

I. **Intro:** 2 weeks ago I summarized the value of spiritual disciplines as practices God asks and expects us to do if we are serious about our own spiritual growth. This thought came back to me 2 days ago in an unusual place ...

A. On Friday I visited our church member Kirk Martin who's incarcerated at the Westville Correctional Facility

1. Spiritually, he's doing pretty well in that depressing place as long as he keeps focused on some advice he received recently from another Christian inmate

2. An inmate who helps lead the self-initiated worship services heard Kirk worrying ... about his aging parents, about his teenage daughter and other concerns from the “outside world”.

a) He counseled Kirk to stop obsessing about all these external circumstances that he could do absolutely nothing about and trust that friends, our church, and the Holy Spirit would see to those needs.

b) He told him to focus on what God was wanting to do in Kirk's current reality right there in Westville

c) He advised him to stop passively waiting for God to bless him and instead do something to be more obedient to God, such as applying for a college class, teaching a video discussion series, or mentoring inmates who are newer Christians or who have special developmental needs

d) The advice was to be less obsessive about the circumstances outside his control, and to be more attentive to what God is doing now, including obeying what he knows God is calling him to do

3. Kirk reported to me that things go better for him there when he follows that advice, but when he allows himself to stay upset or anxious about outside stuff, life becomes harder.

B. Friends, I think that advice also has some truth for us today, even though we enjoy a lot more daily freedoms than Kirk does

1. 2 weeks ago I noted how spiritual disciplines are tried-and-true tools that do not themselves make us grow in Christ, but they place us in position for God to produce that growth

2. I also gave us a modest challenge: to commit ourselves this summer to practice at least one of the 12 or so spiritual disciplines that we're naming in this series ... & Cindy repeated that challenge last week

a) There's an irony here when it comes to spiritual disciplines:

The more we practice them, the more we tend to notice where God is at work in our world;

but the less we engage in spiritual disciplines, the less likely we are to recognize the hand of God, because we have not put ourselves in the places where God is most active!

b) I hope that we, like Kirk, realize the value of focusing our minds more on seeing what God is already doing than on stressing out about the externals ...

c) I hope we can respond in obedience to practices God clearly wants us to do, rather than passively hoping for God to somehow produce spiritual growth in us while we spend our thoughts and energies preoccupied with other pressing things

C. So ... by way of introduction, that was an extended reminder that **everything Cindy & I taught recently about spiritual disciplines is not meant for us to be informed ... *it's meant for us to open ourselves up to be transformed by God thru these practices***

II. (Review & new description of community disciplines)

A. We started with 4 disciplines which Richard Foster, in his classic book, Celebration of Discipline, identifies: *meditation, prayer, fasting, and study.*



B. Last week Cindy introduced us to 4 so-called “outward” spiritual disciplines: *simplicity, solitude, submission & service*



C. Today we conclude this brief series by looking at some community disciplines, which are sometimes called “corporate disciplines”



1. Specifically there are 4 to name here, *confession, worship, guidance, & celebration*
2. Like the other disciplines from recent weeks, these start with an inward component ... they exist within us individually before they can be practiced by groups or communities
3. These are community disciplines because they not only draw us closer to God ... they also draw us closer to others in our community

III. **So here we go to get a glimpse of 4 community disciplines**

... Last week Cindy noted some disciplines put us at ease while others make us wonder why they're even on the list & this week is no different

