
WITH GLADNESS

Answering God's Call
in Our Everyday Lives

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FORWARD MOVEMENT
Cincinnati, Ohio

About the cover: The mosaic ceiling of the Florence Baptistery.

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**Forward
Movement**

inspire disciples. empower evangelists.

For the people of
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
in San Rafael, California

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Introduction

You are body and soul.

I make that claim about you because I am a Christian. An atheist would say that you are just a body, and the word “soul” is a kind of metaphor for a bunch of chemicals combining to produce thoughts and feelings. No God, no soul. But a Christian believes that she is body and soul, and while one ceases to function at our earthly death, the other, in a way that is still mysterious to us, can, by grace, continue eternally with God. While the glory of life eternal is a gift incomprehensible, I wonder if we can live now in such a way that we get a foretaste of this eternal life with God. Can we love and serve God now with gladness and singleness of heart?

This book emerges from a failure to answer that question well. For nearly a decade, I have been building and developing a renewal movement called The Restoration Project. This movement is centered on the practices of prayer, worship, and service, with small-group gatherings nurturing people as disciples of Jesus. While the movement inspired people across the country to grow in spiritual depth, I hit a roadblock in February of 2018. The Restoration Project team hosted a gathering of forty people from around the country who were either already in Discipleship Groups or wanting to learn more about them. Discipleship Groups are at the heart of The Restoration Project movement. These small groups are

structured for Christian maturity and mission by encouraging seven core Christian practices. Each meeting of a Discipleship Group starts with a liturgy that includes the recitation of seven vows, one for each practice. Over the course of the gathering, we often broke into small groups to discuss, in sequence, each of the seven practices. Six of the seven conversations were inspiring and educational. The one that failed was about “call.”

People loved the language of the vow: “By God’s grace, I will listen for God’s call on my life, confident that I have been ‘given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’” (1 Corinthians 12:7), entrusting my Discipleship Group to test and support that call.” But we kept running into two problems with the vow. The first was that, despite years of effort, those of us leading The Restoration Project in our parishes and dioceses had proven unable to shake the idea that “call” applies only to clergy, monks, nuns, and missionaries. For ordinary lay people, call doesn’t really apply, and further, even for clergy, it only applied that one time when we were trying to figure out, with the help of our church, if we should be ordained. After that, the word seemed to be too often discarded. Perhaps we knew in our heads that this wasn’t quite true, but when we gathered and faced the opportunity to apply the vow to our own lives, we discovered not only a profound disconnect but also a failure to get any momentum in conversation.

The other problem with the vow was the lack of specificity. Each of the other vows has a specific goal. We are to work toward twenty minutes a day of prayer, an hour a week in service of the poor, giving ten percent to the church and those

in need, and some knowledge of the whole of scripture. Each of these is a concrete goal toward which we can work. Although the language in the vow on call was lovely and evocative, it didn't hold us accountable for anything concrete. The vow proved to be a dead end.

This was particularly sad for me because I felt that call was the culminating practice of The Restoration Project. The man who inspired The Restoration Project, Gordon Cosby, taught me that we each have a call and do not come fully alive until we follow it. Further, while there are likely to be similar patterns in our call throughout our lives, call manifests itself in different ways in different seasons of our lives. When we created the liturgy of the Discipleship Groups, the idea was that the other six vows fulfilled their purpose when they pointed to and supported us to go out into the world to do the work God sends us to do. With an ineffective vow on call, we had a machine that was missing its most important part.

After the retreat, the leaders of The Restoration Project, both at my church, St. Paul's in San Rafael, California, and from churches in Nebraska, Indiana, and Florida, began revising the vow and testing it out with a variety of groups. In the spring of 2019, I was invited to St. John's Cathedral in Jacksonville, Florida, to preach and teach on the new vow. We received the affirmation for which we had been hoping. After a church service, I shared some of the material that you will find in this book. I explained the power in the practice of simply naming the work that is before us and trusting that it is work that God has sent us to do. My friend Kate Moorehead, the dean of the

cathedral, jumped in and said that her son would be coming back from college in the coming week. Her work—call, if you will—was to establish healthy boundaries for his summer at home and to prepare the room above the garage so that he wasn't forced to sleep in his brother's bedroom.

After the talk was over, a woman came up to both of us with tears in her eyes. This was particularly striking because she had been one of the acolytes in the service, and I noticed and admired her sense of presence, calm, and intentionality, even wearing a knowing and winsome smile as she served. She thanked Kate and me for the teaching and said that when she heard the words call, vocation, or gift, she had an automatic response on the inside that said, “That’s not about me, that’s not about me.” She coupled those words with a firm and clear gesture of pushing something away with her hands. But after our discussion, she understood call in a new way—as the practice of naming ordinary, everyday work and coming to embrace that each work could be done for the glory of God.

