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Be the Change

-an e-book created by Jason Valendy

using the "[People's E-book](#)"



Introduction: Free Samples

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When I was a boy I did not like to go to the grocery store. Well, unless there were free samples given out.

My brother and I would walk up and down the aisles with our mother, holding our breath at each turn, hoping that to see a hair-netted, middle- aged person holding out a little plastic cup. We would devour each sample and then proceed to judge the quality of the food.

In the ideal world, free samples of food are supposed to work by getting people to buy the product. My mother was a list stickler and no amount of samples or begging would result in adding an item to the list. So we were raised to enjoy the sample for what it was - a free little surprise.

What you are reading now is my attempt at a free little surprise.

I want to thank you for reading this sample of writing that I have cultivated from several years worth of blogging. One day I hope to write a book, perhaps based upon some of the ideas in this sample.

But until then, I hope you enjoy this sample.

A word about leaving comments

At the end of some of the entries you may find a link titled "Leave a comment here".

Clicking on this link will take you to a blog entry that is connected to the chapter. If you would like to leave a comment feel free to do so in the comments section at the bottom of the page. At the end of this e-book you can find a link to send me an email directly. This way of leaving comments may not work on all devices, but this should work on the iPad.

Post Scripts:

Thank you Sarah Boyette, Wendy McKee, Nancy Allen and Estee Valendy for all your help, encouragment and inspiration.

This e-book is optimized to be read as an epub. You should be able to see all the videos and links throught this book on most devices. Amazon's Kindle is the major and obvious exception.

Church



How baffling you are, oh Church, and yet how I love you! How you have made me suffer, and yet how much I owe you! I would like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me so much scandal and yet you have made me understand what sanctity is. I have seen nothing in the world more devoted to obscurity, more compromised, more false, and yet I have touched nothing more pure, more generous, more beautiful. How often I have wanted to shut the doors of my soul in your face, and how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms. No, I cannot free myself from you, because I am you, though not completely. And besides, where would I go? Would I establish another? I would not be able to establish it without the same faults, for they are the same faults I carry in me. And if I did establish another, it would be my Church, not the Church of Christ. I am old enough to know that I am no better than anyone else.

- Carlo Carretto

Questions I Want To Ask, But Don't

Have you ever been in a conversation and you wanted to ask a question but for some reason held back asking it? Me too. I have put together a list of questions I have wanted to ask but don't.

Are we reading the same Bible?

Are we working toward the same goal or not?

Do we trust this church leadership?

How can we die to self and give all that we are to God if we are unwilling to change something as simple as music selection in worship?

Do we take "love your neighbor" seriously?

Do we think that God's thoughts and our thoughts are the same every time?

Do we think we understand Jesus?

Are we aware that many clergy think of quitting being clergy often?

Do you know how often clergy think about quitting?

Why do we give things to the church that we no longer want but think that someone else would want?

Why don't we confess our sins? I mean really confess?

Do we really think that God is there to serve us?

Why does our side have to always win?

How can one person hijack the whole system?

How is it that everyone seems to know how to do my job better than I do?

Where is grace?

Do we care more about fairness than about forgiveness?

Why do I have to just "take it" while someone can say the most hurtful things to me?

Why don't I just say this?

[Leave a comment here](#)

The Bargain Church

The Bargain Church is all around, and everyone has participated in the Bargain Church.

When we participate in a food drive by giving the box of pistachio pudding we never made, the jar of pimentos we never opened, or the container of almost expired breadcrumbs - then we have fallen victim of the Bargain Church.

Rule of thumb - If we are not going to eat it, odds are no one wants to either.

If we have ever gotten an angel off an angel tree and then instead of getting the "Super Soaker" water gun or the Nike shoes we saw Dollar General had a sale and we were able to get a 20 pack of 'squirt pistols' or the "Nikeys", then we may have fallen victim of the Bargain Church. The fact of the matter is most of the time people on the angel tree get hand-me-downs all year long, they have enough "Nikeys" to last a life time, they have a closet and room full of constant reminders that they are "other" and "second-hand".

Rule of thumb - If someone asks for [something and we rather give them something else](#) then we are putting ourselves before others.

When we think "beggars cannot be choosy" because beggars should just be happy with whatever they get, and so we give them clothes that are full of holes and tears, we may have fallen to the Bargain Church.

Rule of thumb - If we do not wear clothes because the clothes look like crap, asking someone else to wear them is dehumanizing.

Just because it is called charity does not mean that those who receive charity want the crap that we do not have the heart to throw out.

Rule of thumb - If we are really giving someone something that we just don't have the heart to throw away because we think they could "use it" chances are we are just trying to assuage the guilt we have in having owned the item to begin with.

When we are building a church or doing a ministry but fall into a conversation about how we could "get that cheaper", then we may have fallen victim to the Bargain Church. The institutions that change the world do not allow their big dreams to change the world become hijacked by those who are just looking to get a great deal. Billy Graham did not say, "Yeah we could pack out that stadium, but we should just go to a high school gym because they will not charge us to rent the space."

Rule of thumb - Dreams on the cheap are really just that, cheap dreams.

The Bargain Church makes a mockery of Christ's Church. It makes us feel like we are generous, but in reality we just brag about how much we were able to "save" in the quest of being generous.

Christ's Church must stay vigilant to the Bargain Church. While Christ's Church is built on extravagant generosity, the Bargain Church is built on a feeling good about ourselves for getting a good deal. Christ's Church is built with great dreams to change the world, the Bargain Church is cobbled together with the change we saved on all the great bargains we

were able to get.

We know when Christ's Church is affected by the Bargain Church because the Church is never accomplishing anything. When you are bargain hunting you go from store to store and spend countless hours looking for that "deal" - time and energy wasted. Most of the time the bargain looks great in the short term, but name me a bargain that you have had for longer than ten years and I will show you a rare gem.

And this is the real danger of the Bargain Church. Every now and again it "works". We are able to get by on cheap and work the deal and no one is the wiser. The Bargain Church lives and breathes when we are more satisfied with a good deal than changing the world.

I See God in Nature

You may have heard something like the following:

"I don't go to church because I see God and commune with God in nature. I don't need a church to do that."

To that I say, no kidding!

It is easy to see God in nature (just [google "seeing God"](#) and see how many nature images come up). It is easy to get lost in the transcendent on a mountain top or at the bottom of a canyon or deep within the forest. You would have to be dead in order not to be gasp at the colors blazing across the sky at a sunset or breath deeply when the dawn breaks. One would have to be out of their mind if they are unable to see the power of the universe and world when water pushes a house off its foundation or when a wind picks up a truck and bats it about like a Tonka toy.