A. Confession : This time we'll start off with one that's probably about as popular as fasting

1. I bet most of you had some kind of negative internal response when you saw that word “confession” ...



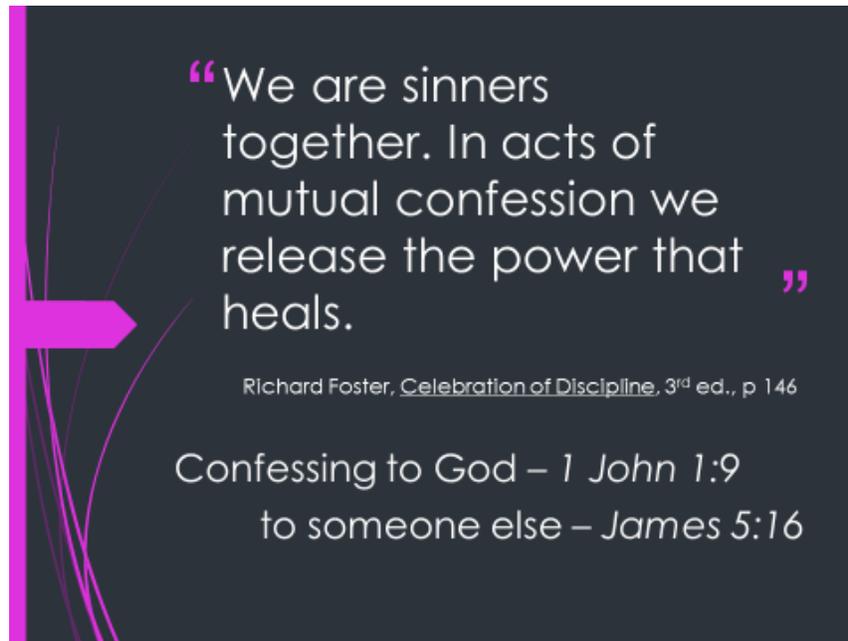
- a) If you want to make Christians squirm, try asking them this question: “As a means to spiritual growth, which would you rather do, go on a 24-hour fast from all food, or confess to a real person specific sins you’ve committed?”
- b) As much as we love to eat any time of day, many of us would prefer the private hunger that no one knows about, to the humiliation of someone knowing our particular failures
- c) Just confessing our sins at all, even privately, often brings with it feelings of shame, guilt, or crushed pride: feelings we really try to avoid
- d) If it’s hard enough to admit we’ve messed up and confess our sins to God, we can be doubly reluctant to confess sins to someone else.

2. In fact our first reaction to calling confession a community discipline may be to protest that confession is a private thing, ... you know, something just between me & God

- a) Yet James 5:16, where it says “Confess your sins to one another” , won’t go away.

b) It remains part of our Bible, much as Some of us who didn't grow up Catholic would rather ignore it.

3. In the isolated worlds we often live in today, we sometimes forget that church is a fellowship of sinners as much as a fellowship of saints. So we believe our sins to be worse than those of others.



a) *“We are sinners together. In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals.”* (Foster, p146)

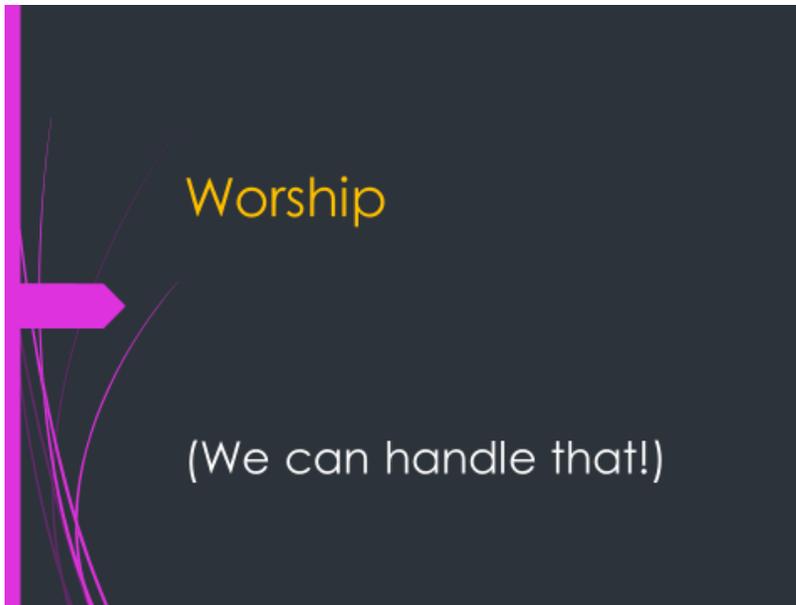
b) I John 1:9 has been called “the Christian’s bar of soap”, (*read*) ... This verse has often helped me confess my sins privately to God and move on as a forgiven person

c) Sometimes there’s a deeper, more powerful release from sin that can only come from another person hearing our confession & us hearing ourselves being forgiven

