



Dr. James C. Howell eShape Of The Christian Life

eShape of the Christian Life 57 - Improvisation

"In the first book, I have dealt with all Jesus began to do and teach, until the day he was taken up, after giving commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles" (Acts 1:1).

The Shape of the Christian Life is this: Jesus began to live a certain way, and we continue what he began. The Gospel of Luke told what Jesus did; then the same author wrote Acts, book two, reporting how those who loved him continued what he started - and we find our place in this same dramatic sequel.

But what exactly are we supposed to do? How do I continue what Jesus did today? Imagine that a long-lost play by Shakespeare has been discovered - but the final act is missing! Are the actors totally lost? or would there be enough clues in the early scenes to tip them off on how to act, how to continue the story, even without explicit directions? Sam Wells, the new Dean of the Duke Chapel, suggests that the Christian life is a kind of "improvisation." Well-trained actors learn their characters so well that they can improvise together, not being original or innovative, but consistent, faithful to the beginning.

God does not seem to have supplied us with complete instructions for what to do this afternoon or tomorrow. We have to improvise - but not randomly! We can live out what is unscripted because we know what has been scripted. The Bible is a training school; our regular worship is a rehearsal. Christians make mistakes! but like actors in rehearsal, the mistakes become opportunities to learn, to grow, to improve.

Too much of our praying happens when we are in dire straits; too often we think of Christian ethics as making a hard decision in a crisis. But if our series has taught us anything, it is that our goal is to be near Jesus all the time, that "wherever I am, O Lord, you are loved" (Thomas Merton). The Duke of Wellington declared that "the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton" - meaning the soldiers were so well-trained that quite naturally they fought nobly and ably when the actual battle raged. "Ethics is not about being clever in a crisis but about forming a character that does not realize it has been in a crisis until the 'crisis' is over" (Wells).

So then, how will we live the Christian life? We don't know just yet. So we will improvise, and in a way that will strike onlookers as fitting, given the beginning of the drama, given the way God has acted in history, given the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, given the great examples of saints who have gone before us. Despite our foibles and sin, God trusts us, and gives us immense responsibility. "Response-ability": God has made us able to respond to God's grace. So we listen to Scripture, sing hymns, pray, discuss, give money, serve at the shelter, knowing that we are being shaped to respond appropriately, faithfully, courageously to the grace of God - and that wherever we find ourselves on the stage of life, in that place God will be loved in a new way that is really the old way.

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eShape of the Christian Life 56 - Body

"For you are the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27).

Unimpressed by rumors that Jesus was raised, Thomas announced, "Unless I see his hands, and touch the mark of the nails, I will not believe" (John 20:25). Very modern this Thomas, as cynical as the average 21st century person: faith is about me, my ideas of what's true and what isn't. But how very lonely! Faith is about us, not me; believing is something we do together. We need each other.

Yet like Thomas, people still say "Show me the hands!" Teresa of Avila wrote, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours... Yours are the hands with which He is to bless now." The world wonders: is this faith

real? or is it just a mind game? How are we Jesus' hands? With his hands, Jesus prayed, fed, read Scripture, touched the untouchables, healed, served.

And he joined hands! No one of us by ourselves can be the hands of Christ. Solo, I'm not up to the task, and I would embarrass myself and Christ. When we are saved, it is to find our place in the Body of Christ. We are different, not all alike, and we can't be, shouldn't be. In society, people typically group up with people just like themselves. But in Church, we deliberately join hands with people who are different, a complementary mix of skills, passions, backgrounds, wounds, dreams - and together we can become the answer to disbelief. Thomas is walking around our cities today, and he will never believe until he sees the hands of Christ.

When we join the Church, we are called "members." To be a "member" is not the surrender of our individuality, but rather is the only true exercise of our freedom. For Paul, you are really yourself only in community. We are not like identically dressed and trained soldiers shoulder to shoulder. We are more like a family, quirky, bound together profoundly, and not like interchangeable parts; you cannot subtract or add a family member without the whole family being totally altered.

There is a unity, which isn't our ability to network: we are one because of Jesus, and the dazzling surprise of the Spirit. When we become those hands of Christ, cynics may move forward with Thomas, who saw the hands, believed - and became part of the hands of Christ himself. And we discover our own destiny as our Christian life together takes shape.

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eShape of the Christian Life 54 - Waiting

"For God alone my soul waits" (Psalm 62:1).

The life of faith always has a dissatisfaction about it, a sense of incompleteness. The hymn, "Fill my cup, Lord," says "Feed me 'til I want no more," as if faith is akin to the way we slide back in the easy chair after a sumptuous Thanksgiving feast. But God has wired us always to want more. Faith is yearning, not possession. And so the emptiness we experience is just the way it is. In fact, the hollowness is God's precious gift to us, to keep us longing for God. We relate to Jesus the way an animal sniffs the air trying to find water (Psalm 42:1), the way a beggar pleads for bread, the way a lover sings to the beloved long before they have come together physically. The nagging hankering we feel inside is God's voice, calling us home, keeping us "restless until we find rest in God" (St. Augustine).

The Shape of the Christian Life is one of waiting. In our society, we hate waiting. We want to keep moving, we want it to happen now, we want to seize control. But "those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:31). My moving may plunge me into disaster; only God's moving matters. What happens "now" is gone by the next time I say "now." Our true life of togetherness with God is "now" only in God's good future. When I am in control, I get a lot of me; to let God be in control, I have to wait, to look and see, to expect something far greater than me.

Think about that awful day between Jesus' death on Good Friday and Easter morning. Nothing happened that numb Saturday. Why didn't God just raise Jesus up immediately? The moment they sealed the tomb, God could have crushed the sealers and rolled the stone right back where it came from. But God waited. God did nothing for a time. Perhaps God knew we would experience life, and loss, and love in just this way. We have hope - but the waiting can be a silent nothing. We do not get what we long for right now. We can't hurry up the resurrection. We live in between.

So dissatisfaction isn't the enemy, but a message from God. And our waiting is not merely passive, or doing nothing. The farmer knows the seed is in the ground, and must wait for the corn to ripen. In the meantime he pulls a few weeds, digs out a few rocks; he acts, in fact, out of conviction of what is to come, in preparation of what surely will be. The mother-to-be feels barely a stirring inside; she cannot - she would not! - rush the baby prematurely. She waits, yet actively, eating well, taking a walk, painting the nursery. We are waiting for the coming of God, for the dawning of eternity. We do not possess this now; we wait. And we wait actively, preparing, hoping, watching for signs, trusting the promise. Easter is coming.

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eShape of the Christian Life 53 - Foolishness

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Corinthians 1:18, 25).

The focal point of Christianity is something grotesque, humiliating, something from which the polite should avert their gaze: the cross, the most unjust application of the death penalty in history, the most abysmal ugliness. Jewelry manufacturers and sculptors have dressed up the cross and made it pretty, smooth, shiny, attractive, even expensive. But somehow the Shape of the Christian Life always assumes the misshapen form of Jesus on the cross.

Olive wood cannot be planed into smooth boards very easily; it bends and twists, with knots. The shaft of wood on which Jesus died would have been gnarled - and I imagine that gnarled cross in the haunting shape of a question mark. The fate of Jesus is God's eternal question about our priorities, our quests, our values. God's way appears as sheer foolishness in the eyes of the world - and so we had best learn to stand on our heads and re-value everything in light of the God who manifested his power, not by blitzing foes with iron might, but by letting misled soldiers batter his own flesh. In God's kingdom, up is down, small is big, weak is strong, darkness is light, even death is life.

Hidden in the awful suffering of Jesus is the unlimited power, the immense love of God. If so, there is power in weakness. So we do not hide our own weakness; instead, we expect weakness to be the place God shows up most powerfully - and not to fix the weakness, but to live there brilliantly. Hemingway wrote, "The world breaks everyone, and then some become strong in the broken places." The Shape of the Christian Life is that of a broken vessel; the cracks let the light in, they let the treasure out.

The Cross insists that we ask, Am I out of sync with this world? Do I fit in too snugly? Am I keeping some frighteningly safe distance from the Cross? If I stick near the Cross, I feel God's heart. I sympathize with all who suffer. I overhear Jesus' words from the cross. I forgive those who do not know what they are doing. I thirst. I cry out in agony toward a God who feels absent but is never so far as to be unable to hear my cry. I commend my Spirit into God's hands. Death is grievous, but has no ultimate power over me.

For me, it is helpful to hang crosses (or better, crucifixes) in my office, in my room, so that wherever I am I will be reminded of the foolishness of God which is wiser than my brainiest self, of the outpouring of God's love for me and for the next person. We may pray together with St. Francis, "My Lord Jesus Christ, Two graces I ask of you before I die: the first is that in my life I may feel, in my soul and body, as far as possible, that sorrow which you, tender Jesus, underwent in the hour of your most bitter passion; the second is that I may feel in my heart, as far as possible, the abundance of love with which you, son of God, were inflamed, so as willingly to undergo such a great passion for us sinners."

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eShape of the Christian Life 52 - Astound Them

"Have this mind, which is yours in Christ Jesus... who took the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:5).

At the Last Supper, Jesus could have allowed the disciples to gather around him, wash his feet, demonstrate their obsequious loyalty to their great teacher - but instead Jesus bent humbly in the form of the servant. The Shape of the Christian Life always and everywhere assumes this posture. We go out of our way to show deference to others, because we want to mimic Jesus, and to glorify God.

In a sermon preached way back in the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom instructed his congregation on how to win over unbelievers: "Let us astound them by our way of life. This is the unanswerable argument. Though we give ten thousand precepts in words, if we do not exhibit a far better life, we gain nothing. It is not what is said that draws their

attention, but what we do. Let us win them therefore by our life."

Contrary to the mistake many Christians make, we do not shun anyone, we do not sit in judgment on anyone. We befriend, we join hands, we grab towel and basin and humbly serve. How simple: Small gestures! or what Therese of Lisieux called "The Little Way." The closer I am to Jesus, the more my life is a compilation of small acts of humble service.

At the outset of this email series, we suggested that it is helpful to pray with Thomas Merton: "Let this be my only consolation, that wherever I am, You, my Lord, are loved." A small gesture from me, or from you, may be the only consolation a passerby (or a coworker, or family member, or the clerk at the store) will get today. And when we love Jesus, as manifested in any small gesture of humble service to another person Jesus loves, then we really do "astound them by our way of life."

Notice how this small plan is really enormous. Each time I take up towel and basin in whatever shape and serve another person, I am part of something huge, beyond my imagining. The architect Daniel Burnham wrote, "Make no small plans. They have no magic to stir the blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble plan will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty. Think big."

Jesus thought big, and though his words were compelling, his actions were unanswerable, alluring, astounding, small yet powerful, humble yet magnificently beautiful. And wherever I am, I want that Jesus to be loved, and those he loves to be astounded.

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eShape of the Christian Life 51 - Learning

"Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:10).

Christians never, ever graduate. The New Testament calls Jesus' followers "disciples," a word that means students, learners. We never master the material - for our subject matter is God, so unfathomably massive and yet tenderly compassionate that our entire lifetime can be spent uncovering ever finer jewels in the mine of theology.

Faith is not a scintillating emotion; faith has a content, it has antiquity about it. And yet the content is fresh, alive, dynamic. In Pasolini's film, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Jesus is always on the move, walking briskly, teaching on the way, the disciples breathlessly trying to keep up with him. Christian learning happens not merely in the stillness of a classroom, but also out in the world. The Bible can indeed be studied around a table upstairs in the church building with people like yourself; but the Bible is perhaps more profoundly explored out in the world, at a homeless shelter, reading with people who are different, trying out what the Bible is talking about in risky practice.

The Shape of the Christian Life is one of reading, and re-reading, debate, conversation, listening, reconsidering, an unquenchable curiosity. We cherish the rich satisfaction of whatever we may know about God, and the delight is that there is always more. Spiritual dullards that we are, we have always - always! - misunderstood a few things about God, even when we have prematurely felt doggedly certain. Humbly, I have to admit that my curved-in, sinful nature clouds my vision of God, and I am far too swift to trot out my pet biases about the world and baptize them as being of God - and so I never stop letting myself be questioned by God, by a re-reading of the Scriptures, and by friends, mentors, teachers, and preachers who love me by refining my knowledge.

And even when we have understood the things of God in our heads, we have such a long way to go in letting what we know take on reality. I can harbor nifty ideas about love, or forgiveness, or justice - but if I stay after class and ask the teacher for more, and return later in the day for the lab session, the practicum, then my ideas are tested, refined, embodied. I do not merely think about love; I love. I do not merely speculate about forgiveness; I forgive. I do not dream of justice; I embark on a crusade for justice - and I grab a hand, another hand, and take a few of my fellow students with me.

Notice that even as Ephesians 5:10 doesn't say "Try to learn what is pleasing to yourself," Paul also doesn't say "You must learn what is pleasing to the Lord." We try. Like toddlers learning to crawl, like a fledgling pianist struggling with scales, like a teenager groping after a foreign language, we fail, then the light comes on and we succeed, then we flail a bit, then we step forward again. We try. And we try best when we try together to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

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eShape of the Christian Life 50 - Prayer and Worship

"True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks them" (John 4:23).

Early in this series (which is in its final 2 weeks now...) we compared the Christian life to a regimen of exercise. Whatever rush of feeling or good intentions we may have about God and a changed life will dissipate into frustration if we do not build the things of God into the structure of daily life - things like prayer, and more than a rushed 37 seconds when we happen to remember... Block out time! Show God (and yourself) you are serious.

Prayer is like breathing. Prayer changes things, especially us. Prayer isn't getting our chaotic lives under control, but yielding control to God. To let our lives be shaped by God we must "learn to pray." Bonhoeffer wrote, "It is a dangerous error, surely very widespread among Christians, to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments - all of which the heart can do by itself - with prayer. Prayer does not mean simply to pour out one's heart. It means rather to find the way to God and to speak with him, whether the heart is full or empty."

Think about children: they do not just know how to talk. The child learns to speak because a mother speaks to him; she learns the speech of her father. So it is as we learn to pray. And the child must be shaped and molded in ways that may not suit the child's immediate desires. We do not want prayer to shrivel up into nothing more than me and my issues. Prayer can catapult us out of our narrowness into the vast adventure of God's work in the world. And only then can prayer shape us into something lovely.

Weekly worship is the school where we learn to pray. Christians serious about the Shape of their lives commit to worship every week, somewhere, somehow. Kierkegaard helped us understand worship: while a service might look like performers (the minister, the choir) on stage before an audience (the congregation), the fact is that we all are the performers (minister, choir, congregation), and God is the audience.

In worship we declare what is worthy of praise, a counter-cultural act in a world where everything from soap to cars is praised. We offer ourselves and what we have to God. We are stretched to pray together what we probably would not pray alone. The Church bears this weighty burden in worship to talk of life and death, of evil and sin - to remind people of what they would prefer to forget. The Church in worship calls us out of our narrow world of self-interest and forces us to pray for people we do not know or have never seen.

In worship we are transformed into people we would never be had we not come. Amos Wilder put it pretty boldly: "Going to church is like approaching an open volcano, where the world is molten and hearts are sifted. The altar is like a rail that spatters sparks, the sanctuary like the chamber next to an atomic oven; there are invisible rays, and you leave your watch outside."

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eShape of the Christian Life 49 - Politics

"These people are disturbing our city; they advocate customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or practice" (Acts 16:20).

Such was the criticism leveled against Paul and the other Christian missionaries when the story of Jesus was first preached in new cities and countries around the Mediterranean. While some people have been taught that religion and politics must never mingle, clearly God stakes a claim in and cares about everything that goes on down here on God's good earth, including what governments and their citizens do.

