

Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People
Practicing Celebration
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Good morning and Happy New Year, Crestwood friends and family! I'm sure we're all excited to see the calendar turn the page and leave behind a year that was so bizarre, a story about murder hornets was the 47th craziest thing to happen. But now it's 2021, which means it's time for a fresh start and dreams of a world with a COVID vaccine and a healing nation and no murder hornets. And then this past week happened. I don't know about you, but I'm ready for 2022. But we will press on, because we know and trust that God is walking with us into whatever this year holds.

The start of a new year is a time when a lot of people will make promises to themselves to be better people. We call those resolutions. That's a funny word, because when you break it down, it is re-solutions. Like, we've tried to solve this problem before and it didn't work, so we're going to try to re-solve it again. As the new year starts, we are resolved to re-solve the parts of our lives that we feel are lacking.

For many people, the focus of their resolutions is spiritual. Coming off the birth of Christ, folks will recommit themselves to strengthening their relationship with God by praying more or spending more time reading the Bible or not fast-forwarding through the sermon while watching online worship. Whether or not they call them by this name, what those people are doing is committing to a spiritual discipline.

That term right there can be a turn-off to some people. The concept of "discipline" might conjure up an image of standing with your nose against the chalkboard because you were passing notes to your friend Dave in Mr. Bedford's social studies class. At least, that's what a friend told me it was like. When we hear "discipline," we might think about punishment, and then it's not a far leap to see reading the Bible or spending time in prayer as more of a penance for spiritually slacking than a recommitment to your relationship with God. That kind of pedantic spirituality benefits neither you nor God. As one writer said, "If you are weary of some sleepy form of spiritual devotion, probably God is as weary of it as you are."

We might also think of "discipline" in terms of athletes preparing for a game. In her excellent sermon last week, Trish talked about the difference between trying and training. We can try to do a lot of things, like running a marathon, but we can't accomplish that without training, and training takes discipline. We don't want to get up early to go for a run or eat kale and quinoa instead of potato chips and barbecue, but in order to succeed at our goals, we have to discipline ourselves.

When it comes to spirituality, discipline is great if you're a monk cloistered away in a monastery somewhere, but most ordinary people balk at the idea of trying to squeeze one more obligation into their spiritual lives. We want to be closer to God, we want to be more like Jesus, and yet who has the time or the energy to discipline ourselves to do the work? The word "discipline" has as its root the word "disciple," but sometimes it's easier and more convenient for us to remain curious observers of Jesus than to discipline ourselves to be disciples.

Maybe we're taking the wrong approach to this whole "spiritual discipline" thing. Instead of seeing it as something we have to add to our lives, maybe we could transform the way we see the things we already do. We might already be practicing disciplines without even realizing it, and all we need is a change of perspective, not an extra hour each day to meditate.

This practical approach will help us name a reality that too many of us forget. Because we are pulled in so many different directions, we come to see our spiritual life as just one aspect of our existence. The idea of “getting our spiritual lives together” becomes akin to exercising more or balancing our budget, just one more tweak to make our lives a little better than before. But our spiritual lives pervade and influence every other aspect of our lives. One theologian called faith “the ground of our being.” Our spirituality is the foundation that holds all the other parts of our lives, so it would behoove us to training ourselves to be more faithful disciples.

To do this well, we’re going to have to come at it fundamentally differently than we do other forms of self-improvement. For the new year, some people will commit to getting a certain number of steps each day, and wearable technology makes that easy to do. There have been several times when I’ve kicked myself for leaving my apartment without my Apple watch because I know the steps I take without it won’t “count” toward my goal. Our motto could be, “If it’s not measurable, it doesn’t exist.”

The goal of spiritual disciplines is not to calculate the number of verses read or the minutes spent in prayer. The goal is to create opportunities to experience God’s presence and for God to work within us. The question we are addressing is, “Who are we becoming?” John Ortberg reminds us that, “Life counts – all of it. Every moment is potentially an opportunity to be guided by God into God’s way of living. Every moment is a chance to learn from Jesus how to live in the kingdom of God.”

So, we’re going to look at some spiritual disciplines for ordinary people, people like us, people who struggle to maintain and nurture our spiritual lives in the midst of everything else we have on our plates, including the mixed up jumbled mess of emotions and loneliness we’ve been dealing with the last nine months. That’s why I wanted to start with the spiritual discipline of celebration. We might think that disciplines can’t be any fun, but the only thing that can keep us from celebrating God’s joy around us is ourselves.