I discovered this a few weeks ago after a church member & I exchanged several emails with our differing opinions on a subject. Our honesty got the better of us in some of the things that we wrote. In order to clear the air between us, we arranged to meet to talk in person. We confessed how our own word choices had been hurtful or offensive to the other. We felt the lightness of experiencing forgiveness and found that our unity in Jesus Christ is so much greater than our differences.

4. This power of divine forgiveness channeled thru someone else is why confession is a community discipline ... & why it is not such a “downer” to be avoided, as we often think of confession.

B. Now we turn to **Worship, and you’re probably thinking “That’s more like it!”**



1. And why wouldn't we breathe a comfortable sigh?

- a) We know how to do this! We're already doing it right now, or at least that's why most of us came here this morning
- b) Won't go into great detail with this discipline because as a spiritual discipline it's probably the most familiar to us.

In fact, a little over a year ago, we devoted a whole Sunday morning series to gathered worship & its importance ... We called it "Getting Together ... For God's Sake"

Despite our varied ages, beliefs & programs, the one thing we all come together for under a common theme: gathered worship

2. There are various definitions of what we mean by gathered worship ...



a) In simple form we can say: *“Worship is the human response to the divine initiative ... ”*(Foster, p. 158)

b) Or from our own worship series a year ago: *Worship is “for God and about God. It’s not about us.”* Whether we liked the worship service or even “got anything out of it” is not the main point.

3. And why do we consider worship a spiritual discipline?

a) As Foster has described it, *“Worship is an ordered way of acting and living that sets us before God so God can transform us.”*



b) Well, here we are, a few hundred of us ...

Whether we came voluntarily or under compulsion ... whether we're eager or resistant inside, we have been set here now ... will true worship happen?

Only God can say whether we will be transformed by being here, but the openness of our hearts once we're here can make all the difference between encountering the living God and merely sitting thru a worship service.

C. The discipline of **Guidance** may be more familiar to us by the term **“Discernment”**

1. Just as I believe fasting may be the least practiced individual spiritual discipline, so spiritual discernment may be the least familiar community discipline in many churches



- a) We have grown up falsely equating decision-making with spiritual discernment
- b) This is partly due to how steeped we are in secular political processes
 - ... In many congregations people don't know any way of arriving at a course of action together other than by majority-rule voting using standard parliamentary procedure ...
 - You'd think Robert's Rules of Order were on a par with the Law of Moses!
- c) In the book by Ruth Haley Barton, which pastors & board are reading now, she quotes Chuck Olsen & Danny Morris, who help distinguish between decision-making and discernment:



2. There is a growing awareness of the need for the people of God to more regularly be listening for the will of God, rather than praying

first and then relying only on facts and human analysis

a) This was the central focus of the Feb. 2 sermons preached here by Ervin Stutzman, Exec. Dir. Of MCUSA, & his writing & speaking within the denomination have repeatedly addressed this

b) Here at Waterford, we have much to learn about discernment as a community practice, but I'd like to share two recent humble attempts in that direction:

3. When our Administrative Staffing Group launched its work in February, our chair Veronica Berkey did not have us begin with job descriptions and lists of tasks to do (although that came later). Instead we spent time with a spiritual awareness exercise.

4. Then last week, when our church board and pastors met together, congregational chair Tim Burkholder prefaced our discussion by having us spread out for 10 minutes just to listen to possible directions the Holy Spirit was drawing us to

D. Celebration is the final discipline & a fitting one to end this series [blank PPT]

1. But before talking about celebration as a spiritual discipline, let's revisit a surprising story of celebration in the Bible, coming from the 8th chapter of Nehemiah

About 450 years before Jesus was born, the Jews were returning in stages from their exile in Babylon, and over many decades, the great Temple and the protective walls of Jerusalem were being rebuilt. In Jewish history this was a very important time of redemption as a people.

