

## **PRACTICING OUR FAITH: GET THEE TO A COMMUNITY**

Let's imagine that one day a friend says to you, "I'm a little embarrassed to ask this, but you're a Christian, right? I mean, I've never paid much attention to these things. Anyway, at this stage of my life I'm interested in giving this Christian faith a try. I wasn't brought up in a church, so I don't really know all that much about it. I mean, I know the basic outlines of the Christian story, but what do I do next? Where do I get started?"

How would you respond? What would you recommend as the starting place? Where would you tell someone to begin? What's the first step in giving this Christian faith a try?

You might give your friend a Bible—an understandable move, but not necessarily the best one. It would be understandable because the Bible tells the Christian story and it is the basis of much of what we do. But someone who sets about reading the Bible on his or her own usually gets bogged down around the twenty-fifth chapter of Exodus or—if you are particularly determined or just plain stubborn—around the third chapter of Leviticus. When the Bible is read without some guidance it can be a most baffling book.

So would you give that friend a more contemporary book about basic Christian beliefs? Such books can be helpful, but is that really the place to begin, with beliefs? At such a stage any survey of Christian beliefs can seem abstract or just overwhelmingly bizarre. Besides, to begin by talking about beliefs is to imply that being a Christian is about getting your head straight on certain matters—it's an interior move, a conviction. But clearly the Christian faith is more than that.

So perhaps you might suggest another starting place and teach your friend the Lord's Prayer, or give her a recording of Handel's Messiah, or suggest that he get involved in an outreach project. I'm sure one could begin in any one of those places.

My conclusion, however, is that none of them would be the best starting place. I think the best word of advice for a seeker friend would be this: "Get thee to a community." The most natural beginning place to give this Christian faith a try is to become a part of a Christian community.

Christianity is, first and last, a communal religion. Before Jesus began his public ministry he called disciples to share that adventure with him. That is, he gathered around him a small community. In fact, Christianity and Judaism are the two great world religions that require community. In other world religions, one's encounter with God can be an individual matter. But Christian worship, like the worship of the Jews from which it derives,

is a communal experience. It requires a congregation. A Christian alone is a contradiction. You can't be a Christian by yourself. Or as someone put it, "It takes two to gospel."

Now, there are different kinds of Christian community, but the most common is the local church, and of course a local church usually has elements of all of those things—the Bible, other forms of study, prayer, music, outreach and more. So becoming part of a community like that would be a most fitting starting place. It seems obvious. But I am suggesting something more than that. I have concluded that becoming part of a community is the best starting place, not merely because such a community provides opportunity to engage in the whole range of Christian practices, but also because being part of a community is, in its own right, perhaps the best place to begin.

Before I elaborate on that, let me quickly admit that there are risks in suggesting that if one wants to become a Christian or grow in the Christian faith, one should start with Christian community. I have known folks who have had some kind of powerful religious experience (or it could be a quieter form of religious awakening) and they are like those caught in the exhilarating throes of a young love. They evidence an eager excitement—until they encounter an actual church. Sometimes such an encounter is itself enough to douse the most ardent flame. Far from the lofty visions of spiritual heights, a church can be, and often is, no different from other human configurations—flawed, if not dysfunctional, marred by personality conflicts, pettiness, clumsiness, foibles... please stop me when you think I have gone too far!

Even those who are most committed to Christian community freely admit its flaws and frailties. I remember visiting a Benedictine monastery for a weekend some years ago. The monks live with a vow of silence. They don't talk to each other as they work side by side each day. They don't talk to one another during meals. Only once a week do they speak to each other. It is at a special meeting held each week for the purpose of dealing with matters of common concern to the community. I was fascinated when I heard about this, so I asked Brother Timothy, the monk who was assigned to answer the questions of visitors, what the monks discuss at that weekly meeting. Do they share with the larger group some of their own individual encounters with the Spirit of Christ during the past week? Do they speak of their hopes for the community?

"What do you talk about at those meetings?" I asked Brother Timothy. "Oh, the usual. Mostly to air the grievances the brothers have with one another that came up through the week." Imagine! The monks aren't even talking to each other during the rest of the week—but they still have grievances! Living in community is not easy. Perhaps that is why Saint Benedict, the same one who wrote extensively about the blessings of community and gave instruction on how to live in community, also said, "Community is my penance."

The best-seller list is filled with books on what is sometimes called "spirituality." In one way or another, I'm sure they speak to the great spiritual longing of our age. But for the most part these books are about an *individual's* search for God. Most often there is no suggestion that being part of a faith community is essential to spiritual growth. One of my professors in seminary, the late Henri Nouwen (who was a Catholic priest), used to say, "Community is the place where the one you can't stand always is." Now, who wants to hear that? Don't put that in a book if you want it to be a best-seller.

**In a way there is something to be said for watching a worship service on television. It is certainly more convenient. Not only can we then avoid the inconvenience of getting dressed, but we can also avoid the far greater inconvenience of encountering others, with all of their needs and frailties.**

**But it is precisely here that perhaps we can begin to see why living in community also is so important. It is a constant reminder that the Christian faith is not something abstract. It is not a religious sentiment that can be kept conveniently at thirty thousand feet about the human fray. It is not about a God who keeps at a rarified distance. It is about a God who gets God's own fingernails dirty in the gritty realities of life as it is actually lived on the ground.**

**Living in community reminds us that Christianity is more than some lofty spiritual truth. It is about the daily-ness of life. It is about the significance of our otherwise ordinary encounters with one another: the ways we speak to one another, the ways we treat one another; the ways we air our grievances and the ways we reconcile; the ways we enfold those who are hurting and lovingly correct those who have strayed—all in the daily-ness of life.**

