

**“Living with Purpose”**  
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

One of my favorite stories, I read many years ago, is about two monks. They were called to walk from one city to the next. As they were starting out, they had to wait for a little while, because they had such a torrential rain storm. When it was over they went on their way.

They hadn't walked too far. They hadn't gotten out of their own city yet, when they came upon a woman – a beautiful woman – who was dressed in fine silks. You could tell she was very wealthy. She was by herself and she stood in front of this huge puddle. There was no way around it.

The one monk kept walking, right through the puddle, and kept on his way. The other monk stayed where he was, and he looked at the woman. He walked up to her and bowed. She looked at him and returned the bow. And, he walked over, picked her up, carried her across the puddle, sat her safely down on the other side, and then walked a long side the other monk.

It took hours to walk to their destination. They didn't say anything, as they were not supposed to talk. Then, all of a sudden, the one monk who had walked through the puddle first, couldn't keep his mouth shut any longer. They had almost reached their destination, but he couldn't stand it. He just stopped and asked, “How could you touch a woman? You know the rules,”

The other monk looked at him and said, “Yes. She needed help. I did pick her up and I carried her, but I set her down on the other side of that puddle. You have been carrying her all of the rest of the way.”

Touching that woman didn't matter to the monk. He was just doing what he felt was his spiritual duty, and that the law was made to help other people, not to hurt them. The other monk who tried so hard to follow the law ended up breaking it, because all he cared about was his own fulfillment of pleasing God, and ended up not pleasing God at all, because he used the law to hurt someone else: the woman for not helping, and the other monk for questioning his faith.

It's hard, very hard to have a faith with meaning. Ethics are difficult and we all struggle with how to live this life. That is why we have so many Christian denominations, because each one thinks they've figured it out. This one is very structured and legalistic, and if you just follow all of the laws everything will be perfect, and I will know I am doing it right. If you don't follow the laws the way they are dictated you are just going to hell.

You have another group over here that is all touchy feely. If the spirit just moves me, I know that God is in me; and, these other people who don't speak in tongues, or have this feeling of the spirit in them every minute – that means that God is not in them and they are going to hell; and, everywhere else in between. We are all trying to get it right, and all of us muck it up.

We mess it up because we don't appreciate the skills, the abilities and the uniqueness of everyone else.

Luke tells the story of different individuals who become followers, and both of them tried to do what was right. But, what is their purpose in life? For the one monk, the purpose is to follow that law and to be darned with everybody else. The other monk was right. You try to follow the law, but people come before law. People are the fulfillment – love is the fulfillment of the law. And, if the law gets in the way of loving, then we have to reflect on how we change it – transform it – so it is living properly in a new type of world.

Another way to try to explain this idea is through a theologian that I dearly respect. His name is Alister McGrath, and he is a professor in England. He wrote a number of books, but one I like a lot is “Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths.” Since he is an English theologian, he is never going to argue that intellectuals don't need God, but he loves telling the story of how faith happens.

He said there are three things that we need to realize: First, faith is about believing in certain things using our intellect. There is room for our intellect. It guides us because if we don't know and study about who God is, we worship a stranger. But that can't be all it is. Otherwise, if we are just affirming doctrines or understanding theological premise, we are just saying, “Yes, we believe that God exists.” But, faith is more than that. So, he said, faith is also trust, and trust means that you have a recognition of an awareness that God not only exists, but does something for us – that God cares for us, and we trust God to love us, to forgive us, to heal us. So, it is based on trust.

There is more, because trusting God also requires a response from us. And, the third one McGrath says, is faith – into the entry, into the promises of God. Not only recognizing them, not only trusting that they exist, but responding of an offering of our very lives. So, we have to understand who God is, trust God to do the things that we believe, and then we have to respond and love.

Now, let me explain another way of saying this: Let's say for a moment that I have a bottle of penicillin sitting on my beside table and, the reason is, is that I have a blood disease. Now, I look at that bottle of penicillin and I say, “That bottle of penicillin exists. That fulfills McGrath's number 1 – I intellectually understand that God exists, and that bottle of penicillin exists.