Under many repressive regimes around the world, people of faith are not free to express their passionately held beliefs. The United States Constitution forbids the establishment of any single religion, but it never declares that government and religion never speak to one another! In 1970, the Supreme Court clarified for any who doubted that churches, just as much as secular bodies or private citizens, have a right to vigorous advocacy of political positions. The conservative scholar Stephen L. Carter is right: "In our sensible zeal to keep religion from dominating our politics, we have created a culture that presses the religiously faithful to be other than themselves, to act publicly, and privately as well, as though their faith does not matter to them."

But our faith does matter. We recognize that every policy, budget, and legislation has some kind of morality (or shortage thereof) is tucked inside. What we as a people do collectively exhibits faith in something - and we are called by God to pay attention, to throw whatever slender weight we may have in the direction of what we feel best mirrors what Jesus was about. To do so requires considerable thought, prayer, reflection - and conversation! The Shape of the Christian Life is one of frank, open deliberation on the issues that impact not just me but all of God's children. We help each other to answer vital questions: How do I think about the world and politics as a Christian? How do I vote? and get involved as a citizen? Is God glorified by how I am engaged? or not engaged?

Many fret that our country is polarized; others are a bit calmer. Christians bear a special calling to find, not "common ground" between those who disagree, but "higher ground." God is not a Democrat, and God is not Republican, either - and the Church dare not let itself get co-opted by either party. "The best contribution of religion is precisely not to be ideologically predictable nor loyally partisan" (Jim Wallis). We never presume God is on my side or our side; instead we worry whether we are on God's side or not (as Abraham Lincoln wisely taught us). In humility we pray, seek God's face, yearn for solutions to the world's problems that require the insights and energies of both conservatives, liberals, and that growing numbers of "others."

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eShape of the Christian Life 48 - Advocacy

"Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8).

Late in the 4th century, the emperor Julian the Apostate tried to eradicate Christianity from the Roman world, but was frustrated because of the self-evident goodness of believers in Jesus. His complaint? "It is disgraceful: the Christians support not only their own who are poor, but ours as well, so everyone sees that people get no help from us."

Christians do not merely give to the poor. We also ask why they are poor, we stand with them and speak up for them who have no influence, we work for changes in society. Some wish to hang back from this, saying it's not the job of the Church to get involved in anything slightly political. But wasn't it the Church that brought down slavery? and segregation? Faith does not insulate us from the world, but immerses us in the world. Our minds may wander cynically, as poverty seems chronic, or racial division seems unsolvable. But the Bible won't let us drift away. Jim Wallis once took a Bible and asked his student to take scissors and cut out every reference to the poor and our responsibility to stand with them from the Bible. Most of the Old Testament was in shreds, the stories of Jesus in ribbons, the letters of Paul confetti. He called this "the holey Bible."

Speaking up for the poor really is all about prayer. How did Jesus teach us to pray? "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Karl Barth suggested that "to clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world." In prayer, we notice our own spiritual poverty, and thank Jesus for being our advocate with God the Father - and so then it is a simple reflex for us to do as Jesus does: to be an advocate for the disadvantaged, the hurting, those who have nobody else, to lift them up in prayer, in conversation, in our civic involvement.

St. Augustine wrote that "Hope has two beautiful daughters: Anger and Courage - Anger over the way things are, and Courage to see to it that things don't remain the way they are." We can blame the poor for being poor, or we can isolate ourselves in silken bliss: but hope, and faith, and the love of God dis-comfort us and lure us into an uprising so that, in whatever small ways, this world - at least the part for which we have some responsibility - mirrors more accurately what the kingdom of God will look like, when there will be no advantaged and disadvantaged, no one left alone on the outside looking in.

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eShape of the Christian Life 47 - The New (Old) Model

"There was not a needy person among them, for whoever owned houses sold them and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to any in need" (Acts 4:34).

Every Christian is called out, to be in mission. But at some point in the last century, we grew infatuated with an alluring but problematical notion: charity. To be charitable is a good thing, and charitable giving in America is impressive, and achieves much. But the giver and the receiver unwittingly get robbed of something far more valuable.

Typically, good people write a check or donate an old coat to someone they never actually meet - the way St. Nicholas, the patron saint of charity, lobbed bags of gold over a wall to the needy. Years ago people started coming to my office with a ham that perhaps had been given them at the office around Thanksgiving, and they would say "Hey, give this to a poor person." I did a few times, but then I started saying "Thanks, but then I get to have all the fun; you take it to somebody..." or even better, "Why don't you get somebody in need over to your house and you eat the ham together?"

You can see the problems with the haves brushing crumbs off the table down to the have-nots: the have-nots are kept down, they never meet the haves, they learn nothing, and they suffer the inevitable embarrassment of being the recipient of charity instead of discovering a new friend. And the haves miss out on discoveries about the world, they learn nothing, and lose the chance at a new friend. So Jesus' extraordinary vision of mission, the new model of the Christian life (which is really the old model we forgot for a few decades) is to get out, meet, touch, befriend, share, enjoy community, visit across social barriers - and to love. Wouldn't the flowering of such relationships change lives on both ends? and transform life in our community?

Jean Vanier wrote profoundly that "to love someone is not first of all to do things for them, but to reveal to them their beauty and value, to say to them through our attitude, 'You are beautiful. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself.' We all know well that we can do things for others and in the process crush them, making them feel that they are incapable of doing things by themselves. To love someone is to reveal to them their capacities for life, the light that is shining in them."

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eShape of the Christian Life 46 - Call Out

"The Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The Greek word for Church is ekklesia, which literally means "called out." The Shape of the Christian Life is one of being "called out." Jesus' parting words to his disciples were not "If you feel so inclined, go do some good when it's convenient and makes you feel good," but more simply, and inescapably, "Go into the world."

Our faith is wildly peculiar, because we are perhaps the only organization in the world whose whole reason for existing is the people who aren't members! If the Church worldwide is in decline, if Christianity seems to be a crumbling shell of its former self, it is because we quit going out, and instead walled ourselves in, seeking a faith that makes "me" feel good instead of one that transforms the world.

Alice Walker wrote about a woman who had for decades been a whirling dervish of doing good for others until, "in mid-whirl one day, she simply stopped and sat down and looked out the back window of her house for years. She gave up trying to improve the world and, instead, declined to notice it." The Holy Spirit sticks a burr under the cushion when we try to sit - and pokes us out of our drowsiness and says "Pay attention!" "For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16), and if we wish to be close to God, we too will love the world. We will be zealous to soak up news, no matter how painful. My heart will break, I will shed tears when anything happens that breaks God's heart. I will live with a pervasive frustration: "I wish I could do something!" - even if the only thing I can do is pray.

But often we can do far more than pray. C.S. Lewis wrote that "it is far easier to pray for a bore than to go and visit him." We notice, we pray - and our most energizing prayer might be, "Lord, show me how I might in some way be the answer to my own prayer." If I pray for the hungry, tsunami victims, or the homeless (or for peace or for justice), the Spirit chuckles a bit if I don't stretch my brain (and make a sacrifice or two!) to figure out how I might make a difference, however small.

"Missions" is not some sidebar, an optional activity for some portion of Christians who get interested. The word *missio* means "sent," just as *ecclesia* means "called out." We are all missionaries, and if I think I am excused from mission, I will have a gigantically daunting explaining job to do when I meet my Maker. Every person can do something; every Christian has a calling (or callings) outside the walls of the Church. The question is: what is my calling? and if it has been X, when might it become Y or Z (or both)? and of even more importance, how do we go out into the world? What is my motive, my posture, my demeanor, and my measure of success?

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eShape of the Christian Life 45 - Self-Control

"The fruit of the Spirit is... self-control" (Galatians 5:23).

Throughout history, philosophers from Plato to Kant have analyzed how the soul finds itself in the middle of a tug-of-war. You may sense this in our society: a loud chorus of voices say "Express your self! Live out your dreams! Satisfy your hankerings!" - while another, stern-faced, solemn group seem bent on squashing the self, mashing you down into some tidy, sanitized box. Probably we associate Church with the latter group, as we surmise Christianity has taken on the job of dousing the self and its desires with cold water.

The fruit of the Spirit is self-control. The Greek word here is *egkrateia*, which for Aristotle meant the way we have powerful passions, but allow them to be properly directed. It is as if there is a mighty Mississippi River of thoughts, desires, and dreams in each of us, and the question is: Will this river rush chaotically over the levees and seep off in wild directions, destroying the countryside? Or Will this river stay within its watercourses, flowing over a dam, producing energy?

Apart from God, "self-control" may feel lonely and unpleasant, like taking medicine, doing extra pushups, or missing a party. But for Paul, "self-control" isn't something I do; it is what the Spirit does - not to me, but for me, and in me. My problem (as C.S. Lewis cleverly pointed out) is not that my desires are too strong; on the contrary, my desires are too weak! I settle for trivial things (like money, ephemeral pleasures, or popularity) when God wants to give me infinite riches and eternal glory. The way to God is this *egkrateia*, which is not me controlling myself, but rather me controlled by God.

Yet "controlled" isn't the right word either: as a gift of immense mercy, God guides me, woos me, so I can fulfill my truest, deepest, most God-given yearnings. A racehorse becomes a champion, not by galloping away wherever he wants, but by a responsiveness to the slightest tug on the reins. A grapefruit would be stupid to declare, "I will be a plum!" We are God's fruit, we are made in the image of our Creator, we are made for sainthood. By the grace of God, the Spirit channels us, bends and molds us - and so while our prayer may be that we will be controlled by God's Spirit, the truth of the matter is that we are, by the Spirit, set free to be the fruitful self God made us to be.

And so we find ourselves at the end of our "Fruit of the Spirit" section within this "Shape of the Christian Life" series.

Now for a time we will turn to the "public" side of Christianity: how do we live out there? and what are our responsibilities in the world? and how does God want to use us in the world?

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eShape of the Christian Life 44 - Gentleness

"Come to me... Learn from me: for I am gentle in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29).

God's love begins gently. We who are taught to be aggressive, to develop a firm handshake, to exhibit strength - we who may have gotten a little crusty on the outside - realize we are in unfamiliar territory with Jesus, who is gentle, who suggests we will never find any rest until we learn from the Gentle one.

"Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling," and the old hymn tells the truth. Jesus does not seem to shout, or clobber us, or twist the arm violently. How gentle is Jesus? God showed God's omnipotent self to us as a child. When Sarah, my oldest, was born, I took her to the Church where blue collar laborers, men with gruff voices, melted at the sight of her, their voices peeping with sweet peeping sounds, their massive hands become gentle pillows holding her. God knew we could use some gentle treatment, and that radical measures, tactics as small and vulnerable as a baby, would be required to draw gentleness out of us.

Coleridge once wrote that the Jews "would not willingly tread upon the smallest piece of paper in their way, but picked it up; for possibly, said they, the name of God may be upon it. Though there was a little superstition in this, yet truly there is nothing but good religion in it, if we apply it to man. Trample not on any; there may be some work of grace there, that thou knowest not of. The name of God may be written upon that soul thou treadest on; it may be a soul that Christ thought so much of as to give his precious blood for it; therefore despise it not."

I may feel I have every right to pounce on the waitress who forgot to bring that side order... but I remember that the name of God is etched in her heart. I may be poised to jump on a deal that will crush the other guy who's too stupid to know up from down... but I recall that Jesus was gentle with me, and that the fruit of the Spirit is gentleness. I catch myself being a little careless with those I love, just plain busy, taking for granted that they have stuck with me for some time... and someone reminds me of the wisdom of George Eliot: "When death, the great reconciler comes, it is never our tenderness we repent of, but our severity." And so, like Jesus (and being therefore near Jesus!), I stop, I calm my breathing, I relax my muscles, and I look, and listen. I touch. I am tender, gentle. Nobody is more surprised than I am by this dazzling miracle of the Spirit in me! and the paradox is that I have simultaneously discovered the lovely secret of being gentle with myself. The Shape of the Christian Life is increasingly gentle.

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eShape of the Christian Life 43 - Faithfulness

"When you face trials, consider it nothing but joy, for the testing of your faith produces endurance, so you may be mature and complete" (James 1:2).

Faithfulness is becoming a rarity. We flit about, like bumblebees in a field. Everything is disposable: plates, cameras, a marriage. But the fruit of the Spirit is faithfulness, described eloquently by Lewis Smedes: "Somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep them. If you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God."

Thank God that God is faithful! "Even if we are faithless, He is faithful" (2 Timothy 2:13) - and faith is the way we connect with God. A faith worth bothering about isn't cheap or easy. Faith isn't pretending horrible things are somehow good. Faith isn't a mere surge of feeling. If I have faith, I am not like Atlas, hoisting the whole world on my shoulders. Faith isn't getting a grip on my life; faith is letting God grip me. Faith isn't some blind leap, for faith loves

knowledge. Faith isn't about me and my feelings; faith is about God, and when I recognize, understand, and love God in faith, I come to have what Maggie Ross called "a willingness for whatever": that is faith.

So faith then is future-oriented, and feels a lot like courage. Faith may be more of a verb than a noun. Let's hear from Smedes again: "What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty." God has made promises to us that God keeps, and so we then are empowered by the Spirit to make and keep promises, discovering certainty amid uncertainty.

So am I faith-ful, full of faith? I may not feel very full of faith. But am I doing anything that blocks off faith, as if there are chambers below deck that are sealed off from the inflowing of God? Perhaps for you and me, even if faith has not thus far filled us, we might pray to be opened up, so faith might infiltrate every nook and cranny of our minds, hearts, bodies, possessions, and surroundings. The shape of the Christian life is always faithful.

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eShape of the Christian Life 42 - Generosity (Goodness Part 2)

"You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity" (2 Corinthians 9:11).

The great New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce felt that "goodness" (as it occurs as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22) should actually be translated "generosity." When the Spirit pulsates through us, and lures us toward God, we inevitably become generous.

Without divine intervention, though, generosity is squashed. For, even though we are the wealthiest, most comfortable people who have ever lived on this planet, we are plagued by a sense of scarcity, an almost irrational fear that I never have quite enough, or no matter how much I have it might evaporate tomorrow, so I store up, I expend on me - and hey, I have earned it, I deserve it, it's mine. Luxuries are deemed necessities, things we merely want seem as essential as oxygen or water.

What would it be like, to be freed by the Spirit so that we no longer cling, grasp or consume, but share, open up, and give generously? Jesus said, "Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8). How generous has God been, with sunshine, the breath you just took, the miracle of vision and thought, the symphony of nature, people who have put up with you, and most splendidly the love of Jesus, who was not stingy or calculating but gave up his very life for me and for you? Generosity begins in the recognition that we have received freely, that whatever happens to be labeled as "mine" really belongs to "God," who loaned it to me so I could enjoy the delicious pleasure of giving it away.

Generosity grows the way we eat peanuts or potato chips: you can't eat just one. You are generous - with your money, with your time, with your talent, with a smile - and before you know it you are more generous. Generosity does not ask tough questions about the recipient of the generosity. Jesus simply said, "To him who asks, give" (Matthew 5:42). Mother Teresa cared for the poorest, and clarified that "We do not ask why they are poor; we simply love them, we love Jesus in loving them." Indeed, "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7), not a calculating giver, not a giver who insists on measured results. Generosity is "an unmeasured willingness to give. It is a warm, delightful, instinctive self-spending for God and others. It is the uncalculated response to all that is asked" (Evelyn Underhill).

In Marilynne Robinson's wonderful new novel, *Gilead*, a man boasts that his grandfather "never kept anything that was worth giving away, or let us keep it either. He would take laundry right off the line. I believe he was a saint of some kind. When he left us, we all felt his absence bitterly. There was an innocence in him. He lacked patience for anything but the plainest interpretations of the starkest commandments, 'To him who asks, give,' in particular." If we let the Spirit have its way in us, might we discover this kind of generosity, this innocent plainness that is hesitant to

keep anything worth giving away?

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eShape of the Christian Life 41 - Goodness

"We are created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Ephesians 2:10).