You see God in nature? No \$%#@! Anyone can do that because it is easy and obvious.

It is a lot harder to see God in the middle of a messy relationship. It is much more difficult to see God when people are angry at one another. It is much harder to see the divine spark in the world when there is betrayal. When we gasp at the discovery that our trust has been violated by a friend, we would much rather be gazing at the sunset.

I go to church and am a part of a community to help me see God when it is much harder than when I am alone in the forest.

Because I do not live as a hermit in a tree. I am a person who lives in relationship with others. And frankly, other people can be real jerks (including me).

I want to meet the people who can see God in the hurt and chaos of the world.

Focusing on church Keeps us Small

There are a lot of projected reasons as to why the Church is in decline. Everyone has a theory as to why this is the case and, adding to the conversation, here is my theory.

We are too focused on churches to the detriment of Church.

I am not talking about the idea that we are too focused on the institution of the church or the four walls of the church or not reaching out to new people or not changing worship styles.

I am talking about scale. We are too focused on our own little church to the detriment of the larger, universal (catholic) Church.

The problems of our day are massive in size. Global hunger. Poverty. Preventable diseases. Homelessness. Education. Violence.

These are massive problems and require massive structure in order to address and take them head on. When we focus on our little church we are limited by what our church can do, repair, help, and reconcile. Even the largest individual churches pale in comparison in scale compared to most denominations. The Catholic Church has over 1 billion people.

That sort of size is the scale that can change the world.

Perhaps our individual churches remain small because we do not focus on the Church, but we are focused on our little church.

A cup of water can quench an individual, a well can sustain a village.

A church can help an individual, the Church can change the world.

[Leave a comment here.](#)

Grace

Christianity is not a religion of virtue; it is a religion of grace.

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The "Free-Rider Problem" and Christianity

The story goes like this in some form or fashion.

Humanity came to the realization that we could accomplish more by collaborating together rather than in isolation. Some people would farm and others would build homes. The farmer did not have to worry about building a home and the home builder did not have to worry about farming because they collaborated and worked together.

The idea that we can do more together than in isolation grew until there were more "collaborators" than individualists. But as the collaboration grew, there were some who did not contribute to society but were able to work the system and take advantage of the group's work without themselves having to work. These "free-riders" became a problem.

If too many people become free-riders then it puts the whole system of collaboration in jeopardy. If word gets around that anyone can freeload the system, then more people might. And if they did then we would all have to go back to individual isolation. Thus the rise of the "punishers".

Punishers are those who keep a vigilante watch against the free-rider problem and who may very well be motivated by the greatness of collaboration and do not want to see it in jeopardy. (Punishers will honk at you when you are driving like an a-hole because it compromises the collaboration of everyone on the road.)

And while an excess of free-riders can be a problem, we are in a time in which being a free-rider of any sort is demonized. There is stigma toward those on extended welfare or disability. There is an understanding that those who benefit from social services should only be those who contribute. And if you are getting services that you did not contribute to then you are guilty of being a lazy drain on society. But let's face it, at varying times and reasons, we are all free-riders.

But as we continue to demonize free-riders in culture, the Church faces a huge theological obstacle - namely the nature of Grace.

Christians have always said that God's grace is free. We cannot do anything to earn God's grace. You and I cannot earn salvation because we are saved by Grace and that Grace is free. We are all Grace free-riders.

Like human culture, many Christians are uncomfortable with too many free-riders. Perhaps we feel Grace is free but if too many people have it, then we may not get our share. Or perhaps we really want to keep a check on it so that Grace does not run out for others. For whatever reason(s), Christians have found our own version of "punishers" to the Grace free-rider problem.

And so, while we say Grace is free, the punishers among us do our part to put some requirements on Grace.

- "Grace is free but you have to accept it."
- "Grace is free for those who accept Jesus."

- "Grace is free but you have to have faith."
- "Grace is free for Christians."

Whenever there is a stipulation, Grace no longer is free.

The church is full of free-riders.

It does not seem to bother God.

Why does it bother us?

Tyranny of the Monologue

Maybe you have heard of the [tyranny of the majority](#) or even the [tyranny of the urgent](#), but I would like to submit that the church suffers from the tyranny of the monologue.

Not all churches are under the oppression of the monologue. However, the power of the monologue has been very influential in the way most seminaries teach ministers how to be ministers.

The tyranny of the monologue is not just that the church is set up to listen to one voice which has more weight than others. It is not just how preaching is conceived by one person standing addressing a crowd. It is much deeper and much more oppressive to community growth and maturation.

The monologue is many things, from Shakespeare to Leno, but it is always one direction. The monologue does not care about the voice of the audience. The monologue cares about what the one who is delivering the monologue as to say. That is it.

So we have ministries that are set up to meet the needs of those who are doing the ministry rather than doing ministry to eradicate the needs of those who are being ministered to. The United Methodist Church structure is very monologue-driven. For instance when we cannot even agree that we disagree on an issue, we have suffered the wrath of the monologue. The monologue does not tolerate disagreement.

The tyranny of the monologue is in the pews as well. When we desire our minister to give us the meaning of a scripture or even demand that the preacher apply the teaching to our lives for us so we do not have to really wrestle with the story of God, we have been "monologued".

When we would rather have a good monologue sermon than have a messy dialogue, you can bet the tyranny of the monologue is as strong as ever.

When we would rather have a few "good" Sunday school teachers than empower everyone to be teachers - tyranny of the monologue.

When we read, consult or listen to the same voices over and over again - we are subjects to the reign of the monologue.

The monologue is a wonderful tool, but it can also be an oppressive hammer among the people of God. It is about time that we put the hammer down because it is doing a lot of damage these days.

[Leave a comment here.](#)

Getting to Know You "Christian Style"



Sorry, your e-reader doesn't support video.

Over the course of my time as a minister in the UMC I have seen two types of people. There are the people who want to get to know you and there are the people who want you to get to know them.

This happens in conversation all the time when you meet someone new. This is not unique to clergy at all. Think when you were at a gathering and you were meeting new people. There are the people who are asking questions of you, in order to get to know you. They do little talking about themselves (unless asked then they will share). They are seemingly interested in getting to know you.

The paradox is that when you encounter a person who wants to get to know you, you actually get to know a lot about them.

You learn about their hospitality, curiosity and social skills. You learn if they are a good listener, conversationalist and a lifetime learner. You learn their interests based on the questions they ask you. You learn about their story because they identify connections with your story.

Then there are the people you meet who are very interested in making sure you get to know them. You are asked little about yourself and are mostly quiet during the exchange because you are hearing them speak about their travels, experiences, knowledge or accomplishments.