Number 2 of McGrath's idea of faith: I understand and I trust that that penicillin can heal me. I believe that. I trust the doctors who have told me. I believe that they have been instructed by scientists and other intellectuals who tell me that bottle of penicillin works. I trust it.

So what? It doesn't matter that I believe the penicillin exists. It doesn't even matter that I believe that it will actually work – unless – number 3: Unless I actually take the bottle, put it in my hand, lift it up to my lips, and take it into my body. Only then will that penicillin heal me.

Now, McGrath says, we have a whole lot of Christians in this world who are good at number 1 – especially Presbyterians. (He didn't say that, I did.) [Laughter.] We are really

good at intellectualizing it. We are good at knowing our theology. We are really good at explaining things. We are good at arguing about things, especially about faith. We love to do that. It's fun to argue with each other and, then, if you say this, then let me be the devil's advocate for just a moment. It is almost a fun intellectual endeavor to argue about this, that, and the other thing with theology. But, does that makes us any closer to the life-saving blessings of God?

According to McGrath not so much. It is a step to understand who it is that we are worshiping, but that doesn't free us.

The next step in that penicillin story, I trust and believe that it will help me. Same thing. We come to church and we believe that this does something for people. I think it's great that we have church, and I think it's great that people go, and I want to support that – but, "I don't really want to do anything, or I hope it just comes through osmosis."

It takes the third step to be a person of faith, that allows you to be transformed in faith. You have to take the faith, bring it up to your lips, and drink it – let it into your body. That is when you are transformed, according to Alister McGrath. And, the way we do that is, we take Christ into our bodies through prayer. When we pray, the Holy Spirit moves in us and through us. We receive it through our entire body the same way penicillin heals. So does prayer, because it invites the Holy Spirit into our body, and it runs through us – through our fingers, down to our toes, up into our heads and out, healing and restoring us for eternal life.

Another way in which that happens is in Communion. What better example could there be, than literally taking the representation of the body and blood of Christ, and putting it to our lips and drinking and eating it? Receiving the Holy Spirit in us through the sacrament. You had, whether as an adult or an infant, the water placed upon your head in Baptism and the water flows down and through you, and that also is a blessing of the Holy Spirit saying, "I'm in covenant with you for the rest of your life, and that life is for all eternity."

That's the third part – taking it in. Then you "take in" the body of Christ through you in worship together as the community of the faith. Then all of the other ways in which you feel the Spirit at work is putting Christ to your lips, and partaking, and being healed. Whether or not that healing is physical, it is certainly spiritual. None of us will live forever physically on this earth, but we have the blessed promise that we can intellectualize through our theology, that we can trust to our biblical understanding and even in our prayer life, but until we really invite God into our soul, invite God to speak to our hearts and to be in a relationship with us, it's like leaving the penicillin on the table.

Today I invite you to receive Christ in. To not just follow rules, like the monk who walked through the water, because he was scared to touch this woman in need; but to be like the other monk who had God, in some manner speaking, through him to know the difference between right and wrong and what was needed in the moment. Because he knew the difference between what God expected and didn't, because his whole life was basked in prayer, it was filled with an understanding, because God and he spoke to each other so freely and openly that he could feel when something felt wrong, or when it felt right. He no longer had to rely on rules or theology. There was also along with those, the Spirit leading and knowing what as appropriate in that moment. And, the only way we get to that point is

through prayer, through the Sacrament, through experience of learning from each other and inviting God into our hearts over and over, and over again.

When we do that, God transforms us and heals us to such a point that whether we live or die in this world, it does not matter as much as staying in relationship with God for all eternity. And, that is the blessing that Jesus was trying to convey to the people who came up asked.

It's really easy. We do it too simply: "Hey, you want to be a member?" Jesus wouldn't have done that. Jesus would have started out by saying, "Do you know how hard this is, if you want to do it in a way that is meaningful?"

That is what Jesus is challenging you and me with today. You can show up. You can be a member. You can do whatever you want to do, but don't leave the penicillin on the table. Don't leave Christ on the table that you look at once a week. Partake. Receive the healing, transformative gift that is our God, who wants to be with us now and always. Amen.