Notice that for Paul "goodness" is not something that just happens to reside in your personality, and is not something you focus and accomplish (like dieting or saving money). "Goodness" is something I am incapable of managing, no matter how hard I try; it is the gift of God's Spirit, or it doesn't happen at all.

This is sobering, humbling news to us who look in the mirror and think, "Hey, I'm a pretty good person" - as if God grades on the curve. Jesus, interestingly, said "God alone is good" (Mark 10:18). But we humans, when it comes to moral ability, have "shabby equipment, forever deteriorating" (T.S. Eliot). We deceive ourselves and stick a "good" label on whatever we happen to like; our ethic becomes "If it feels good, it must be good," or "I want this; therefore it must be good." Paul, who was far holier than perhaps any of the thousands reading this email, admitted to a titanic struggle: "Nothing good dwells within me; I can will what is right, but cannot do it... I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:18). We feel free, but we are in bondage to sin; we get stuck in our self-centeredness; we are chained in the habit of thinking "I am the center of the universe"; and at the end of life our plan is to brag, "I did it my way."

Goodness knows that God alone is the center. Goodness says to God, "Not my way, but your way." Goodness, when it happens, is a transparency: we think, feel and act in a way that makes us like pure, cleaned glass, so onlookers do not see us, but they see through us into the mind and heart of God.

Sadly, in a culture that is hedonistic and decadent, where we value effectiveness and productivity above all else, it falls to the people of God to stand up and say there is still such a thing as right and wrong, that "goodness" matters. Some ask if there are moral absolutes, or if morality is situational, depending on the circumstances - and the answer for us is Both! Absolute right and wrong must be lived out in the gritty realities of unanticipated situations, each requiring considerable prayer, conversation with others striving for goodness, and an openness to the Spirit, without which we have no chance to be or do any good at all.

And goodness is not mere avoidance of the bad! Goodness is positive, active, engaging, not shy, tireless, ever zealous to know more about God who is good, determined to be an accurate mirror of the divine goodness, reaching with hands and hurrying with feet to do good, humbly hopeful that we will be so pliable to the Spirit, so malleable to God's molding, that we surprise ourselves with some goodness and then declare, as Paul did when goodness happened in him, "Not I, but Christ in me" (Galatians 2:20).

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eShape of the Christian Life 40 - Kindness

"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit: be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving as God has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:30).

Kindness seems innocent enough, a little mamby-pamby maybe, something like "niceness" - but we need to recognize how counter-cultural kindness can be. Kindness, not valued the way it was decades ago, has enjoyed a bit of a revival lately. Posters and bumper-stickers advise us to "Practice random acts of kindness." Not a bad idea, but I think I agree with Phil Kenneson, who admits that he is "a bit suspicious of a movement whose aim is largely to provide opportunities for us to feel good about our random beneficence."

Kindness, the kind of kindness that is the fruit of the Spirit, isn't random, isn't anonymous, and isn't occasional. The Old Testament Hebrew word translated "kindness" is *hesed*, meaning "covenant love": *hesed* is a consistent, ongoing

relationship that does not randomly appear and then disappear, but is persistent, committed, and signs its name, owning up to the kindness. I, James, commit myself to be kind to you, right now, tomorrow, next month. Didn't John Wesley say "the doctrine of the devil is to do good when you feel like it"? Kindness isn't something I do to feel better about me; kindness is all about you.

Kindness is all about being close to Jesus Christ. The New Testament Greek word translated "kind" is *chrestos*, which is within an inch of *christos*, Christ. In the ancient world, people confused the adjectives "kind" and "Christian" - so might it not still be, in our world, that the Christians are the kind ones? and the closer we are to Jesus, the more kind we will be? Martin Luther set the bar high: "I will give myself as a Christ to my neighbor."

Kindness is not mere niceness, but a new way of seeing other people. If I see you as someone to whom Christ is kind, someone made in God's image, someone whose future is in God's hands, then I am kind. Kindness is other-directed: I am not the center of the universe, but God is, so God is between you and me, and so I treat you differently, kindly.

Kindness is practical. To be kind is not some inner attitude or invisible mood. You can see kindness. Kindness is humble, but not at all shy, preferring to be right out in the open, for if you don't see or feel me being kind, maybe I'm not really being kind. When we "love kindness" (Micah 6:8), when we are not randomly kind, but consistently and practically kind to family and friends, to the stranger, to the person who may not return our kindness, in a world obsessed with self-indulgence, then we begin to see how revolutionary this simple discipline of kindness can be. Get near Jesus, let the Spirit seep into each breath you take - and people will believe Christians are the kind ones.

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eShape of the Christian Life 39 - Patience

"As God's chosen ones, clothe yourselves with compassion, humility and patience. Bear with one another."
(Colossians 3:12).

The mere mention of the word "patience" drives some wedge through my ambivalent self. To say that I am already patient would be a bald-faced lie, and so I wish for patience, I even pray for patience - but then my louder, more muscular self tells me not to bother, either because it just will never happen, or, were I magically to become patient, I might fall behind in the ratrace, I would be less productive, I would get stomped on by the impatient.

Yet, impatience is our undoing. We harbor an absurd possessiveness about time, as if "my" day has only so many nanoseconds for me to "spend," and so love or prayer or peace or joy or anything else that is good feels like an intrusion. The tyranny of the clock tightens its noose ever more tightly as technology heightens our silly fantasy about how much can be crammed into "my" day. But if time is a gift from God, and if God is most likely the one who is the intrusion, if love, prayer and doing good are your open windows into the light, then patience is the way to life, joy, peace. If we understand the marvelous complexity that I am, that you are, then we laugh off society's insistence on the quick fix, and we settle in for the long haul of growth, the way an acorn prepares itself to become a tall oak.

To have a relationship of any depth with somebody requires patience - and I require some, too. Patience "bears evenly all that is uneven; until it is established, we don't really love" (Evelyn Underhill). To make a connection with God requires patience - and for God's grace to ripple through me and remold me quite a lot of patience will be required. The root of the word "patience" means "to suffer, to bear" - and is the same word as to be "a patient." What does a patient do? A patient suffers, waits, yields control to somebody else. Patience is about being God's patient: not flying off on my own to construct a happy life, but getting quiet enough long enough to hear God say "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Impatience really is nothing but self-absorption: when I am frantic, angry, resentful, hard, impatient, I am putting myself at the center, instead of God, who is the Center of everything.

Fortunately, God is not in any hurry - so the closer we are to God, the less frantically rushed, the more calmly patient, we can be. The patient aren't habitually tardy, and the patient aren't passive. Rather, the patient are those who hang solidly on to God no matter the circumstances; the patient move at God's pace. But you can't just up and decide to be patient; you will fall flat on your face and merely muddy yourself. Patience is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and so you shove

back your old self, you throw your watch away (or at least put it in your pocket where you can't see it all the time) and you pray for patience. Then you begin to notice it manifesting itself, and nobody is more surprised than you.

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eShape of the Christian Life 38 - Peace

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you" (John 14:27).

The prophet Jeremiah sadly wondered how anyone could say "Peace, peace - when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 8:11). Talk of peace seems like mere jibberish, a fantasy image from some distant island. We wouldn't mind having a little - but the tensions and conflagrations that riddle the globe mirror our own anxiety, frustration, and the crippling inability to achieve peace in our own souls. We are a disheveled people, sensing that "Somehow I am at odds even with myself." I sense chaos rippling around me, and naturally I try to pat it down, to smooth out the chaos - but how? With serene surroundings? By sedating ourselves? By shutting out and thus not noticing ugliness out there? But no matter how charmed an existence we muster, the deep, abiding, unassailable sense of peace we crave is missing from our house of cards.

With the wind whipping and waves crashing over their boat, the disciples cried to Jesus, who calmly raised a hand and spoke: "Peace, be still." And the storm subsided (Mark 4:39). Only a word from Jesus, only a miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit, can bring peace. What is this peace, this invaluable gift we can never achieve or earn but merely discover? The Hebrew shalom means "well-being, wholeness, being in sync with God." True peace is nothing more (but nothing less!) than sticking close to God - and being in sync with God does not necessarily imply that everything will be calm and serene! Jesus was entirely at peace, but he faced daunting challenges, endured privations, wept, battled injustice. Thomas Merton was right: "Those who continue to struggle are at peace." The secret, the only question to be answered, is "How much overlap is there between my heart and mind, and the heart and mind of Christ?" The more distant my thoughts, actions and desires are from our Lord (no matter how smoothly I arrange things, no matter if I've had that calming cocktail, no matter how firmly I've slammed the door on whatever is troubling), the less peace I will have. The closer my thoughts, actions and desires are to our Lord (no matter how uphill the climb, no matter how stiff the resistance, no matter if others think I'm crazy), the more peace I will have. The disciples were saved from the storm for one reason: they were in the boat, next to Jesus. Peace is being near Jesus, and nothing else.

When this peace becomes palpable, we become little hubs of peace, channels of that gift in the world. "If possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with everyone" (Romans 12:17). Peace begins to happen around us when we imagine ourselves, in whatever circumstance, in that boat with Jesus saying "Peace, be still." Then I see the other person through Jesus' eyes. I get creative, and patient, and find ways to live peaceably. I encourage. I thank. I love. I pray, asking for the peace of the Spirit to envelop me, the other person, the situation - and it is this quick, subtle, but powerful prayer that is the little opening God needs for you, for them, and for the world.

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eShape of the Christian Life 37 - Joy

"My Father is glorified when you bear fruit... I have said these things so my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:8, 11).

From the cradle, Americans are taught to cherish their right to "the pursuit of happiness." But no one needs to be told that all our endless rounds of fun, our diversions, our most zealous pursuit of happiness, no matter how successful, prove to be nothing more than a silly dance around a gaping hollow place in our souls. God made us for joy, which is deeper than happiness, or maybe different entirely from happiness and fun. Joy isn't happiness times two, or a really tall pile of fun.

Joy may actually seem a bit goofy or maladaptive in a world where advertisers press you incessantly to want more,

for joy is already satisfied. Joy is at peace, calm in the face of bad luck. Joy knows that we are not exposed to random happenings, for we are nestled quite securely in God's loving hand. Joy can weather unhappiness. In fact, joy is frequently discovered in the middle of sorrow. Joy is the candle that flickers in the darkest night.

In one sense, we choose joy. We forever stumble upon some fork in the road, and we can choose joy, or choose to be resentful. And yet the very choice of joy is a gift of the Spirit, who is forever beckoning, coaxing me toward joy. When joy pokes its surprising head into my life, I know I could not have won this myself. In fact, joy is barricaded from my heart by sin, by pride, by my sense of self-entitlement. That barricade must be torn down, by confession, by humility, by a profound sense of gratitude for even the smallest little gift I might have taken for granted five minutes earlier.

Like all fruit, joy requires time, tending, maturity. Evelyn Underhill notes that "it is rather immature to be upset about the weather... Pursuing the spiritual course, we must expect fog, cold, persistent cloudiness, gales, and sudden stinging hail, as well as the sun." Joy is about consistency in the spiritual life. Since joy is different from the emotion of happiness, then joy does not evaporate when God seems absent. Joy knows God is incapable of drifting away from us, and the very fact that we turn our heads and grope after God in the dark is God's gift that gives birth to joy.

Joy is always elusive, at least while we're still down on this planet. We taste joy, but the very taste whets our appetite for more. C.S. Lewis defined joy as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction." We live in this in-between zone defined by 1 Peter 1:6-8: "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may suffer trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold tested by fire, may redound to praise... of Jesus Christ. Without having seen him you love him, and you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy."

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eShape of the Christian Life 36 - Love

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

The first "fruit of the Spirit," the Shape the Christian Life always assumes, is love. Christians love - no small thing in a world of self-interest, grabbing all the self-fulfillment I can lay my grubby hands on. The whole notion of love, the very word "love" has been so corrupted, so pilfered of meaning - but the very fact that we grieve the demise of "love" indicates that there still is a real thing.

Love is, and no matter how much trash gets dumped on it, love always will be, because God is love. Creation happened when God's love went into the factory and let God's imagination go wild. You are reading this email for one reason only: God's love dipped down into history and touched you into being. Same for the next guy you'll bump into today, for the one who gets on your nerves, for the one with whom you've forgotten how to communicate, for the total stranger. And the most important moment in your life (and their life)? It was when "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son" (John 3:16).

St. Augustine taught that we are all lovers. Every problem, if you trace it back, is the rotten fruit of misdirected love, of polluted love. What is love? On my own, I do not know what love is. Love does not just happen. I must be tutored in the ways of love - and so I look to Jesus, who was the love of God walking around on earth, who is the love of God still on the loose. On my own, I will mess love up every time: but remember? Love is the fruit of the Spirit. Love is a miracle God does in me, through me.

Jesus loved first by using words. He spoke of love, and he spoke words of tender, firm love. We flee from love by saying "Oh, I don't have to say it." We are reserved, polite, proper; and then hearts break all around each of us every day because we do not use words to love. We are interested in God; but do we express that love with adoring, grateful words in prayer? and by living differently?

Love is a commitment, to stick with what we're stuck with. "When we have a ship we won't desert, a cause we won't

abandon, a commitment we dare not break, then we are like God" (Lewis Smedes), for God's love is all commitment. Love is a skill; love is a habit. Love has nothing to do with the lovability of the beloved! Jesus said, "If you love those who love you, what good is that?" (Matthew 5:46) - just after he said "Love your enemies." Christians love the unlovable; Christians love the stranger - and love that is a commitment takes on flesh, tangibility. For us, love is something you do, not something you merely feel; and love is something you do even when your feelings inevitably ebb in and out of you.

Love is all about God, who is Love. Søren Kierkegaard said that "to love another person is to help that person to love God; and to be loved is to be helped to love God." Love is to see the other person through God's eyes. Okay, I have my opinions about Joe or Susie: but how does God regard him? and what vision does God have for her? We could talk about love all day. Perhaps we should...

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eShape of the Christian Life 35 - Fruit

"He is like a tree, planted by the water, bearing fruit in its season" (Psalm 1:3).

The Christian life is not pretending to be somebody I am not, but rather discovering who I really am, and then being that person, authentically and zealously. Thomas Merton said, "A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. It consents to His creative love. It expresses an idea which is in God's mind. So the more a tree is like itself, the more it is like Him." What if I think of myself as an idea in God's mind? and the more I consent to be what God made me to be, the more I am like God?

Trees never try to be something else, like wart hogs or sledge hammers. They are content to be trees. But you and I struggle: we can be whoever we want to be, but the less I am in sync with God's plan, the more hollow I become. I cannot find truth and meaning just any old place.

Jesus said "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16). Am I like a tree? My life is not my own: I depend on the sun, the rain, the grace and power of God which I do not control, but only soak up as precious gifts. I live in the light, but my roots go down deep where it is dark - so perhaps I need not fear the darkness? What is growing on my branches? Am I bearing fruit? or am I just some driftwood that used to be a tree?

Theologians speak of a doctrine called "sanctification." "Justification" (our salvation) is what God has done "for" us. "Sanctification" (meaning "made holy") is what God does "in" us. In the Bible, there is no such thing as salvation that does not also include a holy, fruitful life. Both 'getting in' and 'staying in' are the work of the Spirit.

Holiness is not a matter of gritting your teeth and trying really diligently to do what God requires. We may grit our teeth, and we do try hard. But I am not able to do what God wants of me, I am not capable of the life God wants for me. A changed life is the gift of God's Spirit. Paul described this new life, the life for which we were made, as "the fruit of the Spirit." Not "the fruit of my good intentions," but "the fruit of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Not only are these not against the law. They are not the law! Paul does not say, "You must be joyful, patient, faithful." Rather, if we just calm down and let the Spirit have its way with us, we discover to our delightful surprise traces of joy, peace, gentleness in our lives, all gift, all the work of God in us. We will take each of these nine ("love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control") up in turn, for we would be trees giving glory to God, swayed only by the wind of the Spirit, watered by the grace of Baptism.

