

“On Faith and Practice: Thinking and Doing”

October 13, 2024

Based on Philippians 4:8-9. Paul Tells Us To Be Good People

The heart of the message from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians today might be summed up in highly successful 1988 advertising campaign from Nike: *Just Do It!*

Our faith bids us tell the truth; so just do it. Our faith bids us act with honor, so just do it. Our faith bids us to act modestly, to live in gratitude, to act commendably: so just do it.

Think about these things, yes, Paul says. Ponder them in your heart, if you must. Discuss them with one another, of course. But then, for the love of all that is holy, *just do it!*

When it comes to the Philippians, they have indeed already been practicing truthful, honorable, reputable action. When they learn of Paul’s imprisonment, they immediately respond with faith and practice. Faith in the God who seeks to liberate the oppressed. Practice in the form of prayer and advocacy among the powers that be for his release.

In the meantime, as the Philippians are working for systemic change in the judicial system, they create one care package after another to provide for Paul’s physical needs while he remains in prison. Just like our faith in the God who cares for all creation leads us to work for climate justice at the exact same time we pull together cleaning kits for hurricane relief.

This is the underlying point of faith and practice in the church today. Whether it is prayer or worship or communion or hospitality or mission or justice, every practice we engage in the life of the church is about responding to the need of the world - including the need in ourselves - at the exact same time we commit ourselves to calling that world into ever greater alignment with the very realm of God. Our faith leads us to our practice. Our practice itself is an act of faith.

The result of these practices, as Paul describes, can be a peace that passes understanding: an ever-deepening faith *for ourselves* that instills within us a sense that we *already live in* that realm, even as we wait for it in fullness. Faith and practice become reciprocal, one depending the other, which then deepens the other in return, putting an end to the age old debate between faith and works and instead seeing each as the complementary concept to the other that they actually are.

Take, for example, our Guns to Gardens practice, celebrated yesterday at the Shepherdstown Fire Station. Our faith bids us *turn our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks*, which we in our 21st Century American context translate to: *transform our guns into gardening tools*. Acting on faith, we practice what we preach, with truthful, honorable, reputable action.

We respond to the need of the world - and indeed our own need in the midst of so much violence - as we call that world into a vision of justice and wholeness, a reflection of the Garden of Grace we were meant to live in all along. In the process of this practice, our own faith is transformed, as we welcome the stranger, as the buzz of the chop saw hums through our hearts, as we pray through the challenging moments - and there were a few! - as we build relationships across what seems to divide us, as we steadfastly and determinedly dismantle what makes for war, both in the steel and in the soul.

In our Guns to Gardens practice we also learn that we each have a role, clarified according to our particular gifts and interests. Some people are really good at greeting people. Some people are really good at working a chop saw. Some people are really good at making sure your pastor is wearing sufficient sunscreen. No one person need do it all; no one person *can* do it all. But all are needed in order that the faith may be formed and the practice may thrive.

This is true more broadly in the church, as well. Each practice of the church is necessary for the vitality of the whole: the prayer and the worship, the mission and the justice; all of it blending together to strengthen the other parts. No one person - not even the pastor! - is expected to engage wholeheartedly in every practice of the church. We come together as one to bear witness in word and in deed the steadfast love of God and the peace that passes all understanding.

One other important way we do that is through the practice of financial giving, including our annual pledge drive underway here at SPC. Based on input from the congregation over the past several years, the SPC Session has adopted budget priorities for the near and mid-term future. I can attest these are not extravagant expenses! We have reviewed the SPC budget with a fine tooth comb. Any further reduction of costs would significantly hamper our ability to live out our faith and practice as faithfully as we would like.

The budget priorities we have settled on lead us to an annual budget of roughly \$370,000. Last year's pledged income was \$264,000. So there is a gap between our income and our expenses. We have enough money in reserves to maintain our annual budget for 3 - 5 years. If we can raise our pledged income for 2025 to roughly \$280,000 (a 5% increase), we will make great strides toward closing the gap and building our long term vision.

That long term vision includes increased commitments to Mission and Justice; to maintaining this historic church property with its own innate healing power; to building programs for children and youth and worship and hospitality; and to providing equitable compensation for a vibrant, young, and future-oriented staff.

Because I try very hard to practice what I preach, I will assure you Christopher and I have already turned in our pledge card with a 5% increase from last year's pledge. We will continue to increase our pledge in the years to come for as long as it is necessary in order to meet our goals. I assure you that, as we make this commitment, we are not immune to health bills and food bills, and something seems to fall apart every week at the house that needs to be fixed. At the same time, we believe the practice of giving to the church before we budget anything else is the honorable, just, commendable thing to do. And there is a deep peace that comes to us through the practice of giving, even if that peace passes all understanding.

Of course, there are those among us for whom even the smallest financial gift is truly more difficult than can be offered. Please do not receive this message as a condemnation if you are not able to give financially. There are so many other ways to give of time and of talent, no one way is more important than another. All are ways to practice what we say we believe.

Friends, it can be far too easy to take this place for granted. I am begging you. Do not. The vibrancy of this congregation, in its faith and its practice, cannot be understated. Now is the time to put our money where our mouth is and our bodies where our beliefs are. We have said we want to be, in perpetuity, *an inclusive, spiritual community, welcoming all who long for meaning hope and belonging.*

We have thought about it, we have pondered it, we have discussed it.

Now let's just do it!