The paradox is that when you encounter a person who wants you to get to know them, you actually get to know *a lot* about them - perhaps enough to actually not want to learn any more. And the relationship ends.

Christians are followers of Jesus who was a guy who people sought out. And many times, Jesus asks all about the person who sought him out. And as he learned more about them, they desired to follow him. They wanted to learn more and foster a relationship.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are called to learn about people, our neighbors, our enemies and our friends. We are not the center of the world nor the conversation. We are invited to be like Jesus and take a full investment into the lives of others. Which means the Christian is a person who wants to get to know you.

I Found Grace in Mexico Circa 2003

After waiting in the Mexico City International airport for seven hours, riding in a car for an hour to get on a four hour bus ride only to be take to the "edge of the civilization", the nine of us were greeted by cattle trucks.

These pickup trucks with cattle cages over the beds drove four hours deep into the [Uxpanapa](#) valley where I committed to spend two weeks helping a small village of ninety people to build an irrigation system in the main plaza of the community.

We were greeted by many of the village who informed us that they had a treat for us down by the river - paella made in a pot deeper and wider than the river that we were invited to swim in.

After we gorged on the paella and bathed in the sun, we were taken to our host homes where we would stay for our duration. Chon and his family were my host family and their cinder block home was off the main road but not far enough off the road to avoid being noticed by the wild chickens and dogs.



The home had crude electricity, no running water and four rooms. Chon and his wife slept in the master bedroom that was sealed off by a sheet from the kitchen/dining space. The rest of the house was the living room, where the three children slept, and a storage space, where I anticipated I would sleep.

The family greeted me and then the children promptly collapsed their sleeping cots from the main room and moved them into the storage space. Chon set up their best-looking cot in the center of the main room, just below the only light of the space. This was my bed. They handed me a blanket and then we all prepared for a good nights rest.

It is written in some ethereal law that college kids cannot wake up prior to 8 a.m. and this was the case that first morning in Chon's home. What made the experience unique was the fact that my host family was all gone and desayuno on the kitchen table: eggs, black beans and cheese.

Rushing to get to my group's work I forgot my gloves which did not seem like a problem in the moment but later in the day I regretted not picking them up because for the entire day I was the "shovel guy". I was tasked with removing the top soil of the large plaza with a shovel. This task was required before we could install drainage and irrigation ditches and lay sod to finish off the area. At the end of the day my hands were covered with sores and blisters that my gloves were too painful to wear.

To our surprise and delight, the host families each came to see our work each afternoon bringing a Coka (bottled Coke) and invited us to lay in the breezeway hammocks. Never had sugar tasted sweeter nor woven cords felt so soft.

Chon's children brought me water each night prior to bed. Not to drink, but to take a shower with. They carried the water in the morning, while I slept. The only time I saw them carry the water was the morning Chon woke me up at 5 a.m. to invite me to come with him to his place of work.

Going with him was the least I could do! The man had rolled out the red carpet for me and forced his kids to carry my shower water. I had no idea what Chon did but I was more than happy to help him.

Chone drove his well-worn truck out to the edge of the village and beyond the dirt roads into the center of a large field. We did not exchange any words as he drove but it was clear by the mood in the car that we were going to do some serious work.

About 200 yards in the distance was what looked like a cow grazing next to a barn. Chon got out of the truck and I followed. As the dawn broke I noticed that Chon wore dark blue jeans and a white long-sleeved shirt. His clothes looked like "church clothes" compared to my muddy grey pants and torn t-shirt.

When we made it to the barn, it was apparent that the cow was tied to the barn with a long rope. While I examined the thickness of the rope and the rust on the barn, Chon rolled up his sleeves and pulled a tool bag from the barn.

The "tools" were knives. My heart quickened. The cow's eyes looked scared. Chon said a prayer. Three different creatures of God stood under the barn covering, unable to communicate but in that moment we all understood what Chon's work was.

Modern American slaughterhouses are more of a assembly line with thousands of corn fed overweight cows pushed through double doors only to be electrocuted in the skull, slaughtered, then stamped with a meat grade all within a few hours. Chon's slaughterhouse was, well, different.

Spanish words came from Chon as he placed his hands on the belly of the cow and for a moment Chon the butcher looked more like Chon the priest. While I watched Chon, my college-aged brain began to wake up to the reality that I was there to help Chon slaughter a cow. I was glad I had not had breakfast.

I have never killed an animal before, but if every animal was killed the way Chon killed this cow, then I would be willing to bet PETA would have a different argument for animal eating.

The next several minutes were a blur as I watched Chon begin the quartering process. After a while, Chon handed me a knife and showed me how to removed the skin of the cow and even gave a smile when I messed up.

Before this experience the closest I had gotten to slaughtering an animal was when [Han Solo kills a Tauntaun for warmth](#). So with all my vast knowledge of dead animals you can see why I had reason to be concerned about contracting Mad Cow, Salmonella and every sickness my mind could invent. Which explained why I moved so slowly as I helped skin the cow.

After some time, we quartered the animal and then loaded each quarter into milk crates then loaded the crates into the back of the truck. Through a series of taps and points Chon communicated that I would ride - with the cow. I was there to ensure nothing spilled or fell out of the truck.

I rode all the way back into the village with a cows head staring right at me.

In the village Chon took the morning's work into his shop where he cleaned and then continued to prepare for the afternoon sale. Watching his cleaver and knives move so effortlessly was hypnotic and again Chon invited me to join him.

At one point Chon removed the tenderloin and wrapped it in three banana leaves. Chon took the tenderloin to the main square where he was the day's chef.

Once it was all prepared, Chon gave me a plate and a cerveza. Having lived to the age of twenty years old meant that I officially never had a drink of beer before. Having lived through my college freshman year meant that officially never had a drink of this type of beer before. (I do not endorse under-aged drinking).

Our guide must have sensed my mixed feelings of taboo and delight when he told me that if I did not drink the gift from Chon it would be a great insult. So with a smile, a nod, a clink of two bottles, Chon and I shouted, "Salud!"

He and I sat next to each other. I drank the gift. We ate from our work. We could not communicate to each other but we understood one another.

I don't know if it was in the paella when we first arrived. I don't know if it was in the coka or the beans and cheese or the shower water always prepared. Perhaps it was the fact that my room was half of their home or the breakfast prepared each day for me. Maybe it was the tenderloin, the sharing of his craft, or the cerveza. I don't know, But somewhere along the way on this trip I experienced offerings that showed me what Grace is like.

My faith grew.

My faith in the interconnectedness of all humanity. My faith in the goodness that resides in

each of us. My faith in a God that does not abandon us in the rushing mobs the busy streets. My faith in the power of the shared meal. My faith in the assurance that generosity is the law of the land. My faith in the conviction that love transcends language.

