

4 Pentecost Sunday Yr C, 3/07/2022  
Gal 6:1-10  
Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“Practicing Christian Faith”

All of you, most likely are familiar with the old saying: “Practice makes perfect.” Of course, that is not completely true, since no human being is perfect, with the exception of Jesus. However, practice does make us as perfect as we can be, given our imperfect, sinful state of being. If someone wants to be a professional musician, one has to practice pretty much every day, and for many musicians, daily practice consists of several hours. The same is true for almost every type of vocation, every type of work—one must practice in order to do one’s work well.

In today’s second lesson, the apostle Paul is more or less saying the same thing. He starts off in verses one to three by stating that no one is perfect, we all make mistakes, we all sin. Sometimes our mistakes, our sins are not intentional and pre-meditated, they happen because of our imperfect human nature. Paul, in his pastoral way, instructs the Galatians and us not to be too proud and arrogant, thinking we’re better and holier than those who fall into sins and make mistakes. No! Paul says rather that we are to deal with others with a humble attitude, realizing we too could, and at times do, make the same mistakes and commit the same sins as other Christians. Therefore, Paul counsels the Galatians and us to practice one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, namely gentleness. Gentleness involves obeying God’s will, being open-minded and open-hearted in order to learn from those who teach, and being considerate of others.

When I served as a chaplain, one of the saddest things that happened to a number of the dementia residents was that family members, and sometimes even spouses neglected to come and spend time with their loved one. Many of the residents were lonely and felt abandoned, judged and rejected. So I would make an effort to spend time with them. I would encourage them to play percussion instruments and we would sing familiar hymns. I would also share gospel stories with them, and remind them of how much Jesus loved them and was always with them. They felt safe and content with my gentle presence, as I bore their burdens with them.

The apostle Paul goes on in verses four and five to emphasise that Christians should not compare themselves and their work with others—probably by viewing others’ work in negative and critical ways and being overly proud and boastful about one’s own work. In short, Paul is saying: “Don’t make others look bad in order to make yourself look good. If you’re doing the best you can, you will be carrying your own load, just as others are doing the best they can, and are carrying their own load.”

These verses also compliment Paul’s practical wisdom in verses six to ten. In short, what Paul is saying in these verses is similar to Jesus’s teaching of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” If we value what we have been taught, we shall want to share that with our teachers, and be grateful for their influence in our lives. If we reap what we sow, we shall be blessed, and others shall benefit from our good deeds, the community of faith shall be blessed. That reminds me of the following story, told by the Rev. Dr. Keith Wagner.

When Rev. Dr. Wagner was a student at Otterbein College he met an elderly couple by the name of Henry and Martha. They weren’t teachers, or coaches or school administrators. Henry worked for the college service department and Martha was a cook at the campus dining hall. Henry and Martha opened their home to students who couldn’t afford housing. They sometimes had as many as four students living on the second floor of their little home on Center Street. They included them in meals, helped them get jobs and they became surrogate parents. Henry and Martha were true servants.

Henry and Martha had tremendous impact on Rev. Dr. Wagner’s life. They taught him about being a servant. They were popular, not because they were rich or famous but because of the way they shared what they had and how they welcomed people into their lives. They had more influence on Rev. Dr. Wagner than any teacher, or coach or any famous person. He will never forget their warmth, pragmatism, and their openness to share their gifts.

Rev. Dr. Wagner, reflecting on his ministry says: My most enjoyable ministry was not in the church. Rather it was my opportunity to teach at a two-year college. Teaching and helping students was very rewarding. Unfortunately I became hearing impaired and I had to retire from teaching. It was a humbling experience. But thanks to my loving wife, I finally took her advice and got hearing aids.

Most everyone knows that Alexander Graham Bell was the inventor of the telephone. In 1877 at Lyceum Hall in Salem, Massachusetts, he gave a lecture at the Essex Institute. During the lecture Bell demonstrated his device as those gathered heard the voice of Thomas Watson who was 18 miles away in Boston. The Boston Globe later reported that Bell's invention was "an unqualified success."

But, how many know the rest of the story? Bell's father, Alexander Melville Bell, worked in the field of speech, especially the treatment of speech impediments. When he married Eliza Symonds, who was partially deaf, he became involved in the field of deaf. Growing up, his son, Alexander Graham Bell, would help translate sermons to his mother by pronouncing words distinctly to her.

He (Alexander Graham Bell) went on to teach at schools for deaf children in Scotland and the United States. He also devoted his studies and research in studying sound and creating devices to aid the deaf. Like his father, Bell married Mabel Hubbard who was also deaf.

Bell may have succeeded in inventing the telephone but his whole life was dedicated to helping the deaf. Like the others I have described, it was Bell's life as a servant that evolved into greatness.<sup>1</sup>

Neurobiological research indicates that the dopamine secreted in spiritual experience makes us more sociable (Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman, *Why We Believe What We Believe*, p.267). In faith, good works just seem to happen. Paul also makes clear that the good we do is the work of the Holy Spirit, the sowing of the Spirit.

Paul urges that we not grow weary in doing right (v.9). In fact, again modern neurobiology suggests that spirituality provides the energy we need. It seems that the brain chemical dopamine secreted in spiritual exercises and sociality (Dean Hamer, *The God Gene*, pp.72ff.) is related to enhanced energy (Daniel Amen, *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*, p.81). Live faithfully in Christian freedom, and you won't grow weary.

I leave you with Eugene Peterson's rendering of verses nine and ten in *The Message*: So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith. May we continue to practice our faith, for practice makes us the best we can be, thanks to God's love and grace! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Modified slightly from: Keith Wagner, "Those who Reap what they Sow are Servants," at: <<https://www.sermonsuite.com/storyshare/those-who-reap-what-they-sow-are-servants>>.

