

When is Faith Like the Art of Medicine? – August 31, 2014
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When is Faith Like the Art of Medicine?
Romans 12:1-2

Let's practice a mantra for this Fall and Winter. It goes like this: *it is easier to live your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of living.* Say it with me: *"It is easier to live your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of living."*

Those words have particular relevance as we consider St. Paul's admonition to the church at Rome, to *"Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God"* (v. 1). Ultimately the Christian faith is something we do. It is more than thought. It is a way of life. Christians live the gospel.

This is a necessary corrective for today's culture of faith. Too often people have the idea that having faith is having the right answers. Faith is more than knowledge. Faith is about lifestyle. It is about doing more than it is about thinking. In a word, the Christian faith is about *practice*.

The more we practice gospel living the better we are at living the way Christ invites us to live.

Jesus calls us to be his disciples in this world. There is something counterintuitive about what he asks of us. Remember some of Jesus' instructions: *to be first, you have to be last; to be rich, you have to become poor; to live, you have to die. Forgive your enemies; love those who persecute you; be a servant.*

At one level none of these thoughts makes much sense. They certainly don't feel like the way to happiness and success. But on another level, the witness of the faithful, is that these instructions are the secret to a renewed life.

So we practice the faith by doing the things Jesus asks us to do. At first living like a Christian feels unnatural. It is difficult and burdensome. But the more we do it, the more right it feels until one day we find ourselves living the Christ life without even thinking about what we are doing.

Wesleyan Methodists have a term for this. It is called "sanctification." John Wesley said this was the third work of grace. It is growing grace that moves us toward perfection until we can say with St. Paul, "*For me to live is Christ.*" Grace grows us as we practice the means of grace in our daily lives. As we pray, worship, study the Scriptures, give ourselves to service, we are shaping lives that look like Jesus for the world's redemption.

There is a football team that has a sign over its practice field that says: "*You play like you practice.*" How true those words are. An athletic team practices and practices until the moves necessary to win a game become second nature. We Christians must live the same discipline.

This text urges us to present ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Someone has observed that the problem with a "*living sacrifice*" is that it keeps slithering off the altar.

Well, we all know that experience. We have all been guilty of missing the mark (the literal translation of the word *sin*) when it comes to living as a disciple of Jesus. We know what it is to say we are committed to the way of love, and to have that declaration rendered useless by a flash of anger or the desire for revenge. We know what it is to struggle to love the enemy and to welcome the stranger. We know how it is to live with gaps between the affirmation of faith and the deeds of our lives. We have done our share of slithering off the altar.

Yet we keep at this business of trying to live like Jesus' disciples in this world. We do this because we have seen in Christ the light of truth. We have been grasped by Jesus' redemptive love. In the words of St. Peter (John 6:68), "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*"

So we practice, and bit-by-bit we find ourselves becoming different people. Little by little we are renewed until one day the world looks at us and sees Jesus.

Do you remember learning to drive a car? Some of us learned in automobiles with manual transmissions that required all sorts of actions done in a sequence that at first seemed impossibly complicated. You had to push in the clutch, move the shift lever to the proper place, press the accelerator, and slowly let the clutch up. Then, if the car moved ahead without stalling, you had to do it all over again with the car moving this time. Still there was another sequence to be done before the car was in third gear and ready to drive down the road.

If you were like my brother Dennis, this exercise was frustrating. Driving was an experience of starts and stops, of lurching steel and stalled engine. But you continued to do it, and one day there was a smooth start and a synchronized movement of feet and hands as you moved through the sequence of gears. You practiced and got it right until driving became second nature, something you could do without thinking about it.

The Christian faith is like that. We give ourselves to the way of Christ. We receive God's direction about what a disciple does. At first it seems complicated, even impossible to do. *"You want me to forgive my enemies?" "You want me to give away my money to people I don't know?" "You want me to carry a cross?"*

But we try to do it. We show up to carry out our part in the community of faith. Then, lo and behold, one day we're doing it. We are living the Christian life! We have shown up at the altar of faith enough times that our bodies really are living sacrifices for the glory of God. Alleluia. Amen.