

[BLANK] - I hope and pray that you got through the storm OK; it looks like cloudy weather will be with us for a while longer, before Spring begins to feel real. But while we wait for the budding of trees and the daffodils, in Florida, right now, there are definite signs and sounds of Spring. [BAT CRACK & BAG] The crack of a bat. The buzz of fans in the warm sun. Coaches running their players through drills. Spring training has begun! It is a time of practice; practice and hope working together to create a new season of dreams. [BLANK]

In our season of Lent, the forty weekdays and Saturdays between Ash Wednesday and Easter, we, too, are preparing hopefully a new season of dreams. We have reflected this Lent so far on returning to God, purifying our hearts for God, and committing our hearts to God. Just as baseball players return to their teams, focus their minds and hearts on the new season, and commit to what is required to succeed on their team, the “beginning to begin” phase to our Lenten journey now turns to actual practice. Now we look at what we are really doing as disciples of Christ for God’s mission of love, hope, and transformation. There is more than a World Series trophy on the line, after all. There is the future of our lives, our souls, and God’s world at stake. Practicing our faith matters, in a big way, for now, and for God’s future. Would you pray with me, please. [PRAYER]

In a few months, you can be sure that somewhere in the major leagues of baseball, some ball player is going to mess up a play, and some baseball announcer is going to say, “You know, those are plays that you’re supposed to practice in Spring training!” It isn’t fun when your failure to practice gets noticed so publicly.

Yet that’s what happens with us every day. We all try to live up to our faith commitments as best we can, but the world, and God, know when we’ve bobbled the plays that we need to practice in our faith lives. The only question is, are we willing to practice the things what will help our faith to grow in God’s ways?

Practicing faith is not just a matter of doing the same things over and over again. Practicing faith means opening ourselves up to a wide range of experiences, and ways of learning about God. Some of these ways of learning will feel familiar, and comfortable, like coming to worship, or helping to put together a fund-raising dinner. Others will feel a bit out of our comfort zone, not quite matched up with what some people call our “learning styles.” Some will require us to move muscles. Some will require us to meet and work with people who we’re not used to. Some will require us to find new courage to say and do new things. And some will require us to get comfortable with scripture, the revelation of God’s story, with all the insights that we need to find salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

Like baseball players in their Spring training camps, if we don’t move out of our comfort zones, we don’t develop the spiritual strengths that will help us to move forward as God’s people in Christ. Just like a baseball pitcher needs not only to pitch but also to help with plays at first base, we need to practice many things that help to make the difference for God’s hopes in the world. When there is a friend or family member in need of a word of hope from our faith, or a meaningful prayer, how can we offer them these things if we haven’t practiced how to do them? Or, when we need to find words of hope in the Bible,

will be at least have an idea of how to find them, or will we wind up like Homer Simpson: [VIDEO CLIP] When the game of life is on the line, we need to be at least generally ready for anything that life throws at us. Life doesn't guarantee us that we'll get to do only what makes us comfortable. We need to live life on life's own terms. And so, we need to be ready to respond to life with the hope of faith in as many ways as possible.

In John's gospel today, we see what had happened to the people of Israel when their faith had slipped into way too comfortable practices. In the Temple of Jerusalem, where the people of Israel came to pray and to worship God, fund-raising had become the focus of faith, rather than the fruits of faith. The courtyard of the Temple, which was supposed to be a place of spiritual preparation for the Temple, had turned into a marketplace, choked with vendors selling animals for sacrifices at the Temple, and money-changers, making a big profit trading everyday coins for the pure silver coins that the Temple demanded for donations. It was a mess that had very little to do with helping people to have hearts committed to their faith.

This was something that had not happened overnight. It was a gradual corruption in the faith of Israel, to the point that Israelites cared more about selfishness than being children of the living God. As they started to hate the pure ways of God in their hearts, this sinful corruption was handed down from one generation to the next, from parents, to children, to grandchildren and great-grandchildren. As the voice of the living God reminds us, in today's reading of the Ten Commandments from Exodus, God notices when one generation fails to help the next generation to be godly. God judges it. And in Jerusalem's Temple, the judge had finally appeared - Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Son of Man. Jesus made no bones about what God's judgment was. The judgment of Jesus was that the corruption had to leave. Immediately. Jesus threw out the sinful merchants and money-changers, and the temple was open again for people who were seeking the pure light and hope of the living God.

[RETURN] Return. Return to God for healing and hope. [PURIFY] Purify. Purify your hearts and your lives for God. [COMMIT] Commit. Commit your will and your life to the God who loves you more than you can ever imagine, [PRACTICE] And practice, practice everything it takes to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your mind, and all your strength, and to love everyone as you would have them love you. This is the essence of God's Ten Commandments, the essence that Jesus brought to us as the way of God in living flesh. [BLANK]

As Methodists, we are meant to practice a living faith. [BIBLE] We read and discuss and pray over the Bible, not to be experts in the Bible, but to find and practice the living faith that saves us from sin and death. [WORSHIP] We come to worship not just to feel good and to chat over coffee, but to practice being part of the family of God, drawing close to God and one another, the way that we hope that we do once we walk out of this church. [MISSION] We practice serving God through missions, not just to do things that we feel good doing, but to stretch our spiritual muscles, drawing close to different kinds of people to feel God's hope together, for generations to come. [PRAYERS] And we practice

bringing God's living word to people in prayers, and in witnessing to our faith, not as a show of pride or power, but as an expression of God's hope coming into the world, a sign of God's hope to come. [BLANK]

These are the core practices of a living Christian faith that we all must be ready to cover at some point or another in our faith life. And just like an outfielder is not likely to be called on to be a pitcher very often in a baseball game, not everyone is going to be ready to practice each of them equally. We will all have our areas of strengths, and areas that we practice not to be the strongest person doing them, but to be ready to contribute as much as we can to the success of our church as a community of living faith.

I invite you all to consider how you can stretch ALL of your spiritual muscles this year to find a more balanced way to practice your faith. If you're a sometimes show at worship, try making it an all the time practice. If you've never studied the Bible, or a book like our Three Simple Rules, or a devotional reader, give it a try. We have faith groups that will make it easy and fun to do, as we build up a culture of living faith in your life. If you've never tried a mission or service project, give it a shot, and bring a friend. If you're not much for praying or witnessing, and you've committed to practicing these other Christian disciplines, my guess is that you'll be praying and witnessing soon enough. Who knows, you just might find that living faith that we will all need in our lives!

[TROPHY] Come this fall, there will be one baseball team who will be handed a World Series trophy. I am sure that it will be a talented team, an energetic team, a team that had the strength to endure. But most of all, I am sure that it will be a team that practiced, and practiced hard, in every way that they could, to ensure their success as a team, so that they could rejoice in a great victory. I hope and pray that we will all endure in practicing a living faith together, a faith that will bring us, and the world, a life of hope, joy, and everlasting peace, that is the victory of living faith. Play ball! Amen.[BLANK]