

If you pay close attention to what we advertise as the preaching schedule, you might remember that the original title of this sermon was *Bait and Switch*. Sorry about that but we're going to talk about faith practices today. I should confess that I have blatantly ripped off my actual sermon title from my colleague, Dr. William Enright, who was senior pastor at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis when I served there.

Bill, who is now a professor of philanthropy at IU identified a problem with how most congregations collect offering. Second is a large and prosperous church, a good bit larger than this one, but surprisingly similar in demographics. In congregations such as Second or Morningside, it is not at all uncommon for congregation members to pay pledges in full at one time or another during the year of the church, or to give their offering by stock transfer at year end, or, like many of our members, to prepay their pledge in January for the whole year, or to give online through the website.

None of these are bad practices. They reflect the reality in which we now live. Our pay doesn't come in cash form in envelopes anymore. We don't put our cash in a jar over the stove and pull out the first tenth to go to the church, if we ever did, and then set aside the portions of cash to pay the milkman and coal delivery truck. The world has changed.

Money moves around the globe at lightening speed through electronic transfers.

Our ways of giving have changed too. It is meet and right so to do. I personally have my bank send a check to Morningside every time I get paid, automatic draft.

I don't even think about it any more.

But what happens when we become two or three steps removed from our financial witness is that we endanger our understanding of giving as a faith practice. That is true of any faith practice, if we lose its meaning.

When Bill preached his sermon using this title, he was fresh from preaching in a local congregation with which Second had an ongoing relationship, Light of the World Christian Church, a largely African-American congregation on the other side of town. As Bill lamented the loss of giving as a faith practice, as an act of worship, he recounted how the Light of the World Congregation collected offering. In his gravelly, thundering voice (I can't do a good imitation) he spoke of how the collection of the offering was the high point of worship, how the ushers began to move about with purpose, moving the plates around the sanctuary to give each worshipper a chance to participate in the giving of the offering, how the music crashed into a crescendo and the congregation leapt to its feet to break into "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow."

Now, Bill does have the preacher's penchant for exaggeration at times, but I suspect there was a grain of truth to his description and his ensuing lament that we mainline churches have lost something of inestimable value in relegating offering to such an irrelevant portion of our worship and waving the plate on by. Bill pressed the question of the chilling conundrum by asking these follow up questions: what do our children think when they see the plate go right under our noses? Do we discuss with them the importance of giving and our commitment to generosity? And what do our visitors think when they see a half-empty offering plate? Those were Bill's questions – and they should be ours.

At no point did Bill suggest that giving through stock transfer, prepayment or scheduled draft is wrong. It's the world we live in. But passing the plate on by? That bothered

him. Perhaps it should bother us. Shouldn't we place *something* in the plate, if for no other reason than to remind ourselves of what we do and who we are?

Now as a codicil, I will tell you that in his sermon, Bill outlined a few correctives that gave heartburn to the rest of the staff... first, he visited the organist and instructed her that offertory anthems should no longer be soft or circumspect, effectively eliminating approximately half her repertoire and perpetually offending the portion of the congregation already convinced she played everything too loudly. Then he instructed the ushers that the plate would be passed to the pastors first in order that we might place something into them before they ever came to the congregation. At that moment, I saw a brief look of panic cross the face of every minister in the chancel, not least of whom being the head-of-staff. There was a lot of uneasy shifting in our ecclesial seats as we attempted to find the break in the folds of our robes to see if we had anything in our wallets! (Joan, our head of staff, corrected this the next week by going to the bank and procuring hundreds of one dollar bills and stashing them throughout the church... in the sacristy, under the cushions in the chancel, behind the paneling in the chapel... everywhere we looked, there were one dollar bills for the offering plate. I can still see her sweeping in the sacristy with a wad of ones distributing them to all the pastors before the service so as not to be caught empty-handed.)

Now, I have issued no such executive orders, and I won't be, because there is no way I'm going to go to my bank over near Cheshire Bridge road and take out a bunch of ones, but I think we need to live with the question of what we do in the face of a half-empty offering plate?

You see, at the heart of Bill's question, at the heart of ours, is the question of *faith practice*.

My fear for us all is we have become or will become too removed from our practice. Not that we're ungenerous, nor uncommitted - just removed.

I assume you've already pledged or you will pledge. It's important, but I won't harp on it. You know its important and you don't need me to remind you. And what's more, I feel sure you have reached your decision about what you will give. And that figure is between you, God, and Randy Parrish.

But let me ask you, have you reached your decision about practice?

What we do does matter.

I know I've told you about what I learned about faith practices regarding giving and spiritual growth... you could preach the sermon yourselves. You know the folks who associate giving with a physical action are the most likely to consider it a spiritual discipline akin to prayer, study and service. Those whose parents or grandparents taught them from an early age not to let the plate pass by, those who still made some practice of giving, find it easiest to associate giving with spiritual growth. But what I haven't talked about was who I used as my sample to learn these things. I used congregation members just like you.

