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FIREWALLS AND USER MANUALS

We all have routines in our lives. Practices that over time have become habit. I am sure that many of you would not start the day without a cup of coffee, or reading the newspaper or listening to one of those early morning television shows. Some of you are disciplined about exercise. As Christians, we are called to practice spiritual disciplines that will ultimately become a way of life and in so doing, we will begin to live out the values of our Christian tradition. These words from the book of Colossians remind us of how we are called to live.

Prayer

The passage of scripture from Colossians invites us to consider that life does not just happen to us. We choose how we will live our days and on those rare occasions when life shifts and throws us an unexpected curve, we still choose how we will respond. Hannah from the reading in 1 Samuel actually practices her faith and in the process begins to change her outlook on life. She acts first and then is changed by her action.

Firewalls are computer software that are supposed to protect your computer from the damaging influence of outside intrusion.

In the United Methodist tradition, we do not separate ourselves from the world, rather we are called to live as disciples of Christ within the world. That is not true for every faith tradition. There are those faith traditions that attempt to avoid the negative influences of the world by stepping away from daily encounters with the larger community. But as Methodists, we follow the understanding of faith shaped by John Wesley who was very much in the world. He preached on street corners and in farmer's fields. Wesley understood that to be an agent for transformation the followers of Christ must be in the world.

Our firewall is faith. And our user guide or manual is lodged within the holy Scripture. Scripture serves first as our user manual for life and ultimately as our firewall against the destructive nature of the influences outside of us and those destructive influences that may lurk within us.

Henri Nouwen writes in the Introduction of the book entitled *Desert Wisdom* these words, "Precisely because our resistance is so great we need the disciplines. We need very concrete ways of living by which we can keep inner space open for God and grow into the new self. ...it is the power of Christ that makes us victorious and it is that power that transforms us into new people. Indeed God re-makes us. That is paradise: new life with God."

Paradise is not off somewhere in the future, paradise is accessible right here, right now. The path toward that paradise is life with Christ. That path includes the spiritual disciplines of the Christian tradition.

“God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we place ourselves where God can bless us.” D. Elton Trueblood

It is in practicing our faith that we open ourselves to blessing. Practicing our faith, just as practicing anything takes time and discipline. This morning, we do not have time to consider all the spiritual disciplines, but we do have time to take the first steps in exploring the spiritual practices of prayer, study, worship and hospitality.

Prayer and study are considered inner disciplines. Worship and celebration, corporate disciplines.

It was Russian mystic Theophan the Recluse who wrote, “To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing with you.” Being a people of intellect, we so want to understand God. It is as if we can sustain our relationship with the Divine with the intellect alone. But our relationship with God is a matter of mind and heart and soul. It is prayer that moves us from our intellect to our heart and soul. Prayer is conversation with God. Prayer can begin as easily as “Hello Jesus”. Prayer can be shaped by words of others or your own. What matters is that we allow for space and time to open ourselves to God.

Just as many of us begin the day with a cup of coffee, so too we can start each day with opening the conversation with God. We begin the day with a prayer and then allow the conversation to continue throughout the day in various settings.

It is imperative that we experience our relationship with God as a combination of gift and intention. God surrounds us with love, but we grow into that love as we intentionally make space and time to center ourselves in God’s presence. What is your prayer life like? How often are you in prayer? How do you pray? Are your prayers memorized from long ago or are your prayers of your own making. Our prayer life does not need to be identical. But however we go about praying, the spiritual discipline of prayer is consistently making the space and creating an ongoing practice of being with God. It may mean scheduling time, actually putting “time to pray” on your calendar. It is a discipline that we may need to remind ourselves to do at first and then over time, it becomes a spiritual practice that is imbedded in your life. Prayer is a discipline that moves you toward an understanding of Christ that includes your mind, your heart and your soul. Hannah prayed and prayed and prayed. She prayed out of her despair and the actual act of prayer changed her heart. I love that line, “her face was no longer downcast.” Through her prayer life she became changed, she became connected to the Divine. Her attitude, her mindset, her heart changed before her circumstances changed. The practice of spiritual disciplines changes us as we open ourselves to God’s profound love for us.

While prayer is devotional, study is analytical. The two may certainly overlap as you actually pray the scriptures. However, to live as disciples of Christ means to be actually acquainted with the teachings of Jesus. I recently read a horrifying statistic from a book by Maureen Corrigan. She has written a book entitled, “*Leave Me Alone, I’m Reading.*” In it she quotes a Wall Street

Journal article that stated some 59 percent of Americans don't own a single book. "Not a cookbook or even the Bible" writes Corrigan.

