

Christ Church + Washington Parish
Intro. To Way of Love Series, Luke 3:15-18, 21-22
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
Baptism of our Lord; January 13, 2019

Today is the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. It is the day we jump from Jesus as baby in the manger to Jesus, 30 year old man, about to begin his ministry. Ironically, even though its Jesus' baptism day, it is the Holy Spirit that takes center stage in the reading from Luke and just a few verses apart, we have two vivid images of the Holy Spirit - Fire and Dove. John the Baptist in typical dramatic prophet fashion tells his followers of the one who is coming who will, with the power of the Holy Spirit set fire to their lives, and then, at Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit shows up, not as a flaming winnowing fork but as a dove who whispers in Jesus ear just what someone who is trying to figure out what they should do in the world and taking risky steps to do it wants to hear - "You are beloved and with you I am pleased." Both metaphors of the Holy Spirit have stuck so to speak in Christian symbolism.

First, fire. While the winnowing fork that divides the wheat from the chaff (which is the part of the plant that is not useful) and sets fire to the chaff sounds a little frightening, any of you who have tackled a closet or the basement or your whole house for those who have renovated or are enduring a long furlough and separated what is no longer useful from what is, understand the life-giving nature of getting rid of things. The burning of the chaff is the equivalent of taking things to Goodwill. There is something life-giving about the work of looking at your life and letting go of what is no longer needed so that you can hold tighter to what is valuable. There is no denying it; it takes work and you have to be dedicated to the self-reflection that it takes for our lives to not become overcrowded with that which is no longer useful – physically and metaphorically. That can be the spiritual work of the fire of the Holy Spirit.

But the spiritual work of the Holy Spirit can be more gentle, like the dove, that whispers words of loving affirmation. But if all we see is an image of peace and gentleness when we think of the Holy Spirit as dove – we miss something. The word in Luke is almost always translated as dove, but it just as easily could have been translated pigeon. It changes the visceral reaction doesn't it – to think of a pigeon flying down and landing on Jesus shoulder. Pigeons were all over the place in Palestine and they were not pure white. They were gray with a little green spot on the back of their neck; in fact, they looked quite similar to the ones I saw eating trash on 8th street this week.

Pigeons love to be close to us. They don't make their homes in quiet places far from human traffic like some other birds. They are where we are - in some of the worst places - abandoned buildings - to some of the best, flying through museums and gathering in parks. Pigeons have been very useful – as a food source, as entertainment because you can train them to run races, as messengers before we had the wonders of telecommunications. In multiple religions, they have had a sacred role as a sacrificial animal - mainly because they are so easy to catch. Yet there's hardly a bird that people are more likely to want to exterminate. Pigeons are not popular; some even call them “rats with wings,” even the Audobon society once approved of shooting them, and cities have tried countless ways of exterminating them, usually unsuccessfully.¹

¹ Information about pigeons/doves from Chapter 1 of Debbie Blue's *Consider the Birds*(Nashville: Abingdon, 2013)

How does that add to our understanding of the Holy Spirit? What if the Holy Spirit is everywhere people are, sometimes underfoot, routinely ignored, useful for many things, easy to grab hold of, vulnerable to suppression, but impossible to extinguish? What if the Holy Spirit that gently whispers in our ear was as common and accessible as a pigeon? Would that make living the Christian life any easier, less intimidating than say the cleansing work of fire?

Today we begin an 8 week series on living the Christian life; it is called The Way of Love and it is part of a larger movement in the Episcopal Church to put the practices of our faith front and center for those worshipping in Episcopal Churches. It is new in the sense that is what launched this summer at our General Convention, but there's nothing new here, except a graphic. The Way of Love is living the promises of our baptism. It is a way of tapping into the fire of the Holy Spirit to do the cleaning out work and into the ubiquitous presence of the Holy Spirit to gently shape us. The way is a journey that doesn't end, but it does lead to different places. The way is made up of practices – spiritual practices.

Spiritual practices are, as the writer Brian McLaren puts, “those actions within our power that help us narrow the gap between the person we are and the person we hope to become. They help us become good and deep company for ourselves and others. They're about surviving our twenties or forties or eighties and not becoming a jerk in the process. About not letting what happens to us deform or destroy us. About realizing that what we earn or accumulate means nothing compared to what we become and who we are.”²

² Brian McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

Doesn't that make spiritual practices sound worth the effort? Worth failing at it and trying again, over and over? McLaren goes on to say that these practices shape our character which determines the course of our lives, and our character--the kind of people we are--determines how much of God we can experience, and maybe even which version of God we experience, and how the people around us experience God. Which is say that there's a lot at stake here, for us.

As part of the Way of Love, we will look at seven practices over the next seven weeks. The graphic may help at this point; it is located _____.

The first practice is to **learn**, to commit to some faith-focused learning each day. If we don't keep learning, our understanding of God can become narrow and stuck. There's a lot of bad teaching in the name of Christianity-- So choose your resources wisely. What matters most here isn't the quantity of our learning, but the steady commitment to take in a bit of insight each day.

The second practice is **worship**. See you have one down already. Following Jesus is not a solo effort. We need one another. Rarely do we grow in the ways of love on our own. As one writer put it, the church at its best is "like a school that trains people in the way of love, an unusual school that lasts a lifetime and from we which we never really graduate. . . Christian faith is really one long apprenticeship in the way of love."³

³ Norman Wirzba, *Way of Love: Recovering the Heart of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016)

The third practice is **Go**, and is one of the more challenging practices, because what is meant by go is that we cross borders of familiarity to better understand the experience of another; to see the world through others' eyes. I had a professor in seminary that always said, "Mission is ministry across lines of difference." I'm still learning what that means, but it is different doing ministry with people who are like you and with people who are not like you, and it is clear from the gospels that Jesus does ministry with both and it is his ministry to the latter that is most challenging for the apostles to understand.

The fourth practice is **Turn** - to turn our gaze, to turn our mind, our thoughts, our attention to Jesus. It captures both the first time we did that, if you remember what made you decide to commit to the Christian path, and the daily decisions to re-focus attention on Jesus in your life.

The fifth practice is **Rest**. Our bodies and souls are restored in rest. The world does not rest on our shoulders alone. We can, for a time each day, each week, lay our burdens down. This is a time for renewal, for the things that make for joy.

The sixth practice is **Bless**, to speak in word and action kindness and affirmation. Think of the countless opportunities you have each day to speak kindness into another person's life, to speak a word of hope in times of uncertainty, to provide wind for another's sails. To Bless.

The final practice that we will explore as part of this series is **Pray**. To spend time each day – it needn't be long – in intentional prayer. Of course we can pray at all times and places. Yet I have learned that making the effort to sit down in the same place every day for a few minutes has a quiet, powerful impact on my life. It's a time to pray for the people I've said I'm going to pray for, to invite God into my day, to listen to what God might be saying when I stop rushing around. We may not hear anything in the silence. But we might. And we'll never will hear anything from God if we don't take time to listen.⁴

Everyone in here is doing some of this. Many are doing a little of every practice, perhaps without even knowing it. All of us could deepen our practice. So seven weeks. Let's do it together. Pick up a wallet size card, a pamphlet, or a fridge magnet. All are ways to put these enduring spiritual practices at your hand so that you may look at what you are already doing through their lens, and maybe pick up one or two things in areas that you feel need more emphasis in your life. May the practice of your faith grow over the next eight weeks that you may more deeply experience God's love and grace and be able to bless the world with what you find there.

⁴ The second half of sermon draws from a sermon preached on 9/13/18 by The Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde also with the purpose of introducing The Way of Love series.