After years of divine punishment and separation, the people of God were being formed again, gathering around their beloved Jerusalem as the walls were taking shape. It started to feel like the Jewish world was finally returning to the way God intended it, with the right people leading the right worship in the right place.

But all was not right in the Jewish world. Yes, the walls were rebuilt, but despite Ezra's earlier reform efforts, the people were no longer familiar with the first 5 books of the Bible. The Torah was not being consistently read and followed. So this passage shows the start of a new restoration of the Jewish faith community around Jerusalem. This was a revival of sorts.

Somehow the people realized they were not complete in God's eyes. Something was missing for them to be God's faithful community: the word of God's Law was missing! So they called for an assembly of all the men, women and the older children, in order for the Book of the Law to be read aloud, on the first day of the new year.

They built a special raised platform for the occasion. The ceremony focused on the reading of the Law. They read it from early morning until noon! God's word was given special honor ... when

the priest opened up the book everyone stood out of respect. They stayed there for hours! They even had special holy servants called the Levites distributed among the common people, to make sure they understood what they were hearing

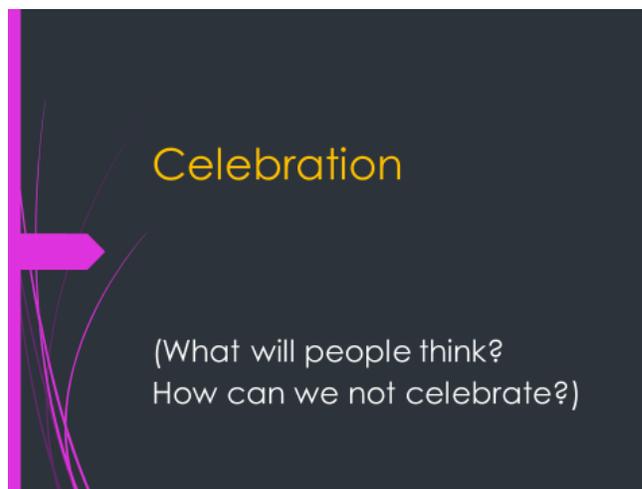
The results were impressive, but maybe not what the leaders expected. The people were weeping! Maybe they were overwhelmed with emotion at hearing God's story & their ancestors' story! Maybe they cried because they recognized how far they had fallen away from God.

That's when the leaders intervened to set the tone right. They essentially said, *“This day is too holy for weeping and mourning! Go have a party to celebrate, and make sure everyone has enough party food to eat! Don't be sad, because your strength is found in the joy of the LORD!”*

So they switched their mourning to celebrating. In fact, they didn't just celebrate one day. They rediscovered the Festival of Booths from Lev. 23, & so they kept on rejoicing and reading from God's Law. As a community they did eventually fast and put on sackcloth and ashes to confess their failings, but this was not until the 24th day of that month.

You see, there was an appropriate time for solemn confession of their sins, but celebration was absolutely central to their life with God! Being in God's presence as a community and hearing God speak to them through the Torah was cause enough for celebration! Even if God's word told them things they preferred not to hear, the news of God's faithfulness, God's saving works and God's commandments to them was ultimately good news indeed!

2. We Mennonites are a little ambivalent about celebrations ...



- a) Some of us have been taught to hold our emotions in check, and not be proud or wasteful, which means we can take life pretty seriously ...
- b) Others among us were born to party, and are ready to have a celebration at the drop of a hat ... too bad Pastor Cindy isn't here for a hearty amen ...

