

*Ephesians 4: 25-5:2*

*John 6: 35, 41-51*

Can you recall a time when you felt an overwhelming sense of belonging? A feeling like you were a part of something beyond you? That you were a member connected to others? Have you ever had this sense in a place where you were among strangers?

My wife Emma and I had an experience like this when we were moving to Louisville, Kentucky. Since we are both pastors and have never served in the same church, we are rarely together on Sunday mornings. In our transition we had the gift of a Sunday together. Growing up, it was a tradition in Emma's family to go out for donuts for breakfast before church. And since we don't often have the chance to keep the tradition, we did on that special Sunday.

We were told to go to a place called Nord's Bakery right in the center of the city. Known for many things, a fan favorite is their maple bacon éclair. If Jesus offered an éclair of life, it would taste like that. When we saw the line out the door and going down the street, we knew it was good. As we waited, the man in front of us started chatting. We told him we were new to town, that we were pastors; that we'd be moving here soon.

We neared the register to place our order, and the man we were talking to asked us to order and he told the staff our breakfast was on him. The woman at the register asked, *What's the occasion?* The man told her we were new to town and never been to Nord's Bakery before.

*Well, welcome to Louisville and welcome to Nord's. A great way to start a Sunday.* The woman placed a coffee, a tea, and a small bag with our two donuts on the counter. We thanked our new neighbor for his generosity, and we went to receive our breakfast and she said, hang on now, we're not done yet. One of the other staff was making up a larger bag for us that she handed with our dainty breakfast. She said, smiling, *if you are going to be a neighbor, there are a lot of donuts you need to try. This should get you started.*

We sat down and unpacked about a dozen different donuts. More than we could eat. We gave some to others seated near us and it was more than we could share. It was a feast of welcome. It was an act of a generosity that offered something sacred.

It was clear that it was not the first time the bakery had overwhelmed a customer with generosity. It was intentional. It was their practice. It was a way of life, a way to welcome; a way to make real a world that they had a vision for. It just happens they did it with donuts.

When Jesus said, I am the bread of life, it is clear that this bread is much more than ordinary food. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, Jesus said. Whoever comes to me will never thirst. Jesus says, whoever eats of this bread will live forever. Jesus creates this reality, but God didn't make it only for waiting. We are meant to live as members of the body of Christ, members of one another. Imitating God means finding ways to share the bread of life together.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Paul is teaching the church in Ephesus that if they are to truly belong to God and to one another, they will imitate the kindness, compassion, and forgiveness of God. It is wisdom that can still shape a faithful life.

What Paul offered the church, as they shaped their lives around Jesus, was a way to live. In a sense, what Paul offered, was a rule of life.

A rule of life is an articulation of values, practices, and virtues that a faith community uses intentionally to guide their life together as they seek to be the body of Christ; as they seek to belong to God and to one another.

One of the earliest and perhaps the most well-known rules of life is the Rule of Saint Benedict. A monk, Benedict, wrote a rule that has guided monastic communities for 1500 years. It provides guidance on everything from how to select leaders and how a monastic community would govern itself, to how to behave when traveling or settling disputes, or even on more specific matters like daily chores, preparing meals, and how to dress, all with a vision to build up a community in its faith, prayer, and worship together, so that God's vision for the world may be lived through them, which is that they would belong to God and to one another.

Using a rule of life as guide can help shape holy lives. And while it has been most common among monastic communities, it has become a more common practice of churches and individuals as they seek to intentionally live their faith.

A very wise woman named Joan Chittister says that a rule of life prepares a person to seek wise direction which is done *by living in community, trusting its elders, its wise, its holy ones, its simple ones—[which] is central to personal growth.*<sup>1</sup>

The Iona Community in Scotland has a Rule of Life. Which I know is a community that is well known to some in this congregation. They describe their rule of life as something that deepens their relationship with God and their relationships with one another. One member of the Iona Community described living by the rule as *a way*

---

<sup>1</sup> Wisdom Distilled from the Daily, Joan Chittister, p. 19.

*of enabling us to live our understanding of Jesus Christ and to do so as a body, made, unmade, and remade in and through the touch of the lives of others who share in its common keeping.<sup>2</sup>*

A rule of life helps us to be intentional about imitating Christ. When we are intentional, we find the life of Christ rising among us. When we are intentional we will find that, as the church, we are shaping holy lives, including our own. Paul suggests to the church some ways to be members of one another...

Be yourself with one another, put away falsehood. Speak the truth to neighbors. Anger can be appropriate, but do not hold on to anger. Commit to honest work and there is no place for theft. Be generous when one in the community has needs. Speak words and language that build one another up. Be ready to speak grace and give grace. Forgive. It may be hard. But forgive. Let yourselves be forgiven. It may be hard, but be forgiven. Imitate God; for God has offered people these things first. Live in love. Live as Christ loves. For Christ loves you as Christ loves all.

Paul is not offering do's and don'ts. It requires more than checking these off for a community to live its calling as the body of Christ. If the church is to imitate God, then the church is seeking to let God shape our lives to be part of the body of Christ. And this, we know, is not always easy. Paul's rule of life requires living sacrificially, with humility, seeking wholeness.

A rule of life is a formal practice of what we do informally. And though it finds guidance from scripture and tradition, a rule of life reflects the community that uses it to shape their life and faith. So what else belongs in this rule of life. What other values, practices, and virtues would you want to guide you to imitate Christ? What would help shape you to live as the body of Christ?

Would you intentionally practice Sabbath and holy rest? Maybe healing practices, not just the medical kind, but those that help us find peace with the relationships or our bodies are not well. Could wonder open us through arts, music, and other gifts to find God among us in marvelous ways? What about passionate living? What if people supported one another to live life to the fullest? Paul offers a framework to imitate Christ and there are many ways to continue to build one another up to be the body of Christ.

I'll close with one I've added to my own life in the last year. Part of my rule of life is that people can do hard things. I have two daughters who are six and three. They have been learning to swim. And learning to swim can

---

<sup>2</sup> Living by the Rule, Kathy Galloway, p. 22-23.

be hard. Deep water can be scary. When they come to me expressing their anxiety or frustration or fear, I find myself say, yes, it is scary, yes it is a challenge, yes it is hard... but you can do hard things. And now I find myself, when I am challenged, when I am afraid, when I face hard circumstances, I am telling myself what I have been saying to them. You can do hard things. When it is hard to be intentional, when it is hard to build up the body of Christ, when it is hard to know what is next –church – remember you can do hard things.

May you know the love of God that brings life. May you know life in Christ that shapes holy lives. May you know wisdom from the Spirit to guide you. Amen.

© 2021 Matthew Nickel