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eShape of the Christian Life 34 - Temple of the Holy Spirit

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? You are not your own; so glorify God in your body" (1

Corinthians 6:19-20).

Look at your body, your self in the mirror. The world says you are a consumer, that your body is to be sculpted, or protected, it is something you use to have fun or to get ahead, that how you look, your presentation is everything. But if the world dictates how I see myself, I become superficial, self-indulgent, vapid. Thankfully, God whispers the truth about the body, the self that I see: your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

What is a temple? A structure that exists for God, and really for no other purpose. A place of silent waiting. A place where truth is spoken, and songs are sung. A place to be deadly serious, and therefore to be giddily joyful. A place where offerings are made to God. A place where heads are bowed, where frivolous stupidity is frowned upon. A place where the unloveliest are welcomed, for the doors are open, and even if God seems to be no place else, God is there, and when you exit you wish you could linger, and you let that craving to linger manifest itself in service and holiness outside the building. A temple is a permanent ark of the covenant, bearing God's word and presence. A temple is a manger, and swaddled inside is Jesus.

So God made me to be all these things? Am I such a place? Isn't my life revolutionized, liberated, enlightened if I stop looking at myself as the owner of my self? Isn't the hidden secret exposed and shouted out loud when I look at my self, at my body as owned entirely by God, and that I exist to glorify God in my body? Do I glorify God in my body? by where I take it? by what I put into it? by how I use it? by how I care for it? by what it bumps up against? or by what it refrains from bumping up against? Am I a manger, humble, nothing fancy, but mysteriously holding up Jesus for those who look closely beneath the folds of who I am?

But a temple (or for that matter, any other structure, any building, any body) can feel empty, just a hollow place, nothing really going on there, nobody home at this address. Paul says "Do you not know your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" In our next email we will try to fathom how we who are temples are potentially filled with the Holy Spirit.

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eShape of the Christian Life 33 - Transformed

"I appeal to you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God" (Romans 12:1-2).

My college roommate's girlfriend cross-stitched these words and hung them in our dormitory room, and I believe their presence speaking to the waking up and living out of our lives in that small space altered who we were and what we did. Perhaps you might hang these words someplace where they might watch over you.

The Shape of the Christian Life is not conformity; God does not have some regimented set of rules to which we must conform - or die. It is the world without God that is all about conformity. We learn our cues, and then we mimic fashions, behaviors, shopping trends, whatever is cool; we want our children to be "normal," and to "fit in." But life with God is all about "transformation." The Greek word is metamorphosis - the near miraculous process by which a grayish brown pouch, the chrysalis, is "transformed" into a colorful butterfly that takes flight. The power of God is like that: not cramming us into a hard shell with no wiggle room, but setting us free from a hard shell so we might soar, so we might discover our true beauty.

The Spirit's work is a "renewed mind." Our minds get stuck, hardened, and we think in the same old rut, but then God peels away the old patterns of thought and our imaginations are set on fire. We see the world, we see other people, as God sees. Then we begin to know God's will, and we let it happen in our lives. So passionate do we become for this God who transforms us, that we think of everything we have - my body, my time, my stuff, my energy, my money, my surroundings - as a "living sacrifice."

Jews, like Jesus, knew sacrifice. You took your best lamb, or the first wheat that ripened, and you laid it on the altar and let the priest set it on fire - a sign that what belongs to you doesn't really belong to you at all, but to God. And once it's sacrificed, you can't get it back: the smoke curls up toward God, who is pleased by the offering. If you and I

could think of our lives (my body, my time, my stuff) in this way, as not belonging to us, but entirely to God, and we wouldn't take it back because we have been set free for the need to cling to it by God, then imagine how rich, how fulfilling, how transformed our lives might be? To avoid God, to shut ourselves to the Spirit, is to hide our beauty in an inexplicable preference to hole up forever inside the cocoon and never fly. To open ourselves to God, to be transformed, is the most exhilarating delight - and the whole world is the beneficiary.

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eShape of the Christian Life 32 - Persecuted (and Christmas?)

"Blessed are you when men persecute you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5:11-12).

Not a very Christmas-y sentiment - being persecuted? But the "rejoice and be glad" echoes the song of the angels announcing the birth of Jesus. How on earth (or in heaven) can suffering for Christ be interwoven with joy and gladness?

Christmas pageants are always sweet, pleasant affairs, and no Advent drama in history has ever mentioned the horrific tragedy Matthew reports as integral to the story of the Messiah's birth: the slaughter of the innocents. Herod, in jealous paranoia, rages to squash any chance of any other boy from Bethlehem assuming his throne. How brutal, how tragic, little boys snatched from mother's arms, delicate flowers barely opened, killed by icy cruelty. The birth of Jesus is forever associated with the suffering of innocent children. We will miss the reward of Christmas if we wrap up in our cocoons and forget the hungry, homeless, those who live in violent homes, those whose grief is numbing, not to mention the innocent victims of warfare on this earth. And we do not pity them at some distance, but we recognize that because of Jesus our hearts are one, our pain is shared, for we all agonize in a world that does not know and love the Lord Jesus.

And there is more, closer to home. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that "If I feel more during the holidays, then that is not only because these days are such strong heart-magnets but also because the world pulls so hard in the opposite direction." I yearn for moments when "All is calm, all is bright," but the malls holler I only have 4 shopping days left. I want to experience the holy poverty Jesus and his family felt in that wretched manger, but I am titillated with shiny objects. I want to hold hands in the dark, quietly moved by the flicker of a candle, but there is so much racket, so much rushing around, I feel like Las Vegas has shoved Bethlehem off the planet. At Christmas, we had better feel awkward, out of place, not quite at home here, or else we have compromised the only treasure that matters, having sold out entirely, and I see in the mirror a champion consumer, instead of a humble lover of God.

To those who suffer with those who suffer, to those who look at the glitz and shopping frenzy and feel like somebody's scraping fingernails across a blackboard, to those who struggle valiantly to focus on God at this time of year (of all times!), Jesus says "Blessed are you; rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great."

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eShape of the Christian Life 31: Peacemaking (part 2)

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

How do we make peace? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "There can only be peace when it does not rest on lies and injustice." Christians dare to speak the truth with the one from whom we are alienated - gently, tenderly, and listening, expecting the other person has some truth to tell, too. We learn how to disagree, not how to avoid discomfort.

For peace to be made, anywhere, any time, some shift in power relationships has to happen. For a tall, muscular guy with a 20 inch sword to be at peace with a little scrawny guy with a pebble in his hand, the big guy has to relinquish his bigness, he has to decide not to tower in intimidation; and the little guy has to decide not to run, not to be a sneaky guerilla in jealousy over the big guy's sword. When the strong befriend the weak, dignity and strength are

imparted to the weak - although the dignity and strength flow both ways, don't they?

Peacemaking is all about love, which isn't an emotional mood, but a tangible action. Jesus said, "Love your enemies," and "Love your neighbor." "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up" (Martin Luther King).

And wasn't Bonhoeffer right? "The forgiveness of sins still remains the sole ground of all peace." We may do a lot of pretending, or we may "kiss and make up" in the home to try to paste on some peace, when our real need is to dive into the thicket of the issue and try to understand, acknowledge, strategize, and mostly to forgive. We may shrink back from forgiveness, from peace-making, not merely because it's hard work, but because there can be something darkly delicious about an unhealed grievance. Unforgiven sin tangles us up in some barbed wire that lacerates the soul.

Forgiveness isn't always a warm fuzzy feeling. If you forgive me, it doesn't mean you feel like showering me with hugs and kisses. Forgiveness is a decision, a commitment to look at me through God's eyes, to stick with me. In the comedy film, Bruce Almighty, the insensitive, knuckleheaded Bruce is finally broken down by life, broken-hearted over squandering his relationship with Grace - and in his humbled misery finds himself face to face with God, who asks, "What do you really want, Bruce? Do you want Grace back?" Bruce, finally understanding, surprises even God by saying "No. I want her to meet somebody who will love her, who will see her the way I see her now - through your eyes." How can we see as God sees and not make peace? or rather let God's Spirit make peace through us?

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eShape of the Christian Life 30 - peacemaking

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

All Christians are required to be pacifists. Let's bracket political policy out of the discussion (for the moment) and think about what the angels sang to the shepherds when Jesus (the "prince of peace") was born: "Peace on earth." When he grew up, he said "Blessed are the peacemakers."

Jesus does not say "Blessed are those who have peace," although we come to God longing for some peace in our hearts. Jesus does not say "Blessed are those who prefer peace, wish for peace, or await peace," however fond we may be of peace. Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, those who make peace." The Greek word literally means "doers of peace" or "makers of peace."

In response to a sermon in which I spoke about Jesus and his apparent obsession with peace, a parishoner emailed me, explaining how boneheaded and irresponsible "passivism" is. Merely a spelling error? or did this person (who is hardly alone) think of "pacifism" as "passivism," that somehow "peace" suggests that we do absolutely nothing? that we be passive in the face of evil? Jesus did not say "Blessed are those who are passive and do nothing," but "Blessed are the doers of peace, the makers of peace." Paci-fist means "peace-maker" - and we must do this! To do peace, to make peace, you have to get busy, you have to act, you have a world of work ahead of you.

Think about your family, your co-workers, anybody, everybody. Christians never, ever settle for warfare and tension. They doggedly make peace. Christians never settle for the bogus kind of peace that pretends, or politely nurtures old grievances, or privately harbors piercing criticisms. We seek out the other person and strive valiantly for peace. Christians never settle for peace by mere force. If dad shouts and waves a mighty fist, and his wife and children cower silently, there is no peace in that home.

Genuine peace is deeper, richer, giving life to those in the home, and in the world, letting them be free to be the people God made them to be, not walking on eggshells but dancing in the streets, clenched fists opening, receiving the once clenched fist of another, a veritable Virginia reel of joy. Peace, when we labor to make peace, opens a faucet that lets a poison run out of the soul, and in the emptied place, deep joy, calm hope and God's Spirit gather.

Suspecting that very many of us need to do some peacemaking (to be pacifists) during this season when the angels will be singing of peace (with whom are you not at peace?), we will add a second email (in a few days) on "How do we make peace?"

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eShape of the Christian Life 29 - Purity of Heart

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

The best line in Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince*? "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." In the Bible, the "heart" is your truest self, the part of you that feels, desires, grieves, makes decisions, the sphere where we meet God - or don't. So what is a "pure heart"? The Greek word, *katharoi*, implies being clean, unpolluted, with a hint that what is pure was not always pure, but has been purified, cleansed, washed out and hung up to dry. A "catharsis" (derived from *katharoi*) is an emotional resolution (as when a story reaches its climax and the reader has a rush of realization); the Oxford English Dictionary somewhat less elegantly defines "catharsis" as "a purgation, especially the evacuation of the bowels." The pure heart would be a heart that has been emptied of what is unclean, purged of what no longer belongs.

Purity of heart can connote simplicity, focus, a singlemindedness. The pure heart is not scattered, and is happy to wear blinders (like a race-horse) to block out peripheral distractions. But purity also suggests what is clean, good, holy. How elusive is purity? Impurity is everywhere, seemingly wafted along in the very air we breathe. Impurity is on the TV, is overheard in conversation, and has taken up unwelcome residence in my soul and yours. Impurity seems to pay!. Who's getting ahead in the world? Not the pure! But Jesus didn't say "Blessed are those who get ahead." He said, "Blessed are the pure in heart." Deep inside somewhere, don't you long to be clean? good? focused?

The Christmas story reveals the purest heart: Mary was focused so purely upon God that she could hear an angel whisper a startling plan. We have so much busy-ness, and racket going on that we have no prayer (literally!) of hearing any angels. Mary was good, not boasting a massive stack of holier-than-thou badges, but with a simple integrity that was willing to do or be whatever for God. If Jesus was right, that the "pure in heart shall see God," it must be impurity of heart that blinds us to God. The divided, scattered, stressed self, that is enmeshed in the world and its values, grows anxious: I cannot see God! If only I could see God I could get all this stuff done and cope better. But it is the pure in heart who can see God. Maybe in the New Year I can restructure my life, and let some purgation happen, an evacuation of what I thought was important but really only grows cataracts before the eyes of my heart. Maybe I will discover that God is not so invisible as I had imagined, and I might begin to notice God in my routine, and especially in the face of a person who just last month looked terribly needy to me, but now looks like a sister or brother in Christ. "Purity of heart... means the renunciation of all deluded images of ourselves, all exaggerated estimates of our own capacities, in order to obey God's will as it come to us in the difficult demands of life in its exacting truth. Purity of heart is then correlative to a new spiritual identity" (Thomas Merton).

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eShape of the Christian Life 28: Merciful

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

Mercy has evaporated from the landscape of our culture, leaving us dry, crusty, hardened. We are a permissive people, but then we show no mercy. Could it be that we will have to remember how to be merciful before we can get our house in order and ratchet up our moral zeal as a people? Mercy requires a high standard, doesn't it? Our inability to show mercy wars against our ability to receive mercy (or to be genuinely good, not just a fake) - which wars against our ability to be merciful. and so the cold, steely circle is forged.

How distant is "mercy" from all the ad campaigns with which we are peppered? They pander to me, saying "You deserve only the best mattress," "You deserve a new car," "You deserve a week in the Bahamas." These billboards

do not know me, but they drive me away from mercy, which has nothing to do with deserving. We are so practiced at self-justification, at rationalizing and explaining. We feel entitled. I'm owed a good life, and if I don't get it, I get busy blaming somebody. And so mercy is a stranger.

Think back over your life. Mercy is not something we define so much as something for which we cry out in desperation. A kid about to pound the daylight out of me on the playground - and what was I required to say out loud? "Mercy." A terrible, horrible mistake has been made, smashing a well-arranged life, and your regret is so intense, no strategy can extricate you from the mess - and what is your only cry? "Mercy." You gaze at the crucifix, and you let it nestle jarringly down into the marrow of your self, and finally you get it - and then what is the only plea you know you have to make, but that you can make? "Mercy."

Deep inside, don't you crave mercy? to be loved despite your craziness, to be handled tenderly? And don't we need to be tender, merciful, forgiving to others? How hard is it to be merciful? Mercy is not doing nothing. The Greek word implies the "pouring out" of oil. Mercy is a pouring out. Mercy is when I unscrew the lid on what is precious to me and pour it out on you. I may not think I have all that much to pour out, but the merciful pour anyway, thinking only of the wounded one who needs the healing balm of mercy. The merciful do not get tangled in a thicket of who deserves what, or calculations of whether their mercy will be productive or not. The merciful are merciful because they have received mercy from the same Jesus who said "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

"Merciful" is not just an inner attitude, although it is an inner attitude. "Merciful" is something you do. You plan to get busy being merciful, but then you are prepared at a moment's notice to let the schedule be shredded, for like that Good Samaritan, you see somebody beaten up by the side of the road, and instead of guessing why he's in the pickle he's in, instead of being so ultra-responsible as to be punctual for your next meeting, you are merciful. Otherwise we live merely in earshot of Jesus, and never get close to the one who said, "Blessed are the merciful," the one who was and is Mercy itself.

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eShape of the Christian Life 27 - hunger and thirst - and thanksgiving

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:5).

We should be experts at satisfaction, as no people in the history of this planet have ever enjoyed so much affluence, such a broad range of choice, such unbridled freedom - and yet Mick Jagger's rock lyric still touches a nerve: "I can't get no satisfaction. I tried, and I tried, and I tried, and I tried." We have tried; we may actually be connoisseurs in the satisfaction of hunger and thirst, with professionals poised to satisfy: the maitre'd, the bartender, the grocer, who require no more than a credit card. We have even turned to the spiritual, scooping up the latest books, shopping for a preacher or praise band, surfing channels for somebody with a miracle up his sleeve. So why is hollowness so rampant? and depression such an epidemic? Why is there a malaise, a sense that something is missing? Why do we ricochet from one relationship to another, one restaurant to another, one diversion to another? and still happiness, contentment, peace seem just out of reach?