This book offers a path for you to identify and answer God’s call in your everyday life. In these pages, I share with you a daily prayer and seven gentle practices to help you embrace a new and ancient way of being a Christian in the world, body and soul.

The book can be read either alone or in conjunction with a prayer partner, spiritual director, or small group. I’m seeking a style of writing where, in one sitting, you can read through the chapter and get going on the practice for that week. At the same time, each chapter, with the help of scripture and some

profound Christian voices, has enough density that, throughout the week, as you implement the prayer and gentle practice, you can return to the chapter and chew a bit more on what's there.

This process is ideal for use during Lent. If you read the first chapter on Ash Wednesday, you will end up reading the last chapter on the Wednesday of Holy Week, just before entering into the great days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. But it doesn't have to be used in Lent. Anytime you feel ready to focus on the life of your soul such that you would like to move through your ordinary days with gladness and singleness of heart, I encourage you to give this book a try.

Christopher H. Martin

Guiding Principles: How to Use This Book

As you work through the book, please bear in mind three methods in our way of proceeding. These three methods are words, shifts, and repetitions.

The first method in our process is how we pay attention to words. Each chapter draws focused attention to a small handful of words. Some of them will be familiar, used along the lines of what you might expect. Examples are the words sent, work, and singleness. Other words are given some very specific meanings that are particular to the practices. These are words like sabbath, conviction, and Beauty with a capital B. Part of the practice is like learning a new language. When you're learning Spanish, you look at a dog and think to yourself *perro*, until it becomes second nature and you don't have to make an effort anymore: *perro* comes as easily as the word dog.

We will also proceed with a high respect for the power of words. The Christian poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, "accustom yourself to reflect on the words you use... for if words are not things, they are living powers, by which things of most importance to (humankind) are actuated, combined and humanized."¹ By slowing down and paying attention to just a few words each week, I invite you to actuate, combine, and humanize the events and the thoughts that occur to you as you move through your days in such a way that you love and serve God with gladness and singleness of heart.

Secondly, it is important to view each of the gentle practices as small and subtle shifts in our souls. Just as a chiropractor or physical therapist might have you practice shifts in the way you hold your head, attend to your low back as you sit, or shift your shoulders as you stand, so these gentle practices improve the posture of your soul. Understanding this method is likely to become increasingly important as you embrace the gentle practices.

For many people, the practices might feel overwhelming. That was Brigitte's experience the first time I taught this material. I had already introduced the daily prayer and two of the gentle practices. Brigitte was trying to do them all and was overwhelmed. It was like walking, chewing gum, rubbing her belly, and patting her head at the same time! When you are working on your body's posture, it often helps to focus on one of the shifts, such as putting your shoulders back. That one focus can then help the other shifts come into place for you. So it is with these prayers and practices. Focus on one at a time and don't get overly concerned about the others at the moment. They are called gentle practices precisely because we can easily get frustrated with ourselves and judgmental about a new effort we are pursuing.

I share these gentle practices in the spirit of the great teacher of centering prayer, Thomas Keating. He repeatedly reminds us that when we sit in silence in Christian meditation, we are to use our prayer word, like the word God or Love, to nudge aside ever-so-gently whatever thought begins to preoccupy us. Likewise, as we move through the course of our ordinary days, we are invited to gently practice improving the posture

of our soul as we look at faces, name our work, pray and reflect, smile our secret smile, use our wound, or name our spiritual home. We are invited to do one at a time, particularly the first time we read through this book.

At the same time, these gentle practices are well worth revisiting more than once. Writing this book is now the sixth time that I have shared this material. Each time I revisit it, a different element of the work emerges as the one that draws me in and shifts me. These shifts are happening in two ways. The first is the shift in what I pay attention to and how I pay that attention. For example, in one of the gentle practices, I invite you to pay attention to each human face you see in a different way. We are also invited to experience a shift through our bodies. When we shift our attention to, for example, our side or our mouth, we are reminded to shift the posture of our soul and live with just a bit more gladness and singleness of heart.

Our final method is to be attentive to repetition. A violinist constantly repeats scales, whatever her level of virtuosity, and a ballet dancer constantly repeats basic dance moves with a hand on the bar, whether he is a beginner or part of a professional company. The repetition assures competence and beauty. One great violinist said that if he didn't practice for one day, he could tell. If he didn't practice for two days, an expert could tell. If he didn't practice for three days, everyone could tell. It is the attentive repetition of practice that keeps the beauty fresh.