Imagine that. More than 75 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians but 59 percent of Americans don't own a book, don't own a Bible.

Most of us I would presume own a Bible, but for many it is a book that has taken on the life of a "coffee table book". One of those books that looks nice on display but is not regularly opened and used.

The spiritual disciplines take intention. I hope that you will choose a time this fall in addition to your own personal study to join the Bible study on Monday mornings, or a study of Romans on Wednesday evenings or one of the studies we now have on Sunday morning or one of the two new studies to begin on Sunday mornings in September. Like prayer, the study of scripture begins as a discipline but over time it becomes a pattern that you reach for on a regular basis. It shapes us in a positive way. It becomes not burden, or obligation, but delight and blessing.

Two of the corporate spiritual disciplines include worship and hospitality. For me they are intertwined. Worship is hospitality. Worship is being open to the presence of God and open to the presence of each other. By God's grace, we are the body of Christ. We are more than friend, we are more than extended family, we are agents for the Divine. Early Christians practiced their faith together offering their praise to God through worship, reading scripture, singing hymns, gathering to embrace the spirit of God and allowing God's spirit to inspire their living. Within the act of worship, they took steps to clothe themselves in compassion, gentleness, humility, patience and forgiveness. It took practice on the part of the new converts to Christianity in the early church and it continues to take practice on our part. If you worship occasionally, move toward once a month. If you worship on average of once a month, commit to yourself and God to worship twice a month. If you worship every week, but find that it is more a practice of the head than the heart and soul, then come to this sacred space with a different expectation. Take the next step in your practice of worship. In so doing, we open ourselves to experience God and to each other. As we become increasingly open we find that we grow not only in love relationship with God, but also we become more open to others. In that ancient church, that openness expressed itself in hospitality: welcoming the stranger, feeding the poor, caring for children who were orphaned, visiting prisoners and much more. The "others" of the world became not an obligation or an imposition, but rather a brother or a sister in need of compassion and care.

The practice of spiritual disciplines moves us from a surface relationship to a deep, meaningful life with Christ. Ultimately the disciplines are not acts to add to life, but rather a way of seeing, a way of thinking and feeling and a way of living.

In a beautiful little book by Lauren F. Winner entitled, *Mudhouse/Sabbath*, Winner writes of her first trip with her boyfriend to meet his family. She tells of going to church with the family. Winner is seated next to her boyfriend's grandfather who suffered with senility. She writes, "As it turned out, . . . this seating arrangement turned out to be the best thing ever. I would say that God Himself had a hand in arranging the seating. Because sitting next to him I could see (and

hear) that Dr. Gatewood, who might not even remember how to count to ten, remembered how to pray. These words of prayer are among the most basic words Dr. Gatewood knows. When he has forgotten everything else, those words he will have. Those words have formed his heart, and – regardless of what he feels or remembers on any particular morning—they continue to form his heart still.”

We choose how we will shape our thoughts, our heart, our soul. It takes practice to live as a person of compassion. It takes practice to be kind. It takes practice to be gentle. In the practice itself we open ourselves to a love that will indeed change us. In the practice we become made new. In the practice we shape a life that will sustain us even if we forget the numbers in our address, the way to the grocery and the names of children. Even then, deep within we will carry the spiritual disciplines we have practiced and they will no longer be just acts, but a way of life.

Back in June I was leaving the church one evening and a young couple caught my eye. They were in the side parking lot and they were dancing. They were practicing in the parking lot. She was making sure that she was standing tall and her arms were in the proper position. Together, she and the young man were working on the steps to the dance. I did not want interrupt, but I could not help but watch for a minute. There they were, practicing their dancing in the parking lot. I imagine that they were practicing for their first dance at their wedding. I don't know for sure, but that is what seemed to make sense to me.

For all our user guides and firewalls, for all our need to control and information, all we really need to transform our living are the spiritual disciplines of our faith, most especially, prayer, study, worship, and hospitality. As a community of faith, I pray that Meridian Street is known as a place where we practice our faith openly and where we dance in the spirit of God. May our practice turn to joy and our joy take us to a place of blessing.

Note: At the conclusion of the service, the congregation was provided with blank cards and invited to covenant with God to strengthen an already existing spiritual discipline or add a spiritual discipline in their lives. They were asked to make a note of that discipline on the card and take it with them as a reminder.