Prayer

Prayer is a perspective from which to behold, from which to respond to, the challenges we face. [Humans] in prayer do not seek to impose their will upon God; they seek to impose God's will and mercy upon themselves. Prayer is necessary to make us aware of our failures, backsliding, transgressions, sins.

- Abraham Joshua Heschel

Jello, Eggs and Restaurants

There are more people who talk about desiring to join a gym than those numbers of people who actually join a gym.

Prayer is the gym membership of the Church.

There are more people who talk about prayer than people who actually pray. This is true among the clergy ranks as well. I have been at many small meetings with clergy and there is no prayer at all. Not even a "God is great" prayer. Could it be that perhaps all the talk and little action to the practice of prayer is that we do not really think it matters or makes a difference?

We tend to think that we are all individual people living individual lives and our actions are too small to affect anyone on any sort of scale. We also tend to think that unless we can physically see something then that something is not real. Or, put another way, we are really suspicious of all that "spiritual" stuff.

Prayer has fallen out of popular practice in part because we have bought into the idea that the only things that change the world are the grand projects. And while these grand ideas are needed, we forget that each grand projects is just a collection of much smaller projects. The beehive is very large, but it is the result of a bunch of small bees doing small amounts. Big things are the result of small things.

Secondly, we hesitate to take prayer too seriously because we cannot see prayer. We can see the sandwiches we made to go to the homeless. We can see the money we collect that goes to eradicate Malaria. We can see the hours we put into a home and see the improvements, but we cannot see prayer. And since we cannot see it, it somehow is less than that which we can see. So for many prayer becomes something we do not practice at the levels that we talk about it.

Which is where Jello, eggs and restaurants come into the picture.

Imagine a mound of jello with fruit and you have a fork.



You are tasked to remove a piece of fruit without disrupting the jello mold. You may be able to have no movement if you move slowly. But as soon as you pierce the fruit to pull the fruit out, and the fruit pushes jello out of its way to make room for its exit, you will disrupt the mold.

Quantum Physics says that everything is bound together by energy. And that what affects one particle affects the next. Christianity has stated for hundreds of years that we are all bound together as the body of Christ. And what affects your ankle, affects your knee, and

what affects your knee, affects your hip, your hips affect your back and your back affects your shoulders. What affects one area of the body affects all areas of the body.

Prayer is like a fork on a jello mold. It is said that prayer is really more helpful for the individual praying than anyone else. I don't know. What I do know is what affects one part of the body affects all parts of the body. And quantum physics shows what affects one particle affects all particles.

Every Easter we take eggs and put them into vinegar and dye. After a few moments the previously white egg is now vibrant green, orange or blue. However, if you were to take an egg and put it into vinegar for two days do you know what happens?

The hard protective shell breaks down and you are left with an egg that is soft, squishy, and a bit bouncy. And if you did not hard boil the egg, then the shell-less egg will still be liquid on the inside.

As we move through our world and pray, chances are we will encounter a few of our neighbors. As we encounter our neighbors and get to know them, our hard protective shells will soften, we become more flexible and less rigid. We still have ourselves intact but we are a bit more transparent with each other.

We are still eggs, if you will, but we are changed in a dramatic way. Whereas before we could not get too close to each other for fear of our hard shells breaking, now we can become closer to one another without fear. Whereas before our hard shells would not allow us to give in to ourselves even just a little bit for fear of breaking, now we are able flexible enough so that we each give without breaking.

Prayer is like that vinegar on that egg. If we pray even for a short time, just like eggs at Easter, we can be changed. If we pray for an extended period of time, just as the Scripture says, our prayers are powerful and effective.

Prayer changes us and it changes our community.

Have you ever gone by a restaurant and seen a line out the door? Have you ever been in a conversation and someone tells you about a restaurant that you "have to go to" because it is "so good". Oh, and when you are there be sure to order this and sit in this location.

When we pray and are changed by our prayers, people will see that we are different and changed. As we pray and our concern for our neighbor and concern for the world impacts our actions, others see that we have a faith that matters. More and more people become curious about our actions. I know I am curious about a restaurant that everyone talks about, so too I become curious about a faith (or a church) that I hear everyone talking about.

We live in a time when culture is suspicious of the Christian religion. Much of the time we Christians are portrayed as militant, xenophobic, anti-intellectuals who reject science and believe everyone is going to hell except us. We live in culture that is suspicious to even come

to the church because all they see are Christians they don't want to be like. They see followers of a Jesus who are not compelling. So they reject the faith and reject the Church. We already have a restaurant effect going on, we are just thought of as a bad restaurant.

The more we we pray and are forced out of our little comfort zones, the more we become ambassadors of reconciliation, peacemakers, advocates of love sharing a voice of hope, the greater chance we have at displaying for the world that Christianity (or a local church) is a good restaurant. A place where we find good company, share in good meals, encourage sustainable life, and are nourished by the Bread of Life.

Why Going to the Corner May Foil Spritual Formation

Sending our kids to the corner when they are being punished may not be the worst thing in the world, but it may be problematic when it comes to spritual formation.

If the only time that we are intentionally put into solitude is when we are being punished, then, like the dogs of Pavlov, we will begin to associate solitude with punishment.

St. John of the Cross said that the first language of God is silence and yet we may be raising up a generation of people who fear silence and solitude.

While it may be a helpful tool to parents, solitude as a means of punishment may very well constrain spritual formation.

[Leave a comment here.](#)

The Loudest Voice in Christianity

Frankly I am fatigued in hearing my fellow Christians bemoan what might be considered the loud voices in Christianity. Be it the fool in Florida who offends Islam (and all religions) every six months or the misguided church that protests funerals of soldiers or the mega-church pastors where the stadium is packed every Sunday. Maybe you are feel the "religious right" or the "liberal media attacking" religion voice is among the loudest voices within religious conversation.

Contrary to popular belief, not one of these is the loudest voice in Christianity.

The loudest voice in Christianity is the collective whispers that are spoken under the breath of Christians around the world.

The whisper of prayer at a bedside.

The whisper of forgiveness one gives to another.

The whisper of grief in tragedy.

The whisper of disbelief at those who use religion to deface Love, God and all that is declared good.

So let us all agree to stop complaining that one group or church or person has the loud voices that are "speaking for Christianity".

The whisper is the loudest voice in all of Christianity.



The loudest voice in the world has always been the [whisper](#).



