

Second Reformed Church, Pella, Iowa  
Steve and Sophie Mathonnet-VanderWell, preaching  
Jeremiah 6:16, Luke 14:28-30  
*Baptismal Life: Writing a "Rule" for Life*

January 15, 2012

It has been several years now that Rick Warren's incredibly popular book "The Purpose Driven Life" came out. I remember when I first looked at it thinking, "Really? What's the big deal? Do Christians really need to be told that their lives are supposed to have a direction and purpose? Doesn't everybody know that?"

Boy—were you wrong. Really wrong!! Whatever you think of that book, it demonstrated how needy, how desperate Christians are for direction about how to live their faith in the real world.

When the church has tried to talk about living out faith in every day, the direction and help of the church has tended to stay at the level of abstraction and vague generalities—"Be Christ-like." "Love in all things!" "Forgive your enemies!"

I would if I could. I would if I has some idea what that looked like.

Other Christians, however, have over-reacted to these abstractions by giving incredibly specific and unbending commands instead. You must do this, you must think this way.

"The Baptismal Life: Continual Conversion." That is the theme of our sermons in this season of Epiphany. Living into our baptismal identities. Living lives of continual conversion, persistent discipleship, turning each day toward Jesus.

And as part of the project we invite each one of you during this season is to try to write a "rule" for life.

A rule for life. What is a rule for life? How do we develop one for ourselves? What might some ingredients, the elements of such a rule be?

First, we need to address that word "rule"—singular. Not rules. I would bet the vast majority of us here have a negative reaction to that word. It conveys kill-joy, fun-haters, rigidity, compulsion. We hear that word and we think "Here comes a bunch of do's and don'ts."

A rule book—"In situation B-17, refer to subsection 9.6, clause c.

But that is not what we mean here. We are using the word in the singular: "rule" and it really connects more to the image of a ruler, a measuring tool, a yardstick. Developing a rule for life is a way for each one of us to try to live our Christian life intentionally, consciously, occasionally pausing to assess and recalibrate our walk with Christ.

Someone has compared a rule to a trellis on which a vine grows. The trellis offers support and direction. There is still a lot of freedom and openness for the vine. A trellis doesn't try to make the vine grow precisely like this or only in that direction. It offers a framework and a guide for those shoots and vines too far afield.

Or perhaps the image of a handle might help you. Following Christ, living out our faith—as we said, this is so prone toward abstraction, so hard to wrap our hands and head around. We need some handles, some realistic places to grab, to hold on.

A rule of life is a trellis, a handle, a pattern, a template, a measuring tool—and that will look different for each one of us.

Do you ever stop and appraise your Christian life? Where am I? How am I doing as follower of Christ?

How is your faith different today than it was six months ago, five years ago? Do you have what might be called growing edges? New comfort and joy? New ways of doing things? Do you have deeply engrained and life-giving habits in your faith?

Honestly, I'm better at noticing when I am not spiritually healthy than being intentional about assessing and improving my walk with Christ. It might be described as drifting/ignoring/not paying attention until I finally notice symptoms of ill-health and inattentiveness. Finally, I'll notice that I'm not sleeping well, or that I'm watching too much TV. I find myself increasingly angry, hostile, resentful, distancing. And it wakes me up and I think—You are one sick puppy. I discover I'm not doing life-giving, God-honoring things. And I change my patterns and routines. I readjust. Am better—for a while. And then typically begin the gradual downward slide.

Is there a way possibly to reverse this? And consciously, intentionally move toward health, toward Christ—rather than drift mindlessly away? Don't misunderstand this as some sort of plan for perfection, self-help. But might a trellis, a template, a measuring tool, be able to help me be more awake, more intentional about following Christ?

Both of the scripture passages today point to the seriousness of serving and living for God. Jesus says that being his follower is like building a tower. It will involve planning, long-term commitment. It won't happen accidentally or without cost and sacrifice. Don't start what you can't finish. Don't say you will build a 100 foot tower and then be exhausted when it gets to be knee high. Persistence. Mindfulness. Steadfastness. Discipline

And then the words of prophet Jeremiah, a verse that is the theme verse for this series of sermons. "Stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies and walk in it and find rest for your souls." Originally, these were Jeremiah's words to the stubborn and rebellious people of Jerusalem. His plea to them. His advice for them—advice that went unheeded. But they are a message for us too. And what message do they carry?

Stand at the crossroads—a place of decision, of assessment, a time that demands attentiveness

Ask for the ancient paths, where the good lies. What are the tried and true ways? What has sustained Christians in faithfulness for centuries? How have the saints before us lived into their baptismal lives?

This is the good way. The way that brings rest to my soul.

Stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies and walk in it and find rest for your souls

Some of us have experience writing personal mission statements. How is a rule for life different from a mission statement?

The differences are not huge, but there is a difference. A mission statement is more about short-term goals, focusing on accomplishments, and the actions and decisions needed to reach that. A rule of life is broader and less action oriented, more about personal traits and characteristics. Rather than ask the question, “What do I want to accomplish?” a rule really seeks to answer, “Who do I want to become? How can I best be faithful in following Jesus Christ?” Remember, a rule is like a trellis, it sets up the conditions and climate, the atmosphere and the framework for you to seek to continually turn toward the path of Christ.

Over the next few weeks we’ll work together on our individual rule of life. So begin thinking. We’ll encourage you. But why is it really necessary to write something out?

When we write something it becomes tangible, real. We own it. Just like when we say something out loud, it becomes more of our own. To write requires planning, focus, work—sort of like building a tower. So be prepared to invest some time and effort in this project.

In the coming weeks we’ll talk about some possible elements for your rule of life. For now, just begin to think and pray about who you are, your gifts and priorities, how you’ve grown and developed over the years, places in your life where you need to be stretched.

Remember we’re not looking for legalism or a tyranny of rules, but a rule of direction, a trellis.

Sophie, you’ve done this. Just to show what we might be doing could I ask you to share your Rule of Life.

My rule of life is composed of five values, and under each part I state more clearly how I will live or embody that value.

Mindfulness:

- My first thought each morning as I awake will be of God and God’s goodness and grace.
- I will practice throughout the day being present to God, to myself, to my loved ones and to others.

Gratitude:

- I will practice being grateful in all things and always looking for the blessings that surround me.

Private and Communal Prayer:

- I will read scripture and pray daily.
- I will practice holy reading of other texts.
- I will worship in community regularly.
- I will meet with my spiritual director once a month.

Self-care:

- I will practice self-care through nutrition (eating mindfully) and regular weekly exercise (yoga, walking, and swimming).
- I will sleep regularly.
- I will take monthly days of retreat and go on an extended retreat yearly.
- I will practice Sabbath rest.

Community:

- I will seek to love those in my closest circle well—always respecting their lives and needs and showing them the compassion, grace, and friendship they deserve.
- I will seek to welcome others as I would welcome Christ.

Stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies and walk in it and find rest for your souls.

Let us pray: *Sophie offers prayer of invitation and inspiration for our rule of life*