In my freshman year, I perhaps foolishly volunteered with my friend Adam to be the first to present a scene in an acting class. We chose a scene between Brick and Big Daddy from

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof by Tennessee Williams. Despite a lot of practice, we were terrible. The teacher, who we found out later had worked closely with Williams and had been the director of several of his debuts, was kind. He told us that when Degas painted the legs of a ballerina, he sketched line after line on the paper until he got the line that was just right. We were to rehearse scenes in the same spirit. The lesson was clear. Creating a through-line for a scene for an actor means repeating the scene in rehearsal, finding many different ways from the beginning to the end until it becomes clear how I make the life of that particular character believable and compelling. The words of the scene are the same each time. But movement, gesture, and tone can take on infinitely shaded variation. The repetition of the same lines, for a lively actor, provides not monotony but an infinite invitation to creativity.

So it can be in our real lives. Our lives are filled with repetitions. We drive the same routes, exchange pleasantries with the same people, and are given the same daily tasks. The art is to discover and claim what theologian and poet Catherine Pickstock calls the gift of “the happy ability to vary the quotidian, to take delight in the subtle variations of day after day shared with friends, or with a marriage partner.”² It is in a new alertness to these “day after day” repetitions that we begin to improve the posture of our souls.

Just as you stand strong when your feet are planted and walk well when you attend to a healthy stride, so the posture of our soul begins with a metaphor about our feet. To begin our traverse of this book and its practices, I invite you to put on Camino boots. In 2010, one of my best friends and I agreed to

walk the ancient Christian pilgrimage of the Camino. The most popular version of the Camino has pilgrims cross north Spain, westward bound to Santiago de Compostela, where the church remembers that the bones of Saint James the Apostle lie. We diligently researched and found many places online with advice about how to prepare and what to pack. All sources were united in one piece of advice: you must break in your boots before you begin the Camino. My Camino buddy bought the boots in plenty of time but didn't have the opportunity to break them in properly. Sure enough, by day four, his feet were a blistering wreck, and we traveled half our usual distance at half our usual speed while his feet got tough, and his boots got soft. By the end of the Camino, we were capable of long days of strong and joyful walking.

The two boots for your soul are worship and prayer. When these two are well-worn into your life, you can more easily embrace the gentle practices. Worship means praying with people every Sunday. For the purposes of this book, weekly worship is an expected part of your spiritual life; the power of the sabbath prayer and reflection will help you integrate the five gentle practices.

Prayer means twenty minutes of solitary prayer each day. The twenty minutes a day is neither arbitrary nor prescriptive. Research shows that people who pray for twenty minutes or more a day express a much higher level of satisfaction with their prayer life than those who pray less than that. We are specific about the minimum time spent, but what you do with that time is between you and God. After teaching prayer for more than two decades, I have found that almost everyone has

a baseline practice of either centering prayer or some other variation of Christian meditation or Morning Prayer as found in *The Book of Common Prayer*. Your creative work is to find a way of prayer that works for you and then, in the words of the great spiritual director, Abbot John Chapman, to “pray as you can, and don’t try and pray as you can’t.”³

The work of improving the posture of your soul begins with concluding your prayer time each day with prayer. The first chapter introduces a prayer, explains it, and then invites you to pray it each day, alongside a gentle practice of reminding yourself that the work is very near you. Chapters two and three introduce the gentle practices to look at each face and name each work. In chapter four, the gentle practice is to pray and reflect on the sabbath. The sabbath prayer invites reflection such that the gentle practices start to integrate themselves into our body and soul. In weeks five and six, I introduce two more gentle practices. These gentle practices are both more subtle and more profound than the first two. Find your secret smile and use your wounds to touch on and transfigure our sense of truth and reality.

In the final chapter, you are invited to name your spiritual center and with beautiful posture and graceful strength in your body and soul, to march each day toward that great goal. It invites us to imagine that we have, through the weeks of embracing these practices, changed from being disciples to being pilgrims, people who are on the Way with Jesus toward what we know is our spiritual center.

CHAPTER ONE

The Work Is Very Near You

GENTLE PRACTICE

In times of transition, think to yourself:
"The work is very near you."