When Sydney was little, after her bath I would dry her hair. This was great bonding time for us and we would often tell stories or make up songs. But on several occasions, I had to pause my work or reading to do her bath and I would go into it with the wrong attitude, feeling like it was an interruption. When it came time to dry her hair, she would want to be goofy and I would just want to finish it so I could get back to the “important” stuff I was doing, and I would often end up angry or frustrated with her. As I think back to that time now, I would give anything to be drying the hair of my silly little girl.

The opportunities to practice celebration are all around us because our God is a God of joy. C.S. Lewis wrote that “Joy is the serious business of heaven.” Another writer said, “God is the happiest being in the universe.” In Philippians, Paul writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say, rejoice!” Joy is not just a feeling, it is a divine command, and to miss out on God’s joy is to miss out on the life God has given us to live.

The passage from Nehemiah reminds us of this. The Israelites have returned from being exiled in Babylon and are beginning to rebuild their beloved Jerusalem. In the course of doing so they have reread the scriptures and have been reminded of their sinfulness which led to their captivity. In other words, they’ve been reminded of their lack of discipline. But Nehemiah reminds them that God is a God of joy, not punishment. He says, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

Now, I don’t know about you, but when the Bible commands me to “eat the fat,” I’m making a beeline to the nearest barbecue place to get a full rack of ribs! When our Parents of

Youngsters Sunday school class was meeting in person, we had one member who would sometimes show up with a Ziploc bag full of bacon to share. Nothing else, just bacon. Who knew that was a spiritual discipline!

What Nehemiah is saying here is that we can bemoan our lack of discipline and the ways we've fallen short in our spiritual lives, or we can celebrate the grace and forgiveness of our God, who welcomes us home from spiritual exile and restores our relationship with God. Not to celebrate the joy of God around us is what one person called "practical atheism." That's when you profess faith in Jesus but don't live out the joy of that faith. I wonder how often people have misunderstood God because the people they know who follow God are joyless, grim, defensive, judgmental? The level of joy we exhibit in our lives is a direct reflection of our understanding of God. If we aren't celebrating God's joy around us, what does that say to others about the God we worship?

Now, I get that this moment in history is not the easiest time to exhibit joy. There is plenty going on in this world right now that keeps us from wanting to celebrate, which means it's all the more important that we look for reasons to praise God and express our joy. We can follow the example of the prophet Habbakuk, who wrote, "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation." I hate it when my fig tree doesn't blossom. And yet, I will celebrate God's saving goodness.

A few years ago, I went on a spiritual retreat in Missouri. It was a particularly difficult time in my life and I was hoping to hear a word from God that would help me navigate through the heavy feelings that were weighing me down. I went for a run one morning to clear my head, and about a mile down the path I saw a sign that said, "Don't postpone joy." That became my mantra for the retreat.

Right now, we might be living under the illusion that joy will come when conditions change. When COVID is no longer a risk, I'll celebrate. When our country's leadership stabilizes, we'll celebrate. When we can worship together again on Sunday morning, I'll celebrate. When the kids go back to school, I'll REALLY celebrate! But what joy are we missing at this moment because we're too focused on just making it through. Don't postpone joy.

Theologian Karl Barth has the best definition of joy I've ever heard. He calls it the "defiant nevertheless" spoken against resentment and despair. When you take time to be goofy with your kids, you are speaking a "defiant nevertheless." When you smile so much at the grocery clerk that, even though you are wearing that pesky mask, they can see it in your eyes, you are speaking a "defiant nevertheless." When you take a few moments at the end of the day to write down three things that brought you joy, you are speaking a "defiant nevertheless." When you savor that cup of coffee in the morning, when you look through an old photo album, when you simply pause to thank God for the joy of life, you are speaking a "defiant nevertheless."

There are plenty of reasons not to celebrate. But what are you missing when you don't stop to praise the Lord for all the joy around you? "And yet, I have joy." Don't postpone the opportunity to celebrate God's goodness. Do it now. Do it often. Do it so much that people become curious about this joyful God you claim to serve. God is the happiest being in the universe. And we are made in God's image. So, let's celebrate!