"We feel empty, not because we are empty, but because we are full of the wrong stuff" (Maggie Ross). We are full of whatever we have grabbed for ourselves. But can't we see how being adept at consuming robs us of any possibility of gratitude? If I am in control, making all the selections, satisfying my whims, how could I ever humbly imagine myself to be a receiver, terribly lucky to have anything at all? The time warp between our day and that of Jesus is nowhere more unfathomably wide. Those who were in earshot of Jesus had no choices whatsoever. Hunger and thirst were not spiritual metaphors, but the reality of the daily grind. Jesus' listeners were quite literally hungry and thirsty.

Augustine said, "Lord, You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in You." Only righteousness can satisfy: being good, holy, in sync with God's ways, perhaps denying ourselves some short-term gratification in order to keep our eyes on the ultimate prize. Notice Jesus did not say "Blessed are those who are righteous," but "who hunger and thirst for righteousness." If you think you possess it, you become self-righteous. God fashioned the hollowness inside us, not as an evil to be cured, but as the most marvelous gift. Our emptiness is God wooing us to trust God, to be grateful to God.

"The discipline of gratitude is the effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift to be celebrated with joy. Gratitude involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions are steeped in hurt. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint. I can choose to speak about goodness and beauty, even when my inner eye looks for something to call ugly. I can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and to look at the faces that smile, even while I still hear words of resentment and grimaces of hate. The choice for gratitude rarely comes without real effort. But each time I make it, the next choice is a little easier, a little freer, a little less self-conscious. Acts of gratitude make one grateful" (Henri Nouwen).

Deep inside, we hunger and thirst for nothing less than a close, intimate relationship with God, that can enjoy good things but bear their loss, that can be content with whatever, that can withstand every disaster. Thomas Merton, reflecting on the inevitable losses we suffer, wrote that faith is "not a matter of getting a bulldog grip on God and not letting the devil pry us loose from it. No, it is a matter of letting go rather than keeping hold. I am coming to think God loves and helps best those who are so beat and have so much nothing when they come to die that it is almost as if they had persevered in nothing but had gradually lost everything, piece by piece, until there was nothing left but God. It is a question of his hanging on to us, by the hair of the head, where we cannot see or reach. Who can see the top of his own head?"

This Thanksgiving, bow your head. Feel the top of your head. Feel God hanging on to you. Notice the hunger inside you, and remember that your hunger is God inviting you to himself. And give thanks.

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eShape of the Christian Life 26 - Meek

"Blessed are the meek" (Matthew 5:5).

Put the word "meek" on your resumé, and you'll never get a job. Yet Jesus lists "the meek" among the blessed. The Greek word *praüs* means mild, gentle, unassuming, perhaps a bit obsequious, passive, shyly hanging back while others step forward. An animal whose wildness has been tamed was called *praüs*. The meek are able to receive direction. They never boast, "I did it my way." But they are not rudderless. Jesus is interested in meekness toward God, being direct-able by God. So meekness is not a handicap but the opening for God to use us. A titanic, can-do attitude can block the Spirit of God. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness" (Romans 8:26). To live as closely as possible to Jesus, for the Spirit to be your rudder, you must have what John Calvin called a "teachable spirit" (*docilitas* in Latin, whose cognate you may recognize - "docile"?). Jesus did not say "Blessed are the smart, who take charge and control their destiny," but "Blessed are the meek, the humble, the happily docile, the nobly weak."

Wasn't the virgin Mary the epitome of meekness? Her simple, calm life having been invaded by an unsolicited angelic message, requiring total disruption and openness to the unfathomable, she replied, "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). What did Paul say to the first Christians? "The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. Consider your call: not many of you were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, so that no human being might boast" (1 Corinthians 1:25-29)? If this be folly then, as Gandalf, the grey wizard and friend of the hobbits said, "Let folly be our cloak."

Humility is everything in God's kingdom. And humble meekness isn't something you cultivate, achieve, possess, and notice in the mirror. In "Camelot," Lancelot du Lac boasts to Guinevere of his "humility" as the source of his prowess - and as the story unfolds we discover that the one who is proud of his humility suffers that most gruesome fall, for his humility is nothing but the charade of the egomaniac. Genuinely humble meekness happens when we are doing something else, looking away from me and my spiritual self, focusing on God, attentive to the current of the Spirit. Blessed are the meek.

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eShape of the Christian Life 25 - Mourn

"Blessed are those who mourn" (Matthew 5:4).

We pity those who mourn. They seem cursed, not blessed. We avert our gaze, dash off a note, send a spray of carnations. We say a prayer. We say something religious, like "He's in a better place." We hope the mourners "feel better" soon.

Around Galilee, when Jesus lived, mourning wasn't so rushed, or so hushed. Mourners literally tore the clothes on their backs. Right out in the open, mourners screamed in agony, scooped up dirt in their hands and shook the dust out onto the tops of their heads. No one tried to go to work, or to "stay busy." Friends gathered, and they lingered over their grief for at least a week or two. What did Jesus say? "Blessed are those who mourn."

Stay with someone who mourns, and you notice how grief is the powerful, existential testimony of the worth of the one who is lost; tears are the eloquent symphony that love is real. The most profound book about mourning I have read is *Lament for a Son*. The author, Nicholas Wolterstorff, focuses on the death of his son, yet also helps us find a new dimension to mourning. He believed that, after the loss of his son, he would for the rest of his life see the world "through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see." Dry-eyed, we may look right past the pain, the loneliness the next person harbors. Dry-eyed, we may forget that in this "season to be jolly," those grieving a death or a family split are struggling. Dry-eyed, we may flit off to a party, forgetting that war is being waged on this planet, that children are dying during that party for simple lack of food or medicine. "When you and I are left to our own devices, it's the smiling, successful ones of the world that we cheer. We turn away from the crying ones of the world. Our photographers tell us to smile. 'Blessed are those who mourn.' What can it mean? The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, who ache with all their being for the day's coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence. The mourners are aching visionaries. Such people Jesus blessed. The Stoics of antiquity said: Disengage yourself. Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity's mourning, weep over humanity's weeping. But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming."

The Shape of the Christian Life is snuggling up to the very heart of God: we feel what God feels, we feel what God's children feel, we dwell right inside the mind of God. We become "aching visionaries." We mourn as God mourns, and we are "blessed." "Jesus praises the weeping class, those who can enter into solidarity with the pain of the world and not try to extract themselves from it. That is why Jesus says the rich man can't see the Kingdom. The rich one spends life trying to make tears unnecessary and, ultimately, impossible.. The weeping mode allows one to carry the dark side, to bear the pain of the world without looking for perpetrators or victims, but instead recognizing the tragic reality that both sides are caught up in. Tears from God are always for everybody" (Richard Rohr).

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eShape of the Christian Life 24 - Poor In Sight

"Blessed are the poor" (Luke 6:20); "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3).

As we move toward the indulgent festivities of Thanksgiving (not to mention the shopping frenzy of Christmas), we may be puzzled by Jesus, who seems to have missed the lesson that "blessings" are "things" - and the more, the more blessed. Listen: "The world says: blessed are the rich. You are worth as much as you have. But Christ says: Wrong! Blessed are the poor. because they do not put their trust in what is so transitory. Blessed are the poor, for they know their riches are in the One who being rich made himself poor in order to enrich us with his poverty, teaching us the Christian's true wisdom. Christ was sowing a long-term moral revolution in which we are changed from worldly thinking" (Oscar Romero). If the poor are blessed, we want to be near them, we want to be like them.

Jesus didn't glamorize poverty, and neither should we. On the campaign trail, John F. Kennedy was asked if he had ever struggled to pay bills, if he had ever been unable to provide for his family. Candidly, the patrician JFK said, "No, I'm sorry, I haven't." The man in the crowd said, "You haven't missed a thing." But maybe when we have much, we miss lots of things. Jesus felt the rich suffered a stiff disadvantage spiritually - for we can easily believe we can

manage our own world, we get what we want, and we can thank ourselves for it. We lose that sense of spiritual poverty, what Gustavo Gutiérrez called our "spiritual childhood," our sense of utter dependence upon God, a humble posture before God and others, our total openness to God who really is all we have at the end of the day.

The Shape of the Christian Life always gravitates toward poverty. In prayer, in reflection, we contemplate our inner poverty, our mortality, our humble status before God. We seek physical proximity to the poor, serving with them, befriending them - for they remind us of our genuine poverty. Corporations and schools do lots of "charity" and "service hours" nowadays. But it is different for us. I am not a "have" dropping a few goodies down on a "have-not." I do not even serve the poor "to feel good about myself." I see in the face of the poor (if I look long and closely enough) a mirror image of my own need, my own poverty - and I also see the face of Jesus. Mother Teresa, whose entire life dramatically enacted Matthew 25:31-46 (a passage the wise will re-read frequently!) said, "We touch the body of Christ in his disguise whenever we help the poor. We do it for Jesus, and to Jesus. This brings a tremendous closeness with Him. We cannot do this with a long face." And she added, "At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have, how much money we've made. We will be judged by ?I was hungry and you gave me food, I was naked and you clothed me, I was homeless and you took me in."

How do Christians think differently? "Blessed are the poor." I am poor, I want to be near the poor, for then I will be near Jesus, who was poor, who became poor for us.

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eShape of the Christian Life 23 - Blessed

"Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, sat down, and taught them: ?Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven!" (Matthew 5:1-12).

This is the overture to the symphony of Jesus' teaching (and life!), establishing the key signature in which our minds are reshaped in Christ's image. We will look at Jesus' mind-boggling "beatitudes" one by one; but to get acquainted with the full set, read (and re-read) Frederick Buechner's summary: "Whom did Jesus single out for special commendation? Not the spiritual giants but ?the poor in spirit' as he called them, the ones who spiritually speaking have absolutely nothing to give and absolutely everything to receive, like the Prodigal telling his father ?I am not worthy to be called thy son,' only to discover for the first time all he had in having a father. Not the champions of faith who can rejoice even in the midst of suffering, but the ones who mourn over their own suffering, because they know for the most part they've brought it down on themselves, and over the suffering of others because that's just the way it makes them feel to be in the same room with them. Not the strong ones but the meek ones in the sense of the gentle ones. Not the ones who are righteous, but the ones who hope they will be someday, and in the meantime are well aware that the distance they still have to go is even greater than the distance they've already come. Not the winners of great victories over Evil in the world but the ones who, seeing it also in themselves every time they comb their hair, are merciful when they find it in others, and maybe that way win the greater victory. Not the totally pure but the ?pure in heart,' the ones who may be as shop-worn and clay-footed as the next one, but have somehow kept some inner freshness and innocence intact. Not the ones who have necessarily found peace in its fullness but the ones who, just for that reason, try to bring it about wherever and however they can. Jesus saved for last the ones who side with Heaven, even when any fool can see it's the losing side, and all you get for your pains is pain. Looking into the faces of his listeners, he speaks to them directly for the first time. ?Blessed are you,' he says. You can see them looking back at him. They're not a high-class crowd - peasants and fisherfolks for the most part, on the shabby side, not all that bright. It doesn't look as if there's a hero among them."

As we proceed, do not think of any Beatitude as a free-floating tidbit to be debated as if you found it in a Chinese fortune cookie. Jesus, who loves you more than you love yourself, who knows you better than you know yourself, thought it to be ultra-important that we hear his words - and notice how he profoundly embodied each one, for his

only purpose in teaching and living was that we might be close to him - in thought and action.

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eShape of the Christian Life 22 - Think

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5).

Do Christians have a peculiar way of thinking? What's going on inside my head? and why? How do I react to what I see? What am I feeling inside? Is there a way of thinking, responding, feeling that is pleasing to God? and a better fit for the person God (who gave me the brain I'm using) made me to be? "What good does it do to say a few formal prayers to Him and then turn away and give all my mind and will to things, desiring what falls far short of Him? The mind that is the prisoner of conventional ideas, and the will that is the captive of its own desire, cannot accept truth and supernatural desire" (Thomas Merton).

In an eloquent passage beginning in 1 Corinthians 1:18, Paul talks about the foolishness of the Cross, how God's secret wisdom is incomprehensible to those who aren't "spiritual" - confidently declaring "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). How do we get this mind of Christ? How do we think God's thoughts? How do we value what God values? shudder over what mortifies God? delight in what God enjoys? press passionately for what makes God smile? You can occupy a lifetime answering this cluster of questions - and you could not spend your life more wisely!

Once upon a time, people thought the world was flat, that the earth was the center, and the sun and stars were circling overhead. But Copernicus shifted the paradigm: actually the earth is turning, we are moving around the sun, we are part of a marvelous galaxy. God invites our minds into a similar shift of perspective: I am not the center, and neither are you. We are part of something much bigger, and wisdom is seeing it all from God's viewpoint.

To gravitate toward the mind of Christ, imagine a pincer movement. On one flank, a great street-sweeper invades my head, a bit ruthless, pummeling all the clutter of accumulated thought, little pet notions that are not of God, little conventional messages that may be appealing, frightening or ugly, but do not square well with the way of Christ. Just as the road is clear and the dust settles, a bookmobile ambles in, with the most enthusiastic salesman ever leaning out the window, giving away God's ideas in the Bible, the verbiage we use in worship, the gathered wisdom of the saints who have thought God's thoughts before us.

You can't get the mind of Christ the way Frankenstein got a brain, by hooking up for some high-powered transfer. You quite literally have to go to school all over again. You can wear a WWJD bracelet, but frankly, you have not the slightest notion of what Jesus would do until you spend a lot of time in the vicinity of Jesus - and the only way to get near Jesus (besides walking forward to receive the Lord's Supper) is by immersing yourself in his words, reflecting on them, living them. So our series turns next to the grand prologue to Jesus' teaching: the Beatitudes (Matthew 5) - and then to the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5).

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eShape of the Christian Life 21 - Talk

"Let the words of my mouth be acceptable to you, O Lord" (Psalm 19:14).

Do Christians have a peculiar manner of talking? When we chat at the water cooler, interact at work, converse at a party: are the "words of my mouth acceptable to you, O Lord"? God doesn't demand that we exhibit some pious, sugary, lilting niceness - but how do we talk in a way that pleases God and makes sense given our faith?

Talk is cheap, and from TV we learn decadent talk. From politics we learn vicious talk. As Christians, we monitor what we hear, and do not get sucked into babbling away like everybody else. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words never hurt me? Nonsense. Words tear down, they belittle - but we want to use our words to build up, to

encourage, to say things that are excellent, that are helpful to others. Our distinctive Christian speech involves knowing when to shut up, when to refuse to pass along a rumor. Bonhoeffer suggested that "Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words." The brother of Jesus, warned that "the tongue is a fire" (James 3:6).

We always tell the truth, although there are truths we keep to ourselves, for some brands of honesty are vicious. We express our values through words, so to talk fawningly over the bogus anti-values of our culture hardly pleases God. If someone listened to you talk over a year or two, what would they conclude really matters to you? Would they get a sense that God is in your life? or that you are kind? or compassionate? or virtuous (without being smug)? What is the tone of my talk? and is my talk (over many years) becoming more? or less acceptable to God? and encouraging to others?

We want to talk about God, but we may get tongue-tied. Will I sound like an awkward toddler, so meager is my faith? Or will I turn the volume up too high and scare somebody off if I tell what God said to me yesterday? And with so much ridiculous, innocuous, manipulative chatter about God out there already, why add to the Lord's name being taken in vain. And actions speak louder than words, right? But we need to talk, to create safe havens with others where we can talk about God, with ample room for questions, doubts, experiences, certainties, wonderings, tears and laughter. Even in Church we are a bit shy to talk openly about God! but let's acknowledge our need to give voice to our faith, our dreams, our confusion, our hopes. Dorothy Day said, "If I have achieved anything in my life, it is because I have not been embarrassed to talk about God."