WORDS

Work Send
Gentle



*O God, send me this day to do the work
you have given me to do,
to love and serve you with
gladness and singleness of heart. Amen.*

The Work Is Very Near You

We begin by introducing prayer into our daily life. Prayer helps introduce the gentle practices into our bodies and so into our lives. The daily prayer is composed of the two post-communion prayers in Rite II of *The Book of Common Prayer*. This daily prayer takes sentences we ordinarily apply to the coming week and applies them to the day before us. The prayer is:

O God, send me this day to do the work you have given me to do, to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart. Amen.

There are many powerful words in this prayer, and throughout this chapter, we will unpack these words, a process that will continue in the weeks and chapters to come.

The first word we will unpack is “work,” which is at the heart of the occasional prayer. In the Bible, the book of Deuteronomy is presented as a series of sermons Moses gives to the people of Israel. The Israelites have made it through forty years in the wilderness and are on the cusp of entering into the promised land. Moses has been told that he is not to enter the promised land with them, and so he gives his last words of counsel and advice. Near the end of this powerful book of scripture, in a crucial section, he assures the people: “The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart.” His teaching is an invitation for God’s people to take the words of the law into their hearts and to trust that God has given those words into

the care of the people so that they might live out their intimate covenant relationship with God. Some years ago, Martin Smith, then the superior of an Anglican monastic order, the Society of St. John the Evangelist, titled his book on prayerfully reading scripture, *The Word is Very Near You*. The book gently but firmly invites the reader to apply the words and images of scripture to daily life.

The prayer that I offer here replaces the word “word” with the word “work.” Here then, taken from Deuteronomy 30:11-20, is Moses’ teaching, abbreviated and slightly altered as an invitation to imagine that the work that God would have us do next is close to hand. (The words I changed or added are in italics.)

Surely the commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away...no, the *work* is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart *and in your hands*...I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity...Choose life that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God.

The act of doing the next thing that God would have us do is as life-giving as bearing in our mouths and hearts the words of scripture. The two are intimately connected. The more we know the words of scripture, the more likely we are to understand what good work God would have us do next. To make a start, we pray, especially in times of transition, by simply saying to ourselves, “The work is very near you.”

I have found that my times of transition frequently happen in the car and on the stairs. I first introduced this prayer into my daily life on my short commute to work. Getting out of my driveway and through the neighborhood always requires staying alert, so it's usually not until I'm through the first stoplight and onto a road with timed lights that my thoughts settle down, and I remind myself, "The work is very near you." Sometimes I think about my schedule of the day to come, but more often, I attend to the way I drive: being a benevolent driver in the clogged Bay Area is an active challenge. I strive to be both a courteous and non-judgmental driver. If I attend to my breath, I can usually maintain an even temper through my commute. Not judging other drivers with my thoughts is more of a challenge. And yet isn't that what Jesus asks us to do? And what a clear and straightforward place to practice! Bad drivers are all around us, providing multiple opportunities to work on our moral life.

Walking up stairs and saying this occasional prayer gives me an opportunity to think of work in the more concrete sense of the term. My office is upstairs, and the front door of my house has a landing with a few stairs. Here, I often think of the most demanding work or tasks that I sense I'm avoiding and find the determination to do that work first.

Jacob attended a class I taught on this practice. In the week after receiving this teaching, he prayed this prayer after leaving a room. Toward the end of his tenure at a health clinic, he brought in a city official with whom he had a working relationship from a previous position. His only task was to make the initial introduction between the official and two of his younger colleagues at the clinic. They were set to have a

difficult conversation about city regulations and the operation of the clinic. The conversation began in a tense and unpleasant way, and Jacob, with his part of the work over, was relieved to offer a light-hearted comment and make his way out the door. Partway down the hall, Jacob thought to himself, “The work is very near you,” and he stopped. He listened to his heart, not his head, and realized that his work right now was to stand by his young colleagues, simply as a non-anxious presence, and provide silent moral support. Jacob turned around, entered back into the room with another light-hearted comment, and sat back down. He felt deep assurance afterward that he had done the work God had given him to do.

The post-communion prayer in Rite I in *The Book of Common Prayer* has a sentence that invites an even deeper reflection on this simple practice of reminding ourselves that the work that God would have us do next always lies close to hand. After receiving communion, we pray:

*And we humbly beseech thee, O heavenly Father,
so to assist us with thy grace, that we may continue
in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works
as thou hast prepared for us to walk in.*⁴

Not only is the emphasis on doing the work, whatever that might be, but also it is explicit that we are to believe that the work has been prepared for us ahead of time. In one of the grandest promises in all scripture, Jesus assures us that he goes ahead of us to prepare a place for us in his Father’s house. Jesus tells us, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a