Ritual

A man decides that he will get up early in the morning to go up the mountain to pray. The first morning, he gets up and goes up to the top of the mountain and prays. On his way back down to his house, he says to himself, "Why should God only be on the top of the mountain? God must be in the middle of the mountain." So the next morning he gets up and goes halfway up the mountain and prays. On his way back down to his house, he says to himself, "Why should God only be in the middle of the mountain, God must also be at the foot of the mountain." The next morning, he gets up and goes to the foot of the mountain and prays. On his way back down to his house, he says to himself, "Why should God only be at the foot of the mountain? God must also be in my bed." The next morning he wakes up to pray in his bed, but cannot keep his eyes open. So he falls asleep.

- Taken from [Singing the Lord's Song in a New Land: Korean American Practices of Faith](#)

Five Year Old Mortally Wounded

I quickly got out of the car and ran over to my son who was holding his elbow, shrieking like a banshee and tears the size of hot air balloons fell on the driveway.

"I am going to die!" he yelled between short hiccup breaths "I, Am, Going to, Dieeeeeeeee!"

Like any first responder I scanned the situation, looking for clues to what happened. The wagon was put in its place. The basketball was in the garage. The water gun still embedded in the grass.

My scan of the situation was interrupted by my son's continued cries and now physical body crashing into mine.

"I am going to die! Oh. Ouch!"

"Son, what is wrong? What happened? What is wrong with your elbow?"

"It is bleeding! Owie!"

"You have to move your hand. Let me see so I can help."

"OOOOOWWWIIIIIEEEEE!"

That sinking feeling that something was very wrong started to set in. Why was my son acting this way? Did he break his elbow? What is possibly causing this much pain?

Kneeling down, I pulled him close so he could sit on my knee. The volume of his voice was just a decibel short of shattering my eardrums but I could not afford to cover my ear with my hand. You see every parent of a five year old knows that while generally weak, the fingers of a child are so difficult to remove from being clenched that it takes a pound of butter and three spatulas just to pry one finger up.

As I was able to pry off his fingers I could see the cause of this problem.

"It's bleeding! OWIE!"

"Son, calm down. It will be okay. You see, it is not blood it is chocolate."

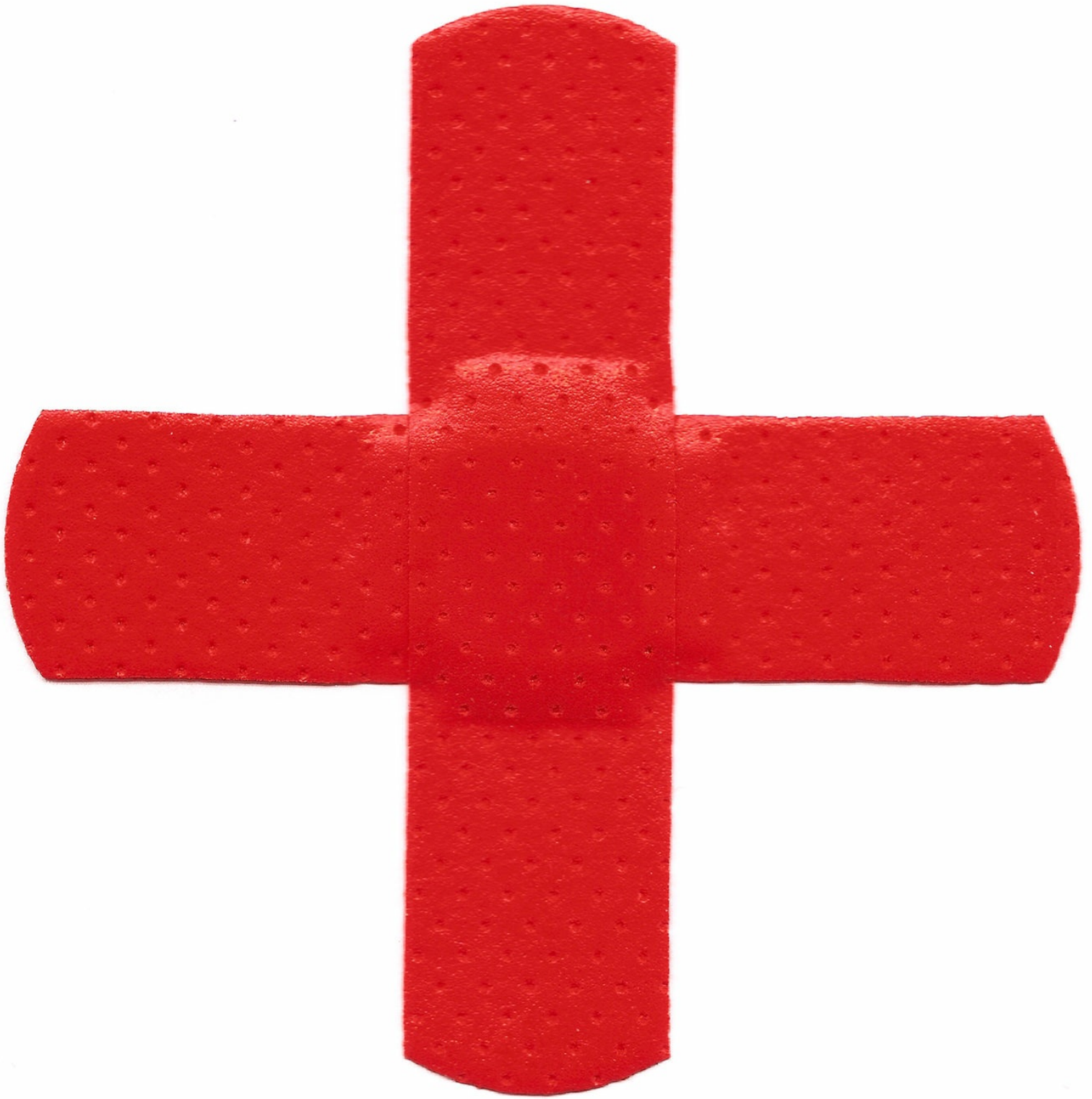
"OWIE! It hurts!"

"No, really Jude calm down. It just just chocolate that smeared on your elbow. It is not blood."

Through all the yelling and screaming and drama of the situation, my son was not able to hear this was just chocolate. He was convinced he was in pain and hurting. And you know there is no reasoning with a five year old. Five year old children eat bread but are convinced the crust is of the devil and must be cut away. There is no reasoning with a five year old who is convinced that something is not right.

The only thing I could think to do was to do the ritual.

I applied ointment and a band-aid and kissed his chocolate smeared elbow.



Once the ritual of making boo-boos go away was all over, the tears dried up and the pain was all gone. My son was back out playing in a matter of moments.

There is a power in the ritual of healing that cannot be overlooked. There is even [science supporting](#) the power of rituals.