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eShape of the Christian Life 20 - The Central Part of You

"O Lord, you have known me; you are acquainted with all my ways" (Psalm 139:1, 3).

So often we think of Christianity as the one big decision, forgetting that the Shape of the Christian life is a thousand and one little decisions, the thought I zipped open five minutes ago, the last sentence I blurted out, what I had for lunch, where I swiped the credit card, how I averted my gaze. C.S. Lewis was right: "People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, If you keep a lot of rules I'll reward you, and if you don't I'll do the other thing. I would rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. Taking your life as a whole, with your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a creature in harmony with God, or into one that is in a state of war with God, and with itself. To be the one is heaven: joy, peace, knowledge and power. To be the other is madness, horror, idiocy, rage, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to one state or the other."

Formation is everything. All the time, you are being subtly remolded into somebody you weren't just yesterday. What is shaping you? Madison Avenue? The plotlines of TV shows? or the chit-chat at a party? God is discrete, yet relentless, humbly asking us to let the Bible, weekly worship, daily prayer, and service to the needy craft us into Christians. Are we ready for God's sculpting of our souls? "Every moment and every event in your life plants something in your soul. Just as the wind carries seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in your mind and will. Most of these seeds perish and are lost, because you are not prepared to receive them" (Thomas Merton).

Today is All Saints' Day. We remember, in faith and hope, those who have died and entrust them once more into God's strong, tender hands. We also recall how desperately we need saints, holy examples, people who have with courage lived their faith. We can mimic their moves, model ourselves on their behavior, think their thoughts. To be a friend of God, get to know the friends of God. We are titillated by celebrities in our culture, who tutor us in consuming, debauchery, superficiality. We need heroes who embody wisdom, fidelity, goodness, courage. Whom are you emulating? and what effect does what you watch and the conversation you hear have on your soul? Is your life structured in a way that might help you to become wise? to draw you closer to God? What are the explosive minefields you have to tiptoe through? and what are the seductions you face that vacuum you away from God? Every time you make a choice, you turn the central part of you into something different. Seeds are being sown; the spiritual

germs can easily be wafted right past you.

Thinking of those little choices and behaviors, we will turn next to ask How do we talk as Christians? and how do we think? in eShape of the Christian Life 21 and 22.

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eShape of the Christian Life 19 - When Bad Things Happen

"Into your hands I commit my spirit" (Psalm 31:5, quoted by Jesus, Luke 23:46).

By far, the most frequent, pointed question I get as a pastor is "Why do bad things happen?" - and often we add "to good people?" although personally I am almost as troubled if someone of less than stellar moral perfection dies suddenly in an accident or is diagnosed with an incurable disease. The Bible repeatedly ruminates on the disconnect between whether you are good or bad, and whether therefore all goes well or badly.

Theoretically, we know that goodness is the flimsiest shield against suffering, and that we are all of us fragile and vulnerable. But then the news hits close to our hearts: a small plane crashes in Virginia with casualties we have actually known and loved. A buoyant, generous 12 year old, Hope Stout, is struck down with a rare bone cancer the doctors can't quite master. A fellow alum went to work in Manhattan on 9-11 and never came home. Or it is your own parent, your spouse, your best friend, your own child for whom you would vastly prefer to give your own life. Out of the deepest abyss of your gut you ask, "Why?" But your sorrow, your dazed numbness muffles any answer. This cry, this scream, this devastated "Why?" is not amenable to logic. Love groans deeply. Love waves off snappy answers, for an theoretical, intellectual (however truthful) reply cannot for one second ease the pain of a love separated from the one love cannot bear to be without.

So where is God? Isn't God supposed to protect us? The most precious, tender place in God's expansive heart was reserved for his own son, Jesus, who was no more encapsulated from suffering and death than any of us. Jesus cried in desolation from the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Whenever we cry out, "Why?" - whenever we shake our hung heads and dizzily conclude God has taken the last train for the coast, the first arms that clutch us firmly in love are Jesus' very own arms, extended on that cross. God could not remain aloof from our pain, our ache - which is why Jesus did not shrink from the worst darkness of separation from God his Father. Jesus is on the wooded mountain, in the hospital ward, at the graveside, weeping, doubled over in pain with us.

After we get a little distance and time, we recall that God doesn't do evil. Ever. God does not sow cancer cells in bodies. A hundred years ago, no one understood infections, so women died in childbirth, children were buried from diseases we'd cure today with a round of pills. A hundred years from now, we will know why we get cancer. We will still be mortal, but we won't suspect failure on God's part. God does not cause car crashes; God does not swat a plane from the air. Cars and planes crash because when we invented those new-fangled contraptions a century ago, we made an unconscious deal: if you hurtle heavy pieces of metal with passengers at high speeds, some (hopefully tiny) percentage will fail, will hit something, and people will be hurt. To function normally, we forget or minimize the risks, but they are always there.

Why didn't God make the world differently, without suffering? and how can we trust that God is in control? The only "answer" the Scriptures yield is this: God made the world and gave us considerable discretion and freedom down here. God does not manipulate us, or events, like marionettes. God seems not to be a dictator insisting on control - and this is because God is all about love. If I try to control you, I do not love you. Love is vulnerable. Love allows the one who is loved some space, freedom - and so we find ourselves in a theater in which a wonderful but perilous drama is being played out every day. God loves, and we live with the question of whether we will love God back or not, whether we will hurt each other, whether we will remember life is brief and fragile and therefore whether we will be tender, whether we will be frivolous or serious, whether we will put off life and loving God or get with it now - and most importantly, whether we will entrust our lives and the lives of those we love to God.

When we do so, God gives no guarantee that God will permit no harm to touch those we love. But the same Jesus, who cried out when racked with pain as he died, was gloriously raised up to be at his loving Father's side forever, and

so we can trust that ultimately, beyond the vagaries and unpredictabilities of our vulnerable lives down here, God will finally draw the rest of his children around his knees in the grand, deliriously wonderful celebration of heaven, when there will be no tears, no cries of "Why?" - no cancer, no crashes, no hung heads. The Shape of the Christian Life is punctuated by earthly pleasures and earthly horrors, cognizant always that neither are the final payoff, for "our citizenship is in heaven, from which we expect a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20).

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eShape of the Christian Life 18 - Care for the Sick

"I was sick, and you visited me" (Matthew 25:36).

A peculiar, distinctive mark of the Christian life is our devotion to the sick, suffering and dying. In a world that denies death, averts its gaze from suffering, and glamorizes glitz, coolness and youth, we do not shrink back, but zealously embrace the sick with tender care. Christians join prayer chains, show up at hospitals, deliver casseroles, drop cards in the mail; Stephen ministers care for people who hurt; the clergy visit and counsel those who suffer. This is simply what Christians do - and yet we may ask why?

No other group in society is so focused on suffering and death. Not the sunniest subjects! but Christians are realists. But there is more: "Remembering Jesus' suffering and death, Christians see in the sick the very image of their Lord and discerned in their care for them an image of their care for Christ himself" (Allen Verhey). God did not remain aloof from human brokenness, but entered fully into our fragility, and we connect with him in the face of suffering. Have you ever been with someone sick, or dying, and sensed the profound, palpable presence of God?

Christians see beyond all the machines and diagnoses of medical technology. Illness has a deep emotional meaning. We may well resist saying "I know how you feel," recognizing that every illness, every dying, is its own, peculiar story that needs to be told, and to be heard. So instead, we ask, "Tell me how you feel." Christians listen, and care. Sufferers feel isolated, and unwanted in a world of health and gleaming vitality. But to us, they belong, they are wanted, they are loved.

We love by showing up, writing little notes, sending a flower. Frequently I urge folks to resist trying to theologize, explain, or "make things better" with words. James Russell Lowell, after the death of his child wrote, "Console if you will, I can bear it; 'tis a well-meant alms of breath; but not all the preaching since Adam has made death other than death." We do not deny death or the immense agony of loss. We do not apply some silly bandage of words, like "Oh, he's in a better place." He is in a better place - but the one who loves wants him here. C.S. Lewis, just after his wife died, wrote: "No one ever told me that grief felt like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me." So we show up. We wait in silence with those whose pain is unspeakable.

Soon in this series, we will weigh why bad things happen, why there is suffering at all if God is good. For now, we notice we all are vulnerable to illness and death. Perhaps Christians themselves can be sick in ways that are empowered by the Holy Spirit, that mirror the glory of God, the sacrifice of Christ. We know we are free to voice our cry before God, since even Jesus screamed in agony, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" We also know that our illness, no matter how all-engulfing, will never have the last word. Jesus suffered terribly, and he is right there in the bed, in the hospital room, feeling every ache, the gnawing misery, bearing us surely on a tide of love and eternal healing. And so we suffer faith-fully, just as we care faith-fully.

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eShape of the Christian Life 17 - Health and Medicine

"Give the physician his place, for the Lord created him; there is a time when success lies in the hands of physicians" (Ecclesiasticus 38:12).

How fascinating: if I ask for prayer requests, 9 out of 10 are related to illness. We have thousands of things to pray about, but we pray most often and passionately about health issues -- all the more remarkable since we are the healthiest people with the most brilliant medical protection ever to live on the planet. Does prayer become, then, another "treatment," with God (like the minister) a "physician's helper" or even a last resort? Health issues confuse us about God, and about prayer. Think about it: before the introduction of antibiotics, vaccinations, and public health measures (such as insuring a clean water supply), suffering and death were more "normal" - no less grievous, but normal. Women died routinely in childbirth; in a family of 12, 7 might survive to adulthood. In Bible times, life expectancy hovered around 28 or 30. But now, if someone gets leukemia or has an aneurism, we wonder why. Our ancestors knew we were mortal, vulnerable - but modern medicine has raised the expectation that we can live long and well, so when we do not, God's very existence is questioned.

Perhaps instead of questioning God, we might give thanks. If you are reading this email, you treasure the lives of several someones who, a century ago, would have died without God's blessing of medicine, which has come so far, so fast, that many physicians wind up in a double bind: "They must do everything they can to keep us alive. but then they must endure our blame when, inevitably, they fail. Almost as perplexing is the fact that although doctors are obligated to use every possible medical technology to keep us alive in order to insure that we will die ?only when everything possible has been done,' we complain that doctors go to unreasonable lengths to keep us alive" (Stanley Hauerwas).

No matter what titanic heights medicine might scale, you and I (and our descendants) will never be delivered from our mortality, our vulnerability to suffering. In fact, the very progress we celebrate can breed new, unanticipated problems! As believers we can humbly acknowledge the limitations of human life, and not chafe. Many ethical issues dance around the human desire to be godlike, our preference not to bump up against any limits at all. Medicine touts that you can craft the life you want: a pill to make you feel good, a little surgery to make you look good, selecting your child's gender (and more) as if shopping in the mall. But we were not made by God to be masters of our fate, nor even to be flawlessly healthy; the spiritual life is all about accepting what is given in the rough wrestling with difficulties. A dark mood may not always be an illness to be treated, but a spiritual nudge toward God. A physical feature that isn't all Hollywood may be sheer loveliness in God's eyes. Children have pressures enough.

Watching his father die, Thomas Merton wrote, "Behind his walls of isolation, he communed with God who gave him light to understand and make use of his suffering, to perfect his soul. This terrible illness which was relentlessly pressing him down into the jaws of the tomb was not destroying him after all. Souls are like athletes, that need opponents worthy of them, if they are to be tried, extended, pushed to the full use of their powers. My father was in a fight with his tumor, and none of us understood the battle. We thought he was done for, but it was making him great. And I think God was already weighing out to him his reward."

Another email series would be required to explore issues of medical ethics. As believers, we support science and discovery; we are patient as we think wisely about issues that are mere toddlers (remembering that most quandaries in medical ethics are newer than my children!). But we never forget that the God who gave us souls like athletes (and does not afflict us with illness), is determined via our struggles to make us great. So we pray, to the one who helps not just the physician but all of us in our battles, zealous for the reward only God can give.

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eShape of the Christian Life 16 - Years

"And so he died, full of years" (Job 42:17).

My grandfather's tombstone shows eight numbers with a little dash in the middle: 1904-1967. Peek under any such dash and you see years (and there never seem to be enough of them when you love the person), a moment here, an act there, a lazy afternoon, working past dusk, a trying week, a blissful month, a year of anxiety, three years of declining health, a decade on the best job you ever had. Our attention spans are short (and getting shorter all the time) - but the Shape of the Christian Life isn't this moment or that crisis or the worry du jour. God takes the long view: "A thousand years in Your sight are like a day" (Psalm 90:4). We never embrace our life with God until we stop,

step back, soar up high, and gauge the broad sweep of time, in which this afternoon's situation is merely a pebble on the beach, in which my entire life is a single measure in the triumphant symphony of God's great composition of the universe.

How many years will I have? and what would make them "full"? In John Irving's novel, Owen Meany mysteriously learned the date of his death, and his purpose in life was defined by his intrepid march toward that fateful day. Today, if I am typing and you are gazing into the computer screen, we're still in that dash somewhere - so how do we make sense of our own march, our own purpose, our own mortality? Being in the dash, we've lived a few years already. In faith, we look back: can you remember what God has done in your life? Rifle through the boxes of old photos in your memory and notice a hand, a smile, a circumstance, a moment, and notice what God has done to bring you to this place. There are wounds, too - and you go there, and let God's healing mercy heal.

But like Janus, we look back, and then turn forward. The Shape of the Christian Life always has a future orientation. We are not yet where we are heading. I am not yet the person God intends. Today's agonizing sorrow, or today's heady success, will be eclipsed. Martin Luther King, coping with terrible setbacks, announced (the day before he was shot) "I am no longer optimistic, but I remain hopeful." Optimism says everything will be better tomorrow; but hope is prepared for whatever happens tomorrow. Optimism depends on you and me doing better; but hope depends on God. We do not vest all our energy on this life, however zealously we may love or work or serve. Instead, we knead our time with an eye toward when there will be no time. I care passionately about how I use the years abbreviated by that dash, but my ultimate identity is focused far beyond the years bracketed by the dash. "When we've been there 10,000 years. we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun." So I can calm down now, and even look mortality squarely in the eye. For death is not a wall, not a prison, but a door, a gate, a vast opening that will make this universe seem like a pebble on the beach or a measure in the symphony.

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eShape of the Christian Life 15 - The Year

"You crown the year with your bounty" (Psalm 65:11).

If God is merciful in giving us only 24 hours in day, and only 6 days of work per week (see eShape 10 and 11), what is the meaning of the "year"? The earth laps the sun once more, the seasons pass: leaves gather, grow thick and luxuriant, then dazzle us with gold, red, then browner, falling to the earth. Life is not just a single arrow flying, but a circle, a web, life given, life lost, life renewed, so natural, God's constancy played out annually.

The Christian marking of time is not the fiscal year, not the calendar year. We begin, rather weirdly, just after Thanksgiving, with Advent, a time of waiting - and the Shape of the Christian Life's mood is always one of waiting, longing, yearning, like winter for the spring, the presence of Christ something we want, long for, reach toward, but never fully possess. Our true life is out in front of us, beckoning, promising to show up.

Every year we re-rehearse the full Bible story: Jesus is born, is baptized, is tempted - and so we observe a 40 day fast during Lent. Jesus is raised, the Holy Spirit comes - and so we observe Easter and Pentecost. Every year of our lives, we rewind and re-watch the Bible's dramatic epic; we live inside the story, and discover our place on the stage - not asking Is the Bible relevant to my life? but Is my life relevant given the Bible?

