

**Giving Gifts, Practicing our Faith, Singing our Lives**  
**Nancy J. Willbanks**  
**Old Cambridge Baptist Church**  
**Cambridge, MA**  
**August 3, 2003**

*(Put vase of sticks in front of podium.)*

This sermon has been germinating for a while, probably starting back in February when I was doing my taxes and looking at seed catalogs. And in February when I went out into my backyard just to make sure that the shed had survived the last big snow and ice storm, mostly what I saw were the tops of a few sticks like this sticking up out of the snow. Looking at those sticks without faith, knowledge, attention and hope, you would never be able to appreciate the juicy raspberries and beautiful roses that these sticks have produced this summer: bowls and bowls of red and black raspberries, and beautiful, fragrant pink roses. *(Put roses and berries out.)*

Like these sticks, each of us have gifts according the grace given us. Let's listen and look for these lessons from God.

Let us pray: God, open us to your grace and to faith. Bless us as we come together as your people on this day and always. Amen.

The writer of Ephesians, begins today's reading by begging us "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." There's an interesting underlying assumption here. It's not if or when or whether you have been called, but, the life "to which you have been called."

How many of you answered a phone call in the past week? How often was that phone call a telemarketing call? I've put my name on the "do not call" lists for telemarketing calls. I don't think these were the calls that the writer of Ephesians had in mind here. But I wonder if somehow you and I think that we are on God's do not call list. I suspect that many of us have indeed put on our answering machine to take the message, put ourselves on the "do not call" list, and are just not wanting to be interrupted by God.

Because, wait, hey, isn't a call is like God speaking "Come, Nancy, Sue, James, leave everything behind and do my work?"

Curran Reichert, a month ago, told us in her sermon, about her call to ministry, in the question: "Got joy?" I also remember sitting here for Jamie Washam's ordination council, when she recounted her call to the ministry. We have turned the idea of call into something that only happens to people who are going to be ordained.

Guess what? Ephesians wasn't written to ordained ministers. It was an open letter to the whole church, all of God's people. "Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

What is a call? In studying for this sermon, I discovered a wonderful preacher and writer, and in Barbara Brown Taylor's essay, "Vocation," she says, "A call means doing what we were meant to do." We are all called. A call is not a one time event, is it? We may be called at different times for different things. That's also important to remember.

This sermon is not about your call, necessarily, however, though I recommend this essay on Vocation to you. This sermon is about what we do to make it day by day trying to believe in God, perhaps while we figure out what we're meant to do. Lead a life which is worth the doing of what you were meant to do.

In this instance, the question in Curran's call, really applies to all of us: Got joy? What are you passionate about? What do you do or can you do that makes you feel like you make a difference? What brings you joy? What are your gifts and how can you give them?

This passage in Ephesians is one of four passages in the New Testament that outlines the spiritual gifts that we are given. A parallel passage in Romans 12, verses 6-8, says: We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

We all have gifts. In my readings on these passages, one writer remarked that every Christian has a gift. It's not a matter of if you have a gift, but rather what are your gifts? Again, the writer of Ephesians reminds us, you have been given gifts according the grace that Christ has given you.

Each of us has been given gifts. What are yours? What are mine? Are you generous? Are you cheerful? Are you diligent? Do you minister, teach or exhort? How are we using those gifts "to equip the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ?"

As many of you know, the way you improve your gifts or talents or skills so that you can use them better, is to practice. You practice your violin, you practice your golf swing, you practice your dancing, and, my friends, you practice your faith. But I think many of us forget or don't realize that our gifts of the Spirit need the same kind of practice and rehearsal we would give our singing, the kind of care and tending we would give our well loved garden, the kind of attention and research to gain knowledge and insight that we would give to planning our summer vacation or buying a car.

And just as if God knew that I'd be ready for it by now, last summer I bought a book, a collection of essays, called **Practicing Our Faith**, edited by Dorothy Bass, and I came across it again this spring as I began to struggle with the gifts in my own life. As it happens, in the Christian tradition there are practices that we can engage in together, and today's entire service is the result of my mulling on practicing our faith and how you and I can use our gifts. So, let me give you a quick synopsis from this book and its associated web site: [www.practicingourfaith.org](http://www.practicingourfaith.org).

#### WHAT ARE PRACTICES?

Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God's active presence for the life of the world.

#### Practices

- address fundamental human needs
- involve us in God's activities in the world and reflect God's grace and love
- are learned with and from other people
- come to us from the past and will be shaped by us for the future
- are thought-full; they rely on beliefs; they develop in us certain kinds of wisdom

- are done within the church, in the public realm, in daily work, and at home
- shape the people who participate in them, as individuals and as communities
- have good purposes, but they can become corrupted
- come to a focus in worship
- add up to a way of life

Some of those practices include:

Honoring the body ... providing hospitality ... household economics ... keeping Sabbath ... testimony ... saying yes and no ... shaping communities ... forgiving ... discernment ... healing ... dying well ... singing our lives.