Poke fun of those who have their own rituals for their pain, but let us not forget that we all have our rituals that comfort and soothe us. We all use rituals to heal us even from the wounds that no one believes are real wounds. We all have the ritual. And we all know the power of the ritual.

Better Hospital Visits

As a clergy, when I enter into a hospital setting, an unspoken ritual takes place. What I have come to discover is that the ritual is generally too quick to be meaningful for most people. Here is the ritual:

Greeting - physical contact with the sick - talk with people present - pray - leave

The only thing that separates a clergy visit from a visit from the doctor is a prayer at the end. It is as though prayer is an exit strategy for us or a way to put a Jesus shine on the visit. Clergy leave but people are left behind in the cold hospital room, waiting.

If it is true that the number of steps in the ritual matter, might I suggest all of us the way Jesus performed rituals. Now we may not have healing powers, but look at the ritual Jesus does on John 9:

¹As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' ³Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

Notice the order of what Jesus does here:

Addressed the crowd/ill [3], stated why he was performing a ritual [4-5], used an external tool/element [6] and touched the sick [6], gave a directive [7].

Could it be that this would be a better ritual for hospital visits? Maybe this is why it would be worth Protestants rediscovering a tradition that was never forgotten by our Catholic sisters/brothers - anointing.

Address the room - Hello my name is _____, Peace be with you.

State why you are performing a ritual - In the tradition of the Church, I would like to anoint your head with oil so that you may know even when I have left that God is always with you and that you are never alone.

Use external tool - in this case, oil

Touch the sick - mark a sign of the cross on forehead

Give directive - "Christ is with you, this day and every day. You never walk alone. From this moment on may you remember that you are a beloved child of God and a valued member of this world. Remember that you are of great worth and that your life has touched the lives of many. Remember who you are and whose you are. Amen."

Pray.

I have now done this ritual in hospital settings about twenty times with a variety of people in

different settings. The response has been overwhelmingly meaningful. Generally a thank you follows the standard ritual, but this ancient ritual has brought tears, smiles, thanksgiving, recommitting to God, hugs and holy kisses.

And so, while this may not be something everyone feels comfortable doing, just like I do not feel comfortable putting an IV into someone's arm, I would commend clergy to consider the rituals we create and perform in the hospital setting.

Let us do a better job at showing the peace of God, the love of Christ and healing of Christ in a place that often times desperately needs it.

How to Say Goodbye

While on vacation, I observed three people at a table next to ours. These people seemed to be good friends. When it was time for one of them to leave they had a goodbye ritual that just captured my attention even provoked me to go ask what it all meant.

First they hugged so that their heads moved to the right. They told me they lean that way first because "we lead with our hearts." They hold that embrace for as long as it takes to breathe together a single breath. The next step is to hug and breathe on the other side. Finally, they would touch foreheads (their [third eye](#)) and breathe once more together. Finally, they would say "[Namasté](#)" which translated as "I bow to you" and depart.



It all took about 20 seconds but it was the most intimate goodbye I have ever witnessed and it made me think about how saying goodbye is a sacred moment that is often overlooked.

A hug and saying "goodbye" is about the extent of goodbyes in my life. But what would it look like to reclaim the sacredness of saying goodbye to someone? And how difficult is it in our time to make goodbyes more intimate?

It was clear to me watching these people say goodbye that they seemed to understand they may not see one another again and so they sealed their time together with a sacred moment.

Di(e)ciple

Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Those who love their life will lose it, while those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

- John 12:24-25

What if Being a Disciple Was Actually to Be a Di(e)ciple

I found myself in a very interesting conversation the other day about what it means to be a disciple. It sounds like a silly question, but what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

The odds are that everyone who is in a worship service on a Sunday thinks that they are a disciple of Jesus. No Christian thinks they are wrong when it comes to understanding Jesus, but lets face it: everyone in Jesus' day was wrong about what it meant to be a disciple and I am not convinced that we have made much headway on having a better understanding.

There are a great number of conversations about having a clear discipleship pathway for church members. The underlying assumption is that we all know what a disciple looks like. But do we really?

For most of us, being a disciple is having a combination of some of the following qualities:

- Nice, pleasant, non-confrontational, cordial
- Does some sort of service, but not necessarily very demanding on the person
- Involved in a small group or Bible study
- Attends worship regularly
- Gives money to the church
- Refrains from doing "really bad things"

The list can go on, but the point being that discipleship is generally seen as a number of actions that a person does that enhance/better their lives. And so being a Christian is primarily about being happy and doing good deeds.

I would like to submit that this way of understanding discipleship actually leads us to a place where Christianity is nothing more than painting a crumbling house. It looks nice and it masks the structural flaws, but the structure is still in disarray.

Rather, I would like to submit that discipleship is not about living your best life now or having everything roses and peaches in your life. It is not about joining a group of people to learn how to be better people or do nice things for others.

Following Jesus, being a disciple, is about dying. It is about dying to yourself. It is about becoming a Di(e)ciple.

[Leave a comment here.](#)

Die to Cool. Why the UMC Won't Talk About Our Faith.

Jesus tells us that we are to die to ourselves and in doing so we will find life. Preachers preach this and we all hear the words. Some of us even nod our heads when we hear it because we affirm this and know it to be true.

The message of dying to self cannot happen these days because most of our Christian faith is working hard to look cool.

We want buildings that look modern and sleek. We want our leaders to be young and hip. We want a tidy message with slick publicity that advertises the week's "message". We want to be seen as a place that has answers and is really "nice". We avoid conflict. We avoid being uncomfortable (even to the point of complaint if the worship space is too hot/cold). We make our spiritual growth a priority when we find it convenient and there is nothing else to do. We desire the Church to focus meeting the needs of members. We ensure membership has "perks" like reduced rates for weddings. We allow our children to choose if they want to be in organized religion but not organized education.

I could go on, but the point is as a religion are generally working to ensure that Church is a cool place to be. And this may contribute to the trend that the UMC has no idea or interest in sharing our faith because it is cooler to talk about other matters.

Talking about religion means that we could come off looking like "those crazy Christians you see on TV". Or worse we could come off looking dorky, nerdy, or uncool.



In our efforts to be "relevant" what we really are saying is we want our church to be "cool". So,

in a effort to be relevant we discard anything that might not be trendy, because let's face it if it is not trendy it is not relevant.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to sustainable growth for the Church is not our mission statements or lack of theological rigor or our aging clergy, but we are very concerned about how cool we come off.

When we are more interested in inviting people to events than to relationships of meaning, we are worried about cool.

Die to self? How about we just die to cool to start with?

Church as Bullion

When I was a kid my mother would make roast. There would be carrots and potatoes as sides along with some bread and the occasional ice cream desert. It was a fine meal, no complaints.