Allan Bloom could have been describing the Howell clan when he said, "My grandparents were ignorant people by our standards; my grandfather held only lowly jobs. But their home was spiritually rich: all things done in it found their origin in the Bible's commandments, their explanation in the Bible's stories. I do not believe that my generation, my cousins educated in the American way, with our M.D.s and Ph.D.s, have any comparable learning. When we talk about heaven and earth, relations between men and women, the human condition, I hear nothing but chichés, superficialities, the material of satire." If I mark time each year by the Bible story, my home grows spiritually rich, and deep. I prepare differently for the holidays. In December, I "prepare him room," instead of cramming the month with shopping bonanzas. In Lent, I devote focused time for prayer. Easter may involve a candle at dawn instead of a ski trip.

In his 1980 debate with Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan asked "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" Maybe the Christian asks each year, "Am I closer to God than last year? Am I serving more faithfully? Have I grown in my giving? in my prayer? in holiness?" It's just one more year - but then recall how fraught with profound meaning the numbers we attach to a year can be. 1967? My grandfather died. 1986? I got married. 2001? 9-11. 2004? That was the year I got serious about my faith...

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eShape of the Christian Life 14 - Time

"For everything there is a season, a time for every matter under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

But is there really? Technology's gadgets promised to save us time, but instead they merely intensify the rush, as we stuff more and ever more into what feels like less and ever less time. I will confess to a terrible kind of greed: I'm not at all greedy about money or things; but time? It cannot be wasted; I want to hang on to it, heighten proficiency, lasso four extra minutes here or there. Yet I know this is futile: the older I get, the faster time rushes away, like a creek rising and surging after a storm.

What if, by some reshuffling of the folds in my brain (or by the miraculous intervention of God - for superhuman power is needed for this), I could calm down, watch the clock ticking, and thank God for the gift of time? What if I could really believe that the 49 seconds I just spent really belong to God? or the 49 years? And if God, by divine mercy, has given me time, why did God give me time? and how do I give this precious time back? or rather, avoid snatching it rudely from God and pretending it's mine?

Nothing wrecks our relationship with God so ruinously as the way we mark up the calendar or punch into the daytimer. What if that archaeologist, instead of unearthing our checkbook, dug up my calendar? Am I someone who works, then sprints from one diversion to the next, my boxes of time filled with activities that are about me and mine? With my tongue hanging out, do I regret how little time I have to pray? to think? to do good? I may feel like a victim, but I have to own the responsibility, don't I?

For the time God gives me, I really am response-able! God has fostered in me an ability to respond, to keep the time in God's hands, to slash my frantic schedule and just say "No" to endeavors that consume my time and to say "Yes" (since I am able to now, as I have wedged open a little room at the inn for Jesus to get in) to God. I block out time for prayer (more than 49 seconds), and I let nothing invade that sacred space. I commit to get involved and serve within the Church, and outside the Church.

I counsel people late in life who are dying, and they never, ever look back and say "I wish I'd spent more time at the office" or "I attended worship too often" or "I played on the floor with my child too much" or "I read far too much Bible" or "I really regret the time I invested in reaching out to the poor and unwanted." At the end of life, God will not ask me how many hobbies I pursued assiduously, how many rounds of golf I worked in (wonderful as golf is...), how many TV shows I watched. But to change that outcome, you have to let God perform some radical surgery on your calendar - now. Don't be greedy with your time; it's not yours to hang on to. Every day, imagine looking back at the day from your last day on earth. Open the scheduler and say "God, it's yours." Watch the digital clock flash the next number and say "Thank you, Lord."

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eShape of the Christian Life 13 - Money

"The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10).

When we realize that work is pregnant with meaning far beyond monetary compensation, we celebrate. But then the paycheck comes. How do you think about it? and how do you use it? John Haughey wrote that "in our American culture money talks all day long and faith is virtually silent." Maybe we get the two in conversation with one another.

In our culture, my money is mine; I dispose of it as I wish. My "worth" is defined by how much money I have. But in God's family, my worth is defined by my faith, by God's saving love. So we need not be duped by money, however tantalizing its allure; by God's grace, money need not wield power over me, for all that I am and have is God's. A footnote: you must keep reminding yourself of this truth! or else money will usurp the role the Holy Spirit is supposed to play in your life...

In God's family, my money isn't mine: it belongs to God - not just some percentage I nobly bestow upon the Church, but all of it. This means not only that I must get deadly serious about giving to the Church; also I begin to inventory all my spending, asking if it makes sense in light of God's claim. How much of my spending is frivolous? self-indulgent? If an archaeologist dug up my checkbook in a thousand years, what kind of person would she assume me to be? How much money is enough? and am I learning the sheer delight of generosity?

Martin Luther was right: to be a Christian, three conversions are required: the conversion of the heart, of the mind, and of the purse. Is my purse converted? and do I honor God with the way I dole it out? Is there evidence that I treat all my money as belonging to God? This would answer questions like "How much do I give to the Church?" Mind you, the Church has a lousy reputation when it comes to money. People think we are anti-money - yet all the while we are reaching into your back pocket to persuade you to give us more. I think that is exactly right: I can't help but warn those I love about the perils of money's sneaky power, and I also want those I love to discover the enormous privilege, the holy opportunity of money. The favor the Church provides is to nag and bug you to loosen your grip, and also to provide you with a trustworthy avenue to do good with your money.

So how much to give? The Church teaches tithing, but John Wesley, Methodism's founder, thought ten percent was a bit chintzy, especially as you make more money. For me, tithing is no big deal now that I make a lot, compared to when I was barely above minimum wage... But don't waste energy on guilt about money. Be generous; dare something bold for God; know that some perpetual discomfort over money and God is a good thing, for this uneasiness will prompt you to draw closer to God, to discover new ways to make a difference, even to relish the deep wisdom of Thomas Merton's words: "If you have money, consider that perhaps the only reason God allowed it to fall into your hands was in order that you might find joy and perfection by giving it away."

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eShape of the Christian Life 12 - Work

"Work honestly with your own hands... and do not grieve the Spirit" (Ephesians 4:28).

How do we think about work? Some take a grim view: work is an inevitable burden to be borne, the price of survival, what I do to get what I want (which is when I'm not at work). Others turn work into a virtual idol: my career is all-consuming, the dominant force that defines and drives me.

We theologians like to speak of "vocation" instead of just work, or career. Career is about me getting ahead; work is about me grinding it out. But vocation is what I believe God has called me to do. Ministers are called by God, but so are teachers, physicians, stay-at-home parents, custodians, pilots, students, financial planners, and a holy host of others. My calling is about God; integrity trumps over profit; when I am called, I contribute to the common good; my deepest achievement is when I help others to be better.

The question persists throughout life: not, Am I getting ahead by the world's measure? but Am I doing what God wants me to be doing? or Am I doing what I am doing in the way God wants me to do it? In *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell (the 1924 Olympian) says "When I run, I feel His pleasure. To win is to honor Him." In your work, do you feel God's pleasure? Can you honor God by your labor? If you scoff and find this notion outrageous or impossible, you'd better pull up roots and find something else to do. You spend the large majority of your waking life engaged in your work, and if you cannot find meaning or engagement with God during those long hours in which you invest your energy, then your life with God will be stunted and never develop.

The Christian "shares by his work in the activity of the Creator" (John Paul II). God gives us abilities to be exercised.

The tragedy in Third World countries is not merely that they have a lousy economy, but that young adults have no means by which to express their genius, passion, and God-given gifts. Think of the faith privileges (and challenges) of work: discipline, commitment, responsibility are crucial. At work we see more human diversity than outside work; at work we come face to face with human sinfulness, in others and in ourselves. Work becomes a test of your faith as you run an unholy gauntlet; work becomes an open door where others can see the kind of person you are, and perhaps inquire, "Why this integrity? and this compassion?" and you humbly respond, "It's all about God."

The Bible reports on three dazzling years of Jesus' ministry. But remember that he spent twenty years as an apprentice, assistant, and then master of a carpentry shop, laboring with his hands, unnoticed, but glorifying God. All his wood work was aimed toward the Sabbath, when he would thank God for work, offer his work to God, and prepare to go back to work. This is the rhythm that can keep us in tune with God on the six non-Sundays each week.

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eShape of the Christian Life 11 - The Week

"Six days you shall work, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord" (Exodus 20:9).

What if our days were not clumped into batches of 7? Imagine the brutal grind of an endless succession of days if God had not invented the "week"? Do I wish my week had 9 or 10 days, so I could get more done? or is it by the merciful love, the tender pity of God, that I only get 7?

Or should I say 6? God wired humanity in such a way that we are most fully the people God made us to be when we count only 6, and keep a 7th for God. The elderly remember when nothing but Church was open on Sunday, when frivolity was frowned upon. But was a Sunday devoid of work, shopping and consuming, so awful? Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." We think we know better than God, so we cram in a business preparation on Sunday, purchase groceries and new shoes, fly from one diversion to another party. Bill Gates doesn't attend Church, as it's not a productive use of time; but God made us to be more than productive.

So many people I counsel say "Inside, I'm just so tired." God foresaw that we would strangle our calendars full and grow weary, so God lovingly permits us to rest one day out of seven. Rest is not the same as laziness. Laziness is me being self-indulgent; rest is about God. The Sabbath isn't God frowning on you if you feel the urge to enjoy yourself; the Sabbath is God smiling on you, eager to have some quiet time with you. To observe the Sabbath is to say not everything depends on me and my feverish activity; on the Sabbath we say "God matters; nothing is so alluring that it could crowd out my special day with God."

Society calls Monday the 1st day of the week. But Christians have (ever since Jesus' tomb turned up empty) named Sunday the 1st day. It is in worship, rest, trust and solitude that I get my bearings on the week about to landslide all over me. The 1st thing is my relationship with God; I do not leave it to the last, I do not let it get squeezed out. God only asks for 1 out of 7 - or maybe if we give God the 1 day out of 7, we finally discover the richness of God's presence in the other 6.

The constancy of weekly worship and rest restores the image of God the world chips away at all week long. Annie Dillard once heard a minister, while leading worship, look up to the ceiling and say, "Lord, we say these same prayers every week!" Indeed. We regain our bearings every week in worship; we rest and do nothing much - except just being together, thinking and conversing about God, reflecting on life, noticing the sunset, picking a flower or two, taking a leisurely walk; we drink deeply from the water, store it up, and launch out into the week like a camel. These Sabbath delights are what give meaning to the rest of the week, which we will examine in our next email...

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eShape of the Christian Life 10 - Night

"The Lord who keeps you does not slumber" (Psalm 121:3).

If we awaken to God and make ourselves available to God in the morning, then how do we notice God like a tender mother tucking us away at the end of the day? Am I just too weary to think of God? Is my head a little woozy? With chagrin, someone told me, "When I get in bed and try to pray, I just fall asleep." How perfect. Like a toddler nestled in dad's lap, able to rest in cozy security, drifting off, held securely.

Mother Teresa said, "At the end of the day, look at your hands, and ask them, 'Where have you been today? and what have you done?'" If you would be close to God, you rigorously assess the day you have just been given by God, and in the light of the all-consuming love of Jesus, you notice the shadows: one hand did reach into the cookie jar, the other was merciful; one hand waved God off more than once, the other handed food to the hungry. Confession is the opposite of negative thinking. My passion is to love God with every fiber of my being, in each moment, tangibly - and so to ask, not how do I feel about my day, but God, what is your read on my day? is the most positive, healthy, hopeful, progressive thought conceivable. And new life is conceived! Yes, I fell woefully short today - but I pray for the power to do better tomorrow, and I relax into my pillow, relishing the curious joy of being able to let it go, to enjoy living as a forgiven person.

And as a grateful person. No matter how exhausted you think you are, devote a few minutes to a highlight reel of the blessings of the day, however small, and the fog of tiredness will lift. You breathed, you ate, the dog curled up at your ankle, the tree swayed in the breeze, the Church is still standing. Look at your hands, fold them, and be thankful. You can rest now, in the comfort that God is good, and it's not all up to you.

Isn't it odd that the day is only 24 hours? When stuffing my calendar, I wish I had 39 hours... but not really. God is merciful in allowing us a mere 24, or else we'd kill ourselves. And how bizarre that God wired us so that up to one-third of the 24 you miss entirely. Try as you might to be Atlas, hoisting the world on your shoulders, you can never get cocky, for you have to sleep, and in the dark when your eyes are shut, God is holding the world up just fine without you. This principle will hold tomorrow when the sun's up, too.

The darkness and quiet of evening are calming, but perilous: things go bump in the night. If the morning sunrise is a little mini-Easter every day, then perhaps the sunset is a little mini-funeral every day. "Now I lay me down to sleep... if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." One night will be your last, and the only waking up left to do will be with the God who gave you today. Each night, rehearse for your eventual death, trusting yourself into God's hands. So pray every evening with Cardinal Newman, "O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in your great mercy, grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at last."

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eShape of the Christian Life 9 - Morning

"Joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5).

If the Christian life begins anywhere, it must be when the clock radio tolls; you rub your eyes, stretch, drag yourself down the hall, and the daily scramble begins. Got up on the wrong side of the bed? What about getting up on the right side, the faith side, being in tune with God at the very launching of the day?

When I have read about Mother Teresa or John Wesley rising at 5 a.m. to pray for two hours before breakfast, I feel annoyed or indifferent. "I'm not a morning person!" The synapses in my brain don't fire before the second cup of coffee; with kids and early appointments, morning is the worst conceivable time to cram in a devotion.

If you can carve out significant time with God before the rush of the day, then good! But even if you aren't a "morning person," some simple habits might strangely transform (and calm down) the balance of the day. When you are first jostled from sleep, notice your very first breath - and say "Thank you, Lord." The grace of God has added another day to your life; that breath is a divine gift. Focus your eyes, and reflect for a nanosecond on the gift of sight. Hear a cricket, taste the juice, look into the face of your roommate, spouse, child (or your own in the mirror) - and for a millisecond thank God for the beauty of that face (even if etched with a crease from the pillow or still devoid of

makeup). Develop the habit of momentary gratitude for all the small details that make life worth getting out of bed.

Morning bears so many palpable expressions of God's grace. The freshening dew (Hosea 14:5), the fog lifting, Venus brilliant (Revelation 22:16), a bird chirping praise, darkness banished (2 Peter 1:19). The women discovered Jesus' tomb empty at dawn, so every morning is a mini-Easter. In Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*, Quentin says "Every morning when I awake I'm full of hope, I'm like a boy! For an instant, there's some unformed promise in the air. If I could corner that hope...and make it mine..."

How to make the hope of the new day mine? As you walk downstairs, or back out of the driveway, whisper "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). However briefly, never start any day without praying, "Lord, use me today. Sharpen my vision so I may notice your presence." Mother Teresa urged us, "Try to feel the need for prayer often during the day." Maybe we could pray, "Lord, remind me to pray today."

Bonhoeffer was right: "The beginning of the day should not be oppressed with besetting concerns for the day's work. At the threshold of the new day stands the Lord who made it. All the darkness of the night retreats before the clear light of Jesus Christ. All unrest, all impurity, all care and anxiety flee before him. Therefore at the beginning of the day, let the first thought and the first word belong to him to whom our whole life belongs."

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eShape of the Christian Life 8 - Magic Show

"The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness" (Psalm 24:1).

"He's got the whole world in his hands" is not just a cute song children learn in Sunday School. God made the world, and God holds this world: these are the spectacles through which everything we see comes into true focus. In *Beach Music*, Pat Conroy writes that Jordan's greatest fear "was that he would be buried alive in that American topsoil of despair and senselessness where one felt nothing, where being alive was simply a provable fact instead of a ticket to a magic show." God's fantastically creative hand has strewn wonders all around this theater in which we find ourselves - and the least we can do is notice. The "shape of the Christian Life" is one of slack-jawed wonder. We stop and smell the rose because the color and scent give glory to God. We shut off the lights and stare at the night sky, pinholes of light that God sent streaming toward us for millions of years piercing the darkness. Christians pay attention; they notice, marvel, and give thanks.