What we do does matter. What we do shapes us and shapes our faith. I still remember the distribution of quarters in the car before Sunday School. And for years, my parents handed the two envelopes, one for the building fund and one for the general fund, to one child or another to place in the plate.

What we are talking about is discipline. What we are talking about is practice.

In our world of quick fixes, instant gratification and fleeting pleasures, discipline is frankly underrepresented. It is underrepresented in the world, but discipline is a part of faith. Think of it: what is the root word of discipline: disciple. If we are serious, if we are committed, if we aren't just playing at following Jesus, then some adjustment, some practice is necessarily part of our faith as we live our lives in witness to the one who has called us.

Moreover, our faith practice extends beyond the offering plate: think of the other chilling conundrums: when we fail to come to worship, we are confronted with the chilling conundrum of the half-empty sanctuary. When we fail to allow our faith to shape our way of doing business, we are confronted with the chilling conundrum of the *unlived faith*.

Whatever our daily practice, when our lives fail to intersect with our faith, when our worship no longer changes *us*, when we become blasé about any aspect of following Jesus, whether it is the offering plate, worship, or basic decency and honest business, we are faced with a conundrum. Have we become *Christians in Name Only* – or even more harshly, what Dr. Kenda Dean terms it - *fake Christians*? That's a troubling question isn't it?

It gets worse. Dr. Dean hypothesizes that our ministries to youth have generated an entire generation who are at risk of worshipping not the transcendent God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but of participating in what she termed “therapeutic moral deism.” And what I find most troubling about any article, any book that tells us what the problem is with today's youth is that most often, it is scape-goating the youth for what is actually ailing us. If we break down the words of her hypothesis, it is easy enough to tease out

her meaning: we use faith as a tool to make us feel better, to enforce our conceptions of morality and to make some vague affirmations about God without actually saying anything. That is not the Gospel.

The calling to be a Christian is a calling to be different

Faith is the nexus of belief with practice. That means thinking first of how your actions, your words, your attitudes shape who you are and how you will interact with those you encounter... just like we promise at baptism.

I read *The Week* magazine, and this past week I was disheartened to read an article that addressed the problem of cyber-bullying. It was related to young people but I've heard stories of adults being harassed and demeaned at the hands of anonymous users. That something as ubiquitous as a computer could be used as a weapon against people in such a different way once again pointed me to the same concern: if our young people have learned that it is acceptable to denigrate anyone for their faith, for their appearance, for their sexual orientation, for x,y, or z, *they haven't learned it in a vacuum*. They have learned it from our talk shows, our political discourse or diatribe, and our failure to differentiate between the two.

Practices matter. Words matter. Discipline matters.

Now, I am circumspect enough to recognize that I started off talking about the offering plate during commitment season and I've worked my way around to suggesting that every aspect of our lives is subject to the ordering of the Gospel if we are to take seriously the call to be disciples. And while I've been pointed, I don't want this to be negative, so let's bring it back in and think of *practice* in terms of our living.

Practices matter. Words matter. Discipline matters.

In his epistolary salutation to the Thessalonian church, Paul gives thanks to God for their practice! He gives thanks to God for their perseverance in the face of persecution, for their works of faith... he writes,

“We always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you and in you in him, according the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹

It may seem odd to preach a sermon on a salutation rather than something meatier, but it's about practicing our faith.

The offering plate is a start. Worship is a start.

I want to suggest a few practices that might prove to be helpful in the formation of our faith. First, however you give the bulk of your giving to Morningside, make it a point not to come to the house of God empty handed. Take time to come prepared. And when you make your offering, even if it is a symbolic one-dollar bill, make it remembering what it represents... remember that it is a physical manifestation of your commitment to be a part of the body of Christ, a contributing part.

Second, make a disciplined commitment to come to worship. I realize I am in danger of carping on this, but that is at the heart of what it means to be a part of a community of faith. When we blow off church for a ballgame – our children, our neighbors, the folks at the ballgame – they all know what was important to us – I know you all are serious about your sports, but what's most important?

¹ 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Finally, and this is the tough one, when you encounter speech or actions that are counter to the gospel, the calling of the Christian is be contrary to speak a word of grace to the problem, no matter how hard it is to do.

These are chilling conundrums: the half-empty offering plate, the half-empty sanctuary, the unlived vocation... they are chilling conundrums because we know how easy they are to slip into.

When I was in Scotland on exchange a few years ago, I accepted numerous social engagements, and I enjoyed them tremendously. My counterpart, Elinor, did the same. I was told after the fact that each time she accepted an invitation, she brought a small gift, a calendar of Scottish scenery, to express her appreciation for having been invited. I, on the other hand, was ignorant of my social faux pas and for the first while, perpetually showed up empty handed, not realizing that I was failing to express proper appreciation for the hospitality that was extended to me. Once I knew, when I returned, I made sure to come with gifts to show that I was aware of how deeply generous their hospitality was to me.

Friends, you know what hospitality is? It's that welcome that we recite week in and week out. We all accept an invitation when we come here.

We are all the beneficiaries of grace upon grace, boundless hospitality spilled out until our cups runneth over.

So, when you come to the house of the Lord, don't come empty handed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.