (the Lord’s Prayer). Luther insisted that every baptized Christian must have a minimal theological understanding of what God has done, is doing, and is yet to do. The practice of encouragement involves striving together for some understanding of life with God. We teach the faith as a gift offered through Christ crucified that cannot be achieved on our own.
SERVE
A congregation in the Pacific Northwest has a brief, but powerful, mission statement: “Gathered to worship; scattered to serve.” The Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies” the Christian holy people, but then sends them into the world in love and service to the neighbor. The Christian life is not one of maintenance, but one of mission, and that mission is in and to the world.

The Book of Acts provides the template for service in the world. The first “act” of the apostles is to be reoriented. As the book opens, they gaze up into heaven at the coattails of their ascending Lord, only to be chided by a couple of angels: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” (Acts 1:11) The work of discipleship lies elsewhere, on earth in love and service to the neighbor.

Where we look determines what we see. If we look around us instead of only up, we will see the faces of our neighbors. To a Lutheran, all the world is a neighbor, and that insight suggests an interdependence among all of creation. The neighbor figures powerfully into Luther’s theology, both as the one whom we serve and the one who serves us and upon whose kindness we depend.

For Luther, the actions that would best serve the neighbor and most conform to the cross-shaped pattern of discipleship reside in works of our calling. Whether teachers or bus drivers, janitors or lawyers, we would find out how to be a neighbor to those around us by doing the best job possible. In contrast to contemporary spiritualities that seek God in individual feelings and religious sentiment, Luther asserted strongly that God also meets the Christian in social roles and relationships with others. These constitute “masks of God” in the world, in which and through which God continues the work of creation. We serve quite literally as God’s hands in that ongoing work of creation.

GIVE
“The gifts of God for the people of God,” the pastor announces, inviting parishioners to the Lord’s Supper. The gift of the body and blood Christ keeps on giving; we give because of what we have been given. Instructing the Corinthians how they are to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, the apostle Paul prefaced his remarks with this same paradigm for giving. “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you....” (1 Corinthians 11:26) The implication should have been clear to them: “Give what you have so abundantly received.” The Words of Institution followed immediately upon this preface.

Luther made a similar connection. He faced his own dilemma of giving. In the medieval world, priests, nuns, and religious orders played a key role in relief of the poor. Priests dispensed alms to the poor; tables outside the cathedrals collected food and other goods for them; masses brought in money for them. Taking apart this elaborate welfare system raised the urgent question of relief of the poor. Luther brought 1 Corinthians 11 to his defense. He commended to his own congregations the ancient practice of gathering food and material goods in the church and distributing them among the poor. Then, he noted, the sacrament was “properly used” and people “understood this fellowship...well.”

Luther took an additional step in his own version of welfare reform and created a new priesthood which would now be responsible for relief to the poor: “the priesthood
of all believers.” Convinced that there ought to be no beggars in Christendom, he counseled every village to become acquainted with the poor in its midst. After all, this is what the priest would have done.

If we would include ourselves in the “priesthood of all believers,” we must accept the duties and responsibilities of that calling. Empowered by the Body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, we move into the world in witness and service, giving what has first been given us. Think of the Offertory Prayer: “We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us — our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love.” The prayer contains both the form of our giving (giving money, volunteering our time, sharing our talents) and the attitude which accompanies it (joy and thanksgiving). The faith practice of giving marks the Christian life of discipleship for Christians who are also priests.

Linked to the “marks of the church,” these faith practices help us to know and follow the path of discipleship. Luther described this as the “way of the Cross.” It is a rough journey, one we would not have chosen and one we could not have envisioned. But, then, disciples do not choose their masters; they do not choose their journeys. They are chosen, and they follow. We hear this in words Jesus speaks again and again in the Gospels: “Follow me.” The only words Jesus says more frequently are the words: “Be not afraid.” This is not a coincidence.

Discipleship is dangerous. Jesus reminds the impetuous Peter of its perils: “...when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go” (John 20:18). This description of mature discipleship should terrify the person who is simply looking for a religion that will do something for him or her. The seeker feels entitled to having desires satisfied and needs met. The disciple knows that desires become transformed through practices that do something for us by first doing something to us.

The image Jesus uses echoes Luther’s own image of the beggar’s hand that reaches out for the grace of God and the kindness of the neighbor. A hand accustomed to grasping requires an extraordinary amount of physical therapy to unclutch and open. Faith practices initiate that therapy. If we can make of them a habit, rather than something we do when we feel like it or when we have time, we will find over time that the Spirit has made our hands flexible and our hearts open.

If the Word is to be “preached, believed, professed, and lived,” we will need all the practice we can get. These faith practices demand disciplined and regular attention from the people of God. The visibility of the church depends on it. The church will have a public face in this new millennium because Christian people commit themselves to these daily faith practices and live in them to the glory of God and the service of the neighbor.

Review the seven faith practices. Think through how they have been a part of your life and the life of your congregation. How can you commit yourself to living these practices more fully? How will the promises and the gifts of God in Christ help you in that intention? How can these practices become more fully a part of the life of your congregation? What might it mean to both members and those not yet members if these were a visible feature of your life together?

What part does giving play in your Christian life? What might it mean for you? What can it mean for your congregation?
ENDNOTES


3. These and other faith practices are discussed lucidly in Practicing our Faith, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).


8. Martin Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings, 1539,” in Lull, Basic Writings, 67.

9. For more on the ancient catechumenate, see William Harmless, Augustine and the Catechumenate (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995). Or see the “Welcome to Christ” resources available from Augsburg Fortress.

10. Luther explained his rationale for this structure in the Large Catechism. Following his explanation of the Ten Commandments, he observes: “In it we have seen all that God wishes us to do or not to do. The Creed properly follows, setting forth all that we must expect and receive from God; in brief, it teaches us to know him perfectly....Now follows the third part, how we are to pray.” Luther, “Large Catechism,” The Book of Concord, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 411, 420.