As I think about this dinner, that was a common set up for my childhood, I cannot help but think about how this is a representation of how many of us grew up thinking about church. That is to say, every area of our lives had its own area on the plate.

There was the place where we worked (carrots). There was the place where we lived (potatoes). There was the place where we attended church (roast) and there was a place we attended school (bread).

Every aspect of our lives was separate and distinct from other areas of our lives.

And this is where the struggle lies. We have a growing generation of people for whom all aspects of life are becoming intertwined.

We work at home and we play at work.

For many people, there is a desire for church to be done in the other areas of their lives as well. Not just on Sunday.

That is to say, some people are not looking for a church to be like a roast - separate from the other elements on the plate. Rather the desire is that church would be like a bullion cube - infusing itself into all the other elements on the plate.

I desire a church that will be willing to melt or die to itself - to give up being a separate space in my life. I desire a church that infuses itself into all the areas of my work, play, school and life.

I don't need more on my plate, I just want my plate to be flavorful.

Give me the bullion, you can keep the roast.

We Do Not Have Time to Rush

There is a difference between being rushed and being urgent. but we sometimes think they are the same thing.

The word, “rush” comes from a Old French word ruser meaning “to dodge”. When we are in a rush we bounce all over the place. We move from breakfast to class to home in order to grab that thing you left behind to work to meetings to volunteering to practice to dropping off the kids to the gas station to make that phone call to picking up the kids to medical exams to back to dinner to bed to sleep. And in all our bouncing we are dodging all the places where Christ calls us to be.

The thing about the act of dodging is that to dodge means you are reacting. Like in the game dodgeball. You do not dodge until someone has thrown the ball. Dodgeball is a game of dodging and reacting.

How many of us live our lives dodging and reacting?

The word urgency comes from Latin and it means to press or push forward. Notice that to press forward means you are not jumping all over the place. To move forward means you are moving in a specific direction with the intent to press on in that direction. To move forward means that you can handle things that come up but they do not deter you from your mission. When Jesus stopped to heal the bleeding woman (Mark 5), the little girl died, but Jesus continued to press forward and healed the little girl.

You can tell when you read the gospel Jesus is moving with urgency. Jesus is clear that he is going to Jerusalem. Jesus is clear that he will be killed, which is why he is able to predict his death three different times. Jesus knows the direction he is moving and he moves with a sense of urgency.

Jesus does not dodge a question. He does not dodge authorities. He does not dodge an opportunity to help those in need. He does not dodge Pilate. He does not dodge the mob sent to get him. He does not dodge his betrayer. He does not dodge the cross. He does not dodge death. No!

This is a very large reason I am a follower of Jesus Christ. Christ brings clear direction in a world that is bouncing all around. Jesus teaches a way of life that is filled with purpose. Christ allows us to say no to certain things without guilt because together we are moving in a specific direction. Jesus empowers us to no longer dodge the difficulties of life but to confront them. Being a follower of Christ is to live so urgently that there is no time to rush.

Related blog post - [Confusing Rushing and Urgency](#)

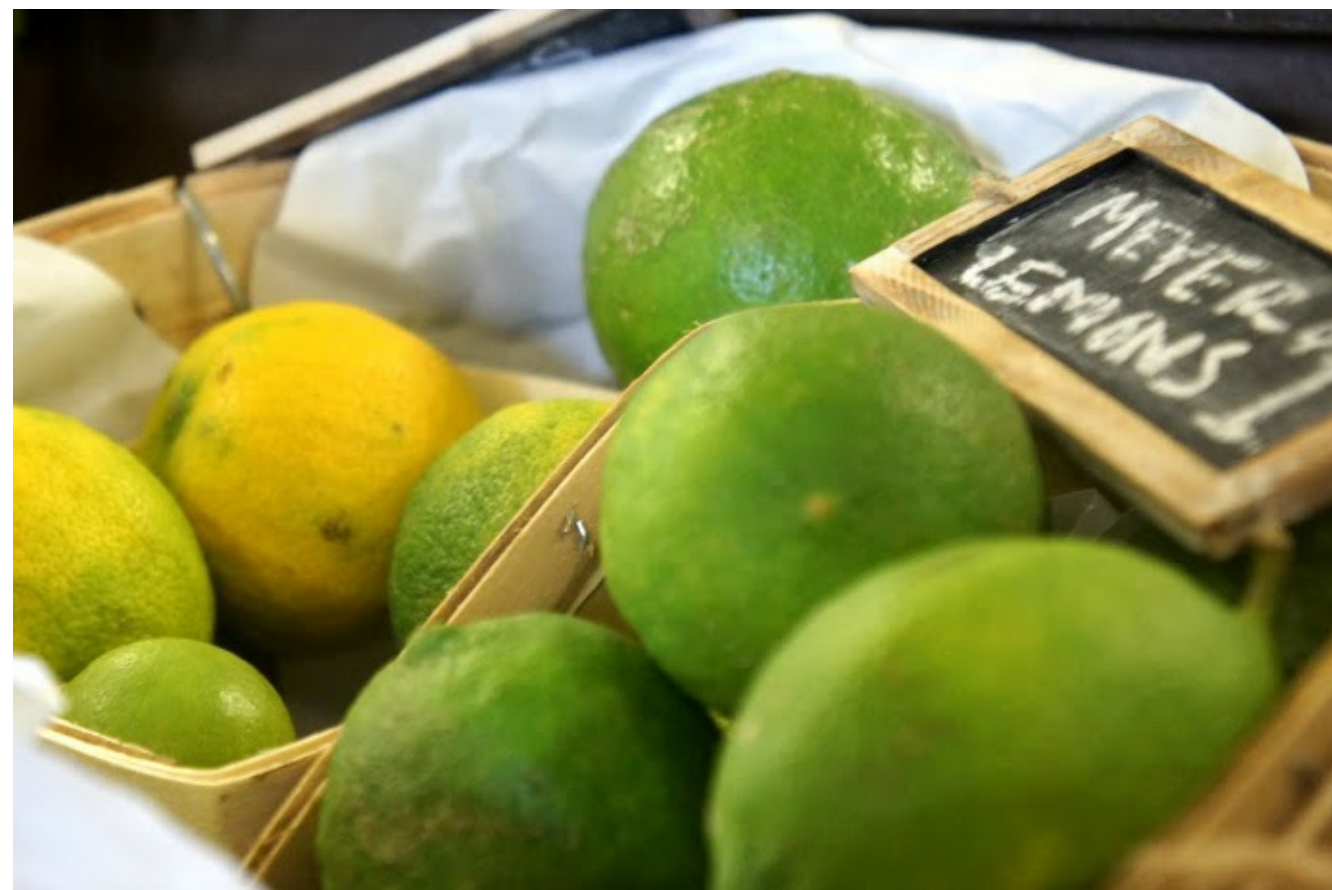
Growing Vegetables Instead of Fruit

In a lectio divina group my wife and I are a part of, the eight of us reflected on a section of John 15. In this "divine reading" there was an insight that came into focus about Jesus talking about bearing fruit. It began with the thought that Jesus does not say we are to bear vegetables but fruit. Which on the surface seems silly, then the conversation became clearer.