What a great list of things to do, isn't it? And intentionally, which I love, "singing our lives" is the ultimate or final practice in the book. Today in this service and throughout the week and year in this church and in many others, we'll be practicing our faith in many of these ways.

As we end the service and pass the peace, many of us exchange a hug, honoring the body's need for tender affection and attention. We share this space with the Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre, and Jose's philosophy of dance is one of honoring, not abusing, the body—no promotion of anorexic dancers here. But ... what other ways could we honor the body individually and together?

As we celebrate at our open communion table today, we practice hospitality. We invite all to share the feast and reflect on the meanings of the bread broken and wine poured. We share our church space through the year with several organizations which provide services for the homeless, and we also have an active congregational participation in the local Refugee Immigration Ministry. How else can we each open our homes and selves to both friends and strangers?

In our time of concerns and celebrations, today we will lift up prayers for healing. The healing group of this church regularly meets to raise prayers for this community and the broader world. What can each of us do to promote health and healing in ourselves, our friends and neighbors and the world?

Today, in sharing with you the practice of singing our lives, we're learning some new songs with wonderful texts and tunes from our hymnal, and I'll be bringing as my offering during the offertory a medley of songs that I've returned to that remind me where I've come from in my spiritual journey, that offer comfort, support and thanksgiving. During the year, we have an active choir and music program, and one of our strongest outreaches and ties to the congregation is in the singing of the church. So, corporately, in the body of this church here, we have some expertise in practicing our faith in some of these ways. I told some of you last fall when I bought a piano after being without one for several years that it was in lieu of therapy. What music speaks to you and how can you share it? I heard some fabulously spiritual pieces on Friday night at Gillette Stadium with 53,000 other people listening to Bruce Springsteen and the E Street band. How can we sing our lives and bring music to the lives of others?

What are your gifts? Where do you need practice? What practices would strengthen your own gifts? Just as we might use different exercises to warm up for singing or to stretch before running, so the different practices of our faith help strengthen our gifts. I was never successful in a regular, personal, prayer practice until two summers ago when I started singing the Psalms. St. Augustine said, she "who sings once, prays twice." Singing let me pray.

This summer I've been working on discernment in my own life. What life am I called to live? What are the best uses of my gifts? I've had a number of people say to me, "Nancy, you have a gift for ministry." In trying to figure out if God is using these voices to call me to a different way of using my gifts, and also being gifted with pragmatism, I've been trying to practice discernment. But every time I sat down to make the pros and cons lists, I popped back up and went over to the piano and found another song to sing. Clearly, singing my life helps me sort things out.

Back in February when I was doing my taxes, if I had done this sermon on giving gifts, I might have done it as a series of lessons on household economics and inspired philanthropy: How to make and keep a budget that puts your life and money in line with your priorities and beliefs. How do you use your gifts of generosity

to practice your faith in the world? And you know, I found half a dozen songs that would be great to go with that series of lessons.

This spring when I was feeling totally overstretched by too many conflicting demands, if I'd had the time, I would have done it on keeping the Sabbath, or how to remember that "this is the day that God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." There are additional books in the Practicing Our Faith series, and the one that explores time and the practice of keeping Sabbath, is called **Receiving the Day**. How do you use your time to practice your faith in the world? For me, there is always a way to make time to make a joyful noise.

So, what I know, is that I love putting together both the words and the music and that's a way I can minister. I can put together my own spiritual life and I can reach others and move others through singing. I can practice my faith and learn and grow in a lot of other spiritual practices: testimony, discernment, shaping communities, if I "lead the life worthy of the calling to which I have been called."

So, this is a call: a wake-up call, maybe? Would you be willing to explore with me further the practices of our faith together? If so, let's talk about how we might do that. If not, you're thinking, "oh no, not one more thing." No, not one more thing! Just, in the life you're leading, with the gifts you've been given, be mindful of how you do it. Let yourself feel and share your joy and passion with others. In the church I grew up in, this would be the time in the sermon for the altar call, and we'd sing **Just As I Am**. (Sing:) "Just as I am, tho tossed about With many a conflict, many a doubt. Fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come. I come!"

What a great song: Here I am, just as I am, a mess, and I'm coming to give my gifts through the grace given me. God, You're not asking me to be someone else, with someone else's gifts. You're asking me to be me, with my gifts, in the world today.

Through the grace given you, you've been given a gift to build up the whole body of God's people. Give your gifts. Together we can find a way to do it. Know that your faith and your gifts are like these brown sticks: beautiful things will come from them. So, practice your faith. Sing a song alone or with 53,000 others. Give a

hug. Welcome a stranger. Tell someone about something that you're grateful for—that's testimony. And every time you do, guess what? This is not an added burden, rather you get another boost of grace and strength. You do have joy. You do make a difference in God's world and a difference is made in you. May the grace that Christ has given us bless us and all our gifts. Amen.