Then there's the ownership issue. We know all about possessing, how to put ink on a deed or contract. Coleridge once wrote that the Jews "would not willingly tread upon the smallest piece of paper in their way, but picked it up; for possibly, said they, the name of God may be upon it." In not-entirely-invisible ink, God has written the divine name on all the paper, all the stuff, the ground, the money, you, me, the other guy... You and I are just the caretakers, the stewards of whatever we happen to have at the moment. And if all my stuff, all my money, all my energy belongs to God, then I dispose of it all differently. My grip loosens. And I cannot be possessed by possessions, since I don't really have any, do I?

Strange how this works: if I see the ink of God's name on everything, then I calm down considerably, and I have to control myself from rudely laughing out loud when people around me talk cloyingly about their self-indulgent projects - or from weeping out of pity for what might have been, or what might still be if we could open our tight fists and stop clinging to what isn't really ours in the first place. It all belongs to God. If we could ever "get" this, we would be set free from endless anxieties and preoccupations, and God's work in the world would prosper, too.

You've been handed a ticket to a magic show. Get on into the theater! but you have to open your hand, you have to let go, you have to relish the show, and don't forget to find the owner of the theater, who is also the choreographer of the show (and also the one who gave you the ticket) and say "Thanks" with your life - which isn't really yours either.

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eShape of the Christian Life 7 - Rights

"Every good and perfect gift is from above" (James 1:17).

When people talk about values or try to resolve issues, the trump card they believe will win every hand is "I have the right to..." Didn't the Founding Fathers declare that we "are endowed by our Creator with unalienable rights"? Odd - because in God's grammar (that alien language of our faith), "rights" is a misguided way to think about life on this planet.

Were there no God at all, the notion of "rights" would still be a recipe for irresolvable antagonism. Mary Ann Glendon, who teaches law at Harvard, notices in America's "rights talk" a disturbing "starkness, legalistic character, exaggerated absoluteness, hyperindividualism, and a silence with respect to responsibility." She believes the shrill insistence on rights has ruined democracy and shortchanged citizenship. Flatly asserted, "I have this right!" leaves no room for exploration, no room for give and take. Little wonder debates cannot be resolved. Does the conceived child have a "right to life"? or does the woman have a "right to choose"? Do people have a right to privacy? or do citizens have a right to safety that overrides? Do we have the right to attack a country? or does the world have the right to put on the brakes?

Usually, the notion of "rights" plays out as "my right," which is pretty different from me defending "your right," or those who have no "rights" at all. Not only do Americans have countless "rights," but they curiously have no legal duty to come to the aid of someone in danger. Rights without responsibilities? God turns all this on its ear and lovingly suggests we have no rights, but many responsibilities.

Instead of "rights," the Bible speaks of "gifts." If there are any "rights," God has them all! - because every good gift comes down from above. There is no "right to life." Life is a gift, and this may be the compelling reason we do not have the right to take life. I do not have 'rights' over my own body; God has those 'rights.' My body is a gift of God, an instrument to be used in service to God, a temple of God's Spirit, not a theater for my own spirit.

What is "responsibility"? It is "response"-ability! We are able to respond to God's gifts, and we not only must but are eager to come to the aid of others. Are we just splitting hairs? Hardly. Isn't it freeing to think I am not a fist seizing my rights? but instead I am an open hand, gratefully receiving gifts from a loving God? Rights are about me; gifts are about us. Rights require law; gifts require love. Rights build walls; gifts open doors. Rights I cling to; gifts I share. Rights depend on government; gifts come down from God. The Shape of the Christian Life is primarily gratitude, not assertion, and we turn next to delight in God's good gifts and our response-ability to live thankfully.

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eShape of the Christian Life 6 - Happiness

"The fruit of the Spirit is joy" (Galatians 5:22).

In America, "the pursuit of happiness" is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, and it seems to go without saying that parents want their children to be happy, couples want to be happy, workers hope to be happy in employment. We pray to God for help being happy.

How bizarre, then, to notice that the Bible doesn't tell you how to be happy, or even that you should try. In God's eyes, happiness is a chimera, a mirage. Not that it doesn't exist: it does, and some of us marshal more happiness than others, measured in fun, pleasure, and comfort, which are the benefits of some unpredictable mixture of hard work and sheer luck. God is interested in something for us that's deeper than fun, pleasure and comfort. And that something can be had neither by hard work nor by luck. It's a gift, and it's so different from run-of-the-mill "happiness" that we give it a different name: "joy."

Happiness vs. joy? Is this just a word game? Hardly - and the difference widens the more deeply we probe. Happiness depends on circumstances; joy depends on God. Happiness registers as feelings, which are less predictable than the weather; joy hinges on truth. Happiness is about me; joy is shared. Happiness says I must satisfy

every desire that pops up; joy is prepared to delay satisfaction. Happiness lives by how well things go today; joy hangs on God's future, and is "the power of being cheerful in circumstances we know to be desperate" (G.K. Chesterton). Joy has its immense comforts and pleasures, and is great fun, but is far richer, brighter, leaving fleeting happiness in the shade.

The paradox hidden in the very marrow of life, God's most clever bit of loving humor, is that you cannot pursue joy. Aim for it? and you are wired to miss every time. Joy strikes you from behind, when you aren't looking, while you're pedaling toward God, faithful to God's tasks. Someone taps you on the shoulder and asks if you are joyful. "Why yes, I hadn't thought about it..." and then you're back to your focus on God. It's all gift, it's never a "right" - and we will speak of "rights" next time...

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eShape of the Christian Life 5 - Friendship

"Jonathan loved David as he loved his own soul" (1 Samuel 20:17).

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam summed up his findings about American society by a single example: "More Americans are bowling than ever before, but league bowling has plummeted." Can we explain why we stick to ourselves and are less involved with others? People are cocooning, not connecting at a deep level. If the culture defines me as a "consumer," then I value relationships only as they are useful, as they support my agenda. We have forgotten how to deal with differences.

Little wonder we are lonely. We may have a gaggle of fun-loving acquaintances; we may go to cool parties - but we may rub elbows in a crowd but our hearts never touch. In our world, a "friend" is someone with whom you have fun, someone who likes the same things, someone I agree with, someone who mirrors my self back to me in a way that makes me feel good about myself.

How alien to ancient notions of friendship. Socrates saw friendship as a "school of virtue." Friends help each other to become good, to gain wisdom. For Aristotle, "the opposite of a friend is a flatterer." Flattery feeds my narcissism. We need friends who care about the truth. "To love someone is to help that person to love God; to be loved is to be helped toward God" (Kierkegaard). Why does Church bother to exist? "God has given us company so that we will know how rightly to worship" - and live (Stanley Hauerwas).

Just as I will never improve at football, playing bridge, or square dancing by myself, so I will never grow toward Christ without a friend or two. I may or may not naturally "like" such a friend; we may or may not have "fun." The friend who is unlike me may stretch me toward Jesus, for I don't look so much like him either. If God became human in Jesus, and he drew about himself a company of friends, then does our failure to connect with others at a deep level shield us from God? Dorothy Day said, "We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other... We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love, and that love comes with community."

So I poke a hole in the hard cocoon, and search for somebody, anybody, who will draw me out of myself and explore questions that matter. Pray, ask God to send a friend or two, a little group if you're lucky, to quench the loneliness, to peer out together beyond this world. Take a chance; open up. The other person is just as hungry, just as weary of superficiality. Connect. Pray for each other, tell the truth. Love. Be friends.

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eShape of the Christian Life 4 - Physical Therapy and Foreign Language

"I press on toward the goal for the price of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14).

A friend was in a car crash, surviving multiple fractures to her hip, legs and feet. The bones healed, but she had to

battle through months of physical therapy before she could actually walk. Not only had her muscles atrophied for lack of use; the doctor suggested the neurological linkage between her brain and muscles had fallen asleep.

You were made in God's image, intended for the kind of beauty Michelangelo approximated in stone and fresco. But repeated collisions with a culture that thinks nothing about God (not to mention your sinful nature) wreck your God-given beauty. You get flabby. In your laziness you adjust to the mess of your life. The delicate fibers tying soul, heart and spirit into real life shut down. "I'll just stay where I am, the junkyard isn't such a bad place; there are so many cool people here." If you care about the Christian Life, you have to get in shape, and climb up and out of the old life via the regimen of worship, prayer, Bible reading - not just "nice" activities, but the difference between languishing flat on your back and being able to run and dance.

Or maybe the Christian life is akin to a foreign language. I wish I could just start speaking and comprehending Spanish. Listen to a single Russian tape, drop by an Arabic class twice, and your confusion will be dizzying. A language demands an investment of time, study, gradual improvement, embarrassing failures, toddling steps of progress, commitment; eventually you begin to understand, the grammar sinks in, you communicate. Even if you learned French once upon a time, you lose it if you don't use it. Christianity doesn't "take" in childhood Sunday School, without lifelong persistence.

The Christian Life will never assume lovely shape as long as you worship when it's convenient, if your relationship with God is limited to a seventeen second prayer here and reading Howell's email there. Jesus called "disciples" - a word meaning both "students" and "discipline." The antidote to a bumbling, lackluster faith is discipline, regularity, a re-carved schedule, so prayer is not a quickie, so the Bible isn't something I "ought" to read, so getting involved in mission isn't a nice idea I'm glad the teenager down the street is doing. The disciplines of the faith are the divine origami whereby our mis-shapen souls are revamped into God's image.

Christianity isn't merely like a language or exercise. Faith is something you do with your body: reaching out, serving, sweating, refraining, touching, hammering, kneeling, smiling; new skills and literal muscles are required. Faith really is another language, with a peculiar vocabulary, a grammar alien to the way the rest of the world thinks. In the next three emails, we will wreak some havoc with three notions that supposedly define the good life: friendship, "rights," and happiness. In the meantime, hustle on down to the therapist. Lift that Bible, go to your knees, open that tight fist, and use that open hand to be generous, to welcome a stranger, or just to signal to God that you're available.

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eShape of the Christian Life 3 - in Motion

"Be doers of the word, not just hearers" (James 1:22).

From our first two reflections, we might be tempted to nestle among the pillows, imagining faith as a nicely painted still-life. Those old Bibles with pictures portrayed Jesus as sitting still, the disciples posed around him in fixed positions, motionless, gazing - but this mental image forgets that "faith" is a verb, that in its opening years Christianity was called "the way" (or "the road"), that the Christian life really is alive. I love the 1966 Pasolini film "The Gospel According to St. Matthew." Jesus pulsates with energy; he cannot sit still. He is always in motion, hurrying to the next village, talking rapidly - and the nearly breathless disciples gallop to keep up. He literally teaches on the run, looking back over his shoulder as he's moving, as they rush to catch every word.

Whoever decided Christianity was boring or somehow lacking in action? Jesus keeps us on the move, pressing into new places, making a difference, bumping into things and people, doing something even if we cannot see immediate results, eager to keep pace with Jesus in his zeal to transform the world, not thinking twice about my comfort and taking my rest. But we do not get exhausted, because we are going somewhere, we have a purpose, we are energized not by our own depletable resources, but by the inexhaustible power of God.

Pasolini's vision of the disciples swept up into motion, going and doing before they even have heard that much of the message fits not just the Gospel stories, but our own lives. You and I forever hesitate, holding back, waiting to get all my religious knowledge down pat, to have all my questions answered, to grow comfortable with our beliefs before we

actually do anything. But the learning is in the doing, and we cannot make sense of the content of our faith until we are acting out what that faith is about. Look at Jesus, or a Bible verse, or some belief - then go and do something. Put some flesh on it out there. Live it, and then you'll understand it. Seminaries recently have begun to weigh how much is lost when students learn theology in arid classrooms with thick textbooks open, and how much is gained when students learn theology in the field, among the poor, at a clinic, in the thick of congregational life.

The "shape" of the Christian life is something we do with our bodies, and so like athletes we begin training, we notice a good bit of flabbiness in our selves, but we get moving, working the muscles, gathering strength and agility. How we train ourselves will be the subject of our next email...

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eShape of the Christian Life 2 - Wherever I am

"You shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Keep these words in your heart. Recite them, talk about them when you are at home and away, when you lie down and rise up. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them on your forehead, write them on the door of your house" (Deuteronomy 6:5-9).

For those of us who are not good at being still, who do not know how to stop, it may help to reflect upon the one thing that will stop you dead in your tracks - and that is Love. Boy meets girl, and suddenly the crammed agenda of urgent things to do becomes a blur, fades into oblivion, and he is still, an excited calm, daydreaming, imagining her face, recollecting her voice. Time waltzes by, unnoticed.

Or, the telephone rings, and the news makes your knees buckle. Again, the urgency of the crammed agenda is vacuumed into irrelevance, and for days you lose track of time as some machine beeps by the hospital bed, and you do not move, because you love.

I have tried to think of a single image to capture what the Christian life is like, an image that, if we could paste it on the dashboard, if we could whisper it to ourselves throughout the day, we would stay on track, garnering some feeble confidence we are in sync with God's will. Obviously love will have be at the heart of it - and so I turn to a lovely little prayer from Thomas Merton: "Let this be my only consolation, that wherever I am, You, my Lord, are loved." What if we made this the focus on life, the goal toward which we press, the achievement in which we took holy pride? that wherever I am, Lord, no matter what else happens, You are loved, and that the way I am, the way I think, and the way I act somehow embodies that love? Everything else may fail, I may not play the violin well or have a stack of money - but Lord, wherever I am, at least one thing is guaranteed, that in that very spot, You are loved.

Notice the Lord is to be loved not just in Church, not just when kneeling in prayer, not just when the Bible is open, not just when you're staring into this computer. But wherever I am! There's no hiding from God anyhow, and really there's no reason to want to hide. For wherever I am, I am loved by God. So let me be sure that wherever I am, God is loved. The shape of the Christian life, then, is not some rigid adherence to rules, and the motivation is never fear - and I do not expect perfection from myself. For love is always a bit amateurish, awkward, yet determined, passionate, relentless, patient, understanding. It is love that will calm me down, block out the chaos, banish my fear, and lift me beyond myself - wherever I am.

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eShape of the Christian Life 1 - Stillness

"Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10)

And so we begin this exploration of the life of faith. What is the shape of the Christian life? In this series, we will focus on what we do, and what we refrain from doing; on our thoughts and attitudes, juggling complex demands, acting out our beliefs, coping with crises, getting busy in service to God, and much more. But first, before we go anywhere in life, much less in this series, we have to stop. Like a hunter who barely hears a twig snap, we turn, we wait, eyes wide open, ears cocked, wondering instead of just presuming what God wants, waiting for a new adventure instead of trying to piggyback God on the old routine.

For most of us, our lives are like some overloaded train rambling out of control. But instead of applying the brakes, we frantically shove more coal into the engine, going faster, taking on more cargo, rushing toward... well, we aren't sure at all where we're going. To be remotely serious about the Christian life, you have to stop, leap from the train if you have to, scrape your knees and elbows, then stand, dust yourself off, and be still. Wait.

"Be still and know that I am God" - and I've always thought the Psalmist should have added, "and you aren't." I am not God, and neither are you. You and I cannot be masters of our own fate. The world says "It's all up to you, so hurry, cram, grab, load it up." But as Maggie Ross gently suggests, "When you feel empty, it's not because you are empty; rather, the problem is, you are full of the wrong stuff."

To begin to understand the hollowness we feel inside, we have to slam on the brakes, watch the house of cards tumble into a heap - but then the cards are all on the table, and we look across at God and see his tender, firm, loving face. God reaches across the messy table, takes your hand gently, strongly, and says "Be still, and know that I am God." "But what am I supposed to do?" And God answers, "Nothing just yet. Just be still. Get calm inside. Be with me for a while."

We'll need each other to stay still. Nicholas Lash spoke of the Church as a "school of stillness." As you gaze into this computer screen, you are not alone. Together, we can be a school of stillness. Together we wait (we who are not God), we long, itching a little as we wonder what God will do. And this will be the clue to what we will do. Be still.

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