**A number of years ago I preached a sermon from this pulpit in which I asked, "Is there someone in this church you can't stand?" (Remember Nouwen's definition of community as "the place where the person you can't stand always is.") I went on to ask, "Is there someone here who has betrayed you, or disappointed you, or who offends you, or angers you, someone you don't want to have anything more to do with, or someone who just grates on you? If there is not yet such a person here for you, then that is an indication that you need to draw closer, because it is when we have encountered people that we would normally not choose to associate with—it is then that we have a chance to become more than just another pleasant gathering of congenial people. It is then that we have a chance to be a church."**

**After that sermon a relatively new member said, "Gee, I don't think that sermon was addressed to me because there is no one here in this church like that for me." Well, she's been around us a little longer now and a while ago she said to me, "Remember that sermon that I told you I couldn't relate to? Well, I think I get it now." I said, "Good. Now God can do something with you." It is when we recognize our differences that God can do something with us all. Indeed, it is then that we have a chance to be a church.**

**I remember being shocked when I heard a psychologist say that a church is valuable because it is a place where we can learn to stand one another. But since then I have come to see that the psychologist was making no small claim. The church, like the family, is a place where we can learn to live with people we did not choose. When we love the ones we are stuck with, it is a powerful reminder of the love of a God who is stuck with us all.**

**When Luke describes the life of the early church he says that "many wonders and signs were being performed." Among the "wonders and signs" Luke enumerates is that "day by day...they broke bread in their homes and ate the food with glad and generous hearts, praising God." Now, that may not sound too startling to us. A shared meal? It's a simple thing. But in the first century, among these people, it was unheard of. You see, that fledgling church already included both Jew and Gentile—anyone who had committed to follow Jesus.**

**First century Jews and Gentiles were sworn enemies. They would have nothing to do with another, no less share the intimacy of a meal.**

**So when Luke says that the members of the early church—Jews and Gentiles—ate together, he is reporting a momentous thing. It is a sign and a wonder. They actually ate together!**

**Living in community is an essential Christian practice because it gives us such ample opportunity to learn how to receive the stranger and practice forgiveness. If we learn to accept one another, in spite of our differences, we can learn to accept anyone. If we practice the art of reconciliation long enough with one another, then we have a chance to let reconciliation mark our relationships with others as well.**

**We have been invited by our partner church, The Historic Charles Street AME Church, to join them at the end of March for what they call a “love-feast,” a form of worship service that has ancient roots. At Charles Street the love-feast is held the Wednesday before the Sunday when communion is served. Its object is to prepare the church to receive the Lord’s Supper. The love-feast takes as its charter Jesus’ instruction that if you come to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come back. So, the instructions for this service say, “The object of love-feasts is to have people bury all bickerings, malice, envy and strife, and if any are not speaking to get them to make up and start upon a new Christian career.”**

**That’s powerful stuff. Charles Street Church, and other faith communities of their tradition, have been working at reconciling with one another for a very long time. They take it very seriously. And I don’t think it is coincidence that a community that takes reconciliation with one another very seriously, also reaches beyond the bounds of their community to extend gracious gestures of reconciliation to others—like us! A community of faith is important because it is a place in which you get to practice forgiveness. The promise of community is that if you practice forgiveness and reconciliation long enough with one another, then you have a chance to let reconciliation mark your relationships with others as well.**

**Now, if community is the place where the one you can’t stand always is, it is also the place where there are people of great faith, and who exhibit other gifts of the Spirit. It is in community that we can meet them, work alongside them and learn from them. We can find a mentor. Or, as I prefer to say, we can “adopt a saint.” That is, we can learn from others who have been at it longer than we have. Increasingly I am convinced that the best way to become a Christian is to apprentice oneself to such a person. Like dancing, baking bread or playing the cello—being a Christian is not something that you can learn from a book. It is too complex and too nuanced to be learned at a distance. The variables are too numerous to be catalogued. So there is no substitute for working alongside someone with more experience.**

**When our relationship with God is still tender and new, it may be particularly important to work alongside such everyday saints. But such people also play a role for us at other times, when our faith has become brittle with neglect, or strained by circumstance, or simply needs refreshment. I like the way Mary Luti put it: “When the love of God feels**

remote to you, look to holy people, people for whom God is very real. Fix on these folks, the ones you can see God luring to goodness. And if the love of God means nothing to you, love the lovers of God.”

Gratefully, every Christian community I know has them—the lovers of God. And sometimes they are the only reason we don’t chuck the whole thing. Our own faith may be meager or severely tested. Our most urgent questions may echo in our hearts without answer. What we see in the church or from those who call themselves Christians may discourage us. But then there is that person, the one who would probably be shocked to learn that when you hear the word “saint,” you think of her. Sometimes, it is the presence of such lovers of God, and nothing more, that keeps us coming back, keeps us in the fold, keeps us at it.

I remember a rabbi telling me this story about a man who faithfully came to the synagogue for services each Sabbath, even though he was openly skeptical about the claims of the Jewish faith. When the rabbi asked him about this, the man replied, “Well, rabbi, people come to the synagogue for different reasons. For instance, Sol Levin comes to talk to God. And I come to talk to Sol Levin.” It is good advice: “If the love of God means nothing to you, love the lovers of God. Fix on them.”

A while back someone said to me, “You know, I have many doubts. I have great difficulty with Christian theology. But I’ve been part of a church all of my life because I haven’t found anywhere else the kind of community that can be found in a church.” Indeed, if the love of God means nothing to you, love the lovers of God.

So if someone who wanted to give this Christian faith a try were to ask me where to begin, I would say, “Get thee to a community. You’ll have a chance to see how it all works on the ground. You’ll be given ample opportunity to practice forgiveness. You’ll learn how to love the ones you’re stuck with. And, along the way you’ll spend time with some saints who will show you how its done.”