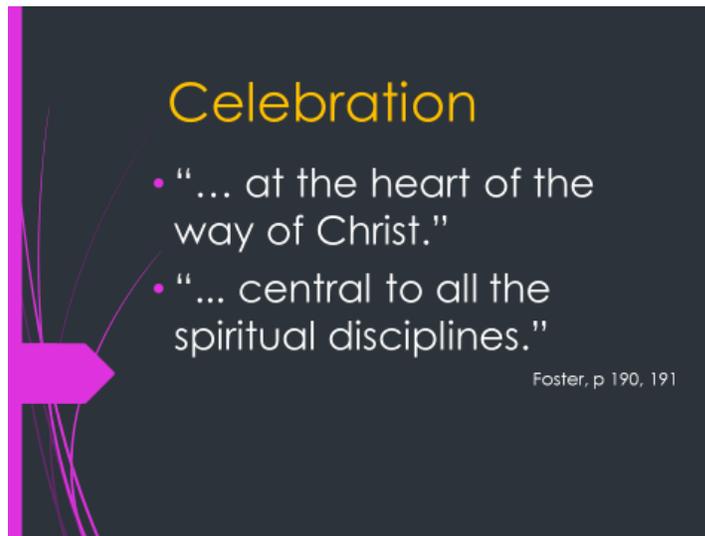
on 2nd thought, she's doing exactly what I'm talking about: taking

a weekend away with Luke for their wedding anniversary

In fact, makes me wonder why I'm here preaching this sermon ...
Velma is away celebrating a new grandchild ... & Lyle is
celebrating his graduation from AMBS

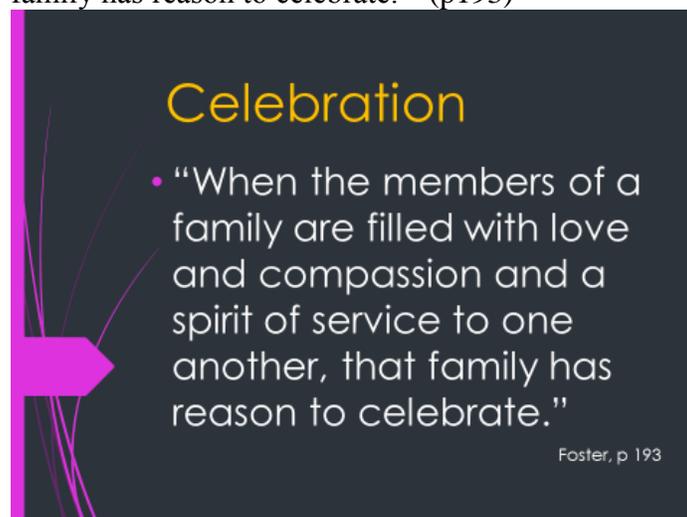
I'm the only pastor this weekend not celebrating some personal
milestone!

3. Ultimately, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead to give us
newness of life, celebration is what it's all about! Foster has
summarized it well *Celebration is at the heart of the way of Christ. In
fact, it is central to all the spiritual disciplines.* (Foster, p 190-1)



a) Celebration is not always about once-in-a-lifetime or mountaintop experiences like baptisms and weddings ... God often brings his joy by redeeming and sanctifying the ordinary things in our lives

b) For example, Foster states, "When the members of a family are filled with love and compassion and a spirit of service to one another, that family has reason to celebrate." (p193)



IV. Conclusion

A. We've reviewed a lot of spiritual disciplines in 3 short weeks

1. Some we do individually, some w/ 1 or 2 others & some in a larger community.
2. We do them out of obedient love to God. We do them because these are the means God uses to draw us closer to God.
3. We will not feel happy 100% of the time as we engage in these spiritual practices ... yet the joy of the LORD is our strength, a strength deeper than surface emotions or outward circumstances.



B. If you're still wondering how "celebration of discipline" is not an oxymoron, Richard Foster has a great way of pulling it together:

Celebration is not something that falls on our heads. It is the result of a consciously chosen way of thinking and living. When we choose this way, the healing and redemption in Christ will break into the inner recesses of our lives and relationships, and the inevitable result will be joy.

C. As you engage in a spiritual discipline this summer, take to heart this invitation from the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1 & 2 (read)