I am not a farmer and know very little about growing produce. What I do know is that to grow, say corn, one would plow the soil and then sow seeds and feed and water the seeds over time then when the harvest comes, you cut the corn down and then you begin the process over again the next year.

What is great about growing vegetables is that there is an immediate return on the work. You plant a seed then later that year you get corn or carrots or beans or squash. This is why kids are always introduced to gardening with growing vegetables - you do not have to wait too long for food.

This is not the case with many fruits. Peaches, apples, olives, lemons, cherries all take a number of years before food is produced.



At the start of the process, being a farmer of fruit looks like being a farmer of vegetables. However, in the beginning fruit farmers do not get to 'eat' from their labors and must wait. However, fruit farmers also do not have to take time the next year to till and plant - the vegetable farmer has to.

It is a simple thought but one that has larger ramifications for spiritual formation - are we working like vegetable or fruit farmers?

Vegetable farmer spirituality might look like we are doing the same work work year after

year. Vegetable farmer spirituality might look like we are always busy getting ready for the next season that we cannot abide in the presence of God? Vegetable farmer spirituality might look like we are being fed but not patient enough to discover the sweetness of fruit. Vegetable farmer spirituality has some risk but only short term risk because there is always a new season to try again and so there is no need to really develop trust.

Beyond Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

Ortho - from the Greek orthos ("right", "true", "straight")

Dox - from the Greek [doxa](#) ("opinion" or "belief", related to dokein, "to think")

Much of the church focuses on the "right belief" of the parishioners. Many of the conversations I have with people are rooted in what is orthodox Christian thought and what is not. The current state of the Church places a premium on orthodox thought. The thing is orthodox thought is not just the idol of the Church but of our world. We have a desire to ensure that people have the right thoughts on things.

This is not a "bad" thing, but when orthodoxy is out of balance with orthopraxy (prax - from the Greek praxia "action", "activity") then things get a little weird. This imbalance can be seen when members of the Church will preach love but stand on corners and condemn the "heretics" (heresy - from the Greek hairetikos meaning "able to choose").

Arguing orthodox thought happens in the world of science as well. The debate of climate change rages on and the debates of the mysteries of the world continue to perplex the mind.

The church spends a lot of time getting people to orthodox thought. For instance, the church teaches people that it is a good thing to give of their time, talents, gifts and service to the world. The belief that giving is a good thing is "orthodox" in Christian thought, and the church is a place to instill that idea into the minds of people.

In order to ensure that orthodox is not out of balance, there is orthopraxy - which has come to mean "doing the right things". It is not enough to intellectually know about the importance of giving, but if you want to be a Christian you must actually give. It is in the doing of faith that faith is given flesh. It is the whole, "It is not what you say but it is what you do" mentality. Orthopraxy is meant to be a counter-weight to orthodoxy.

But like all weight and counter-weights, this creates a dichotomy that ends up pitting one against the other. So you have people in the church that place the importance on ensuring people have the right beliefs and then there are people who are not concerned with beliefs but are invested to ensure we are doing right actions. Christians talk about the balance between "faith" and "works".

The problem is that Christianity is not dualistic in thought or deed. What sets Christianity apart is the Trinitarian nature of our understanding of God. This is the Good News of Jesus, there is a third way that is not being held up in this conversation between orthodoxy and orthopraxy and it is this third way, which breaks the dichotomy of faith and works.

"Faith without works is dead."

"Works without purpose are empty."

"It is not what you say it is what you do."

"Beliefs drive actions."

"Anyone can take communion in worship."

"You cannot take communion unless you know what it means or it cheapens the sacrament."

"Baptism of children are well and good because baptism is for all people."

"Baptism is only for those who know what it means, so babies are not considered."

The argument of what is more important - what you believe or what you do - grows two camps. Each side appreciates the other side but in the end is ultimately convinced their camp is slightly more important than the other. Thus debates rage on and on in these dualistic conversations.

Enter Jesus who brought a teaching that there is a third way.

Jesus heals a lot of blind people, which is nothing to dismiss as though Jesus is just really good with eyes. Jesus heals blindness because it is this blindness that keeps us from seeing this third way - the way beyond orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Take the example of teaching people to give to the church. The orthodoxy side of us wants to ensure people know that giving is important. The orthopraxy side of us wants to ensure people are giving to the right causes. When this right knowledge and right action are achieved then we would count that as a good job. If someone knows they should give and then give to the causes that are the most fruitful, then "mission accomplished"!

Teaching people to give and giving opportunities for them to give falls short in discipleship. These two steps are just the beginning and if we want to move beyond orthodoxy and orthopraxy we must see our need for orthokardia - right heart.

This process of discovering orthokardia is like learning a second language. When we first begin a new language, we are focused on the right words. Once the vocabulary is to a point, we then begin to work on the correct way to say the words (rolling the 'r' or pronouncing the umlaut). As we speak this second language we are at first really speaking our first language then translating in our heads what that word combination would be in our second language. With practice, we begin to shift from translating to just speaking. We begin to think in terms of the second language and not our first. It is a wonderful transition and critical to anyone who wants to be fluent in languages.

Orthokardia is much like this. While we are focused on what people think about giving or what they give to, we are not encouraging orthokardia. It is not enough to convince people to give or to give to specific causes, orthokardia is about making generous people. People who do not need to be told to give of their time or money or energy, but people who are aware of the numerous ways to be generous all around them.

It is an easy thing to get people to give compared to creating generous people. It is an easy thing to get people to understand the value of learning the story of Jesus compared to helping create "little Christs". It is very easy to pick out people who do not believe the right things or do the right things compared to those who have correct orthokardia.

If you would like to share a comment via email please feel free to contact me by clicking [here](#).

I was introduced to the band Cloud Cult a year ago. Currently this song, [Complicated Creation](#), is rockin in my ears.



About Jason

My name is Jason Valendy and I feel my call is to help cultivate and create the culture known as the Kingdom of God. My wife, Estee and I co-pastor [Saginaw United Methodist Church](#) and we share the joy and privilege of being the parents of our sons, Jude and Evan.