The 2000 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture
Life Together: Practicing Faith with Adolescents

Introduction

"And they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42)

"Get a life!" adolescents are told by their peers, their parents, and the media. But just how does a young person get a life? What kind of life can they get? Left to their own resources, adolescents will look for meaning and purpose in friendships, service, and faith or in cliques, drugs, sex, and violence.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Christ offers not only "a life" but abundant life. And he calls the church to live out together the life he offers. We are called to invite and to guide young people into life with Christ—and to live it together with them. Christian practices—worship, prayer, giving to those in need, Bible study, forgiveness, the sacraments—provide a way to live out the abundant life of faith with young people. These and other Christian practices are acts that identify us as, and form us into, the people of God, the church. Because they shape our identity in Jesus Christ, practices are essential to ministry with adolescents. When "doing" faith through Christian practices, young people discover they don't need to "get a life" because they already enjoy abundant life in Christ.

The 2000 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, with their focus on Christian practices, push us toward seeing the Christian faith as a way of life. Dorothy C. Bass explores "life together" as a worthy pattern of living in which many people can share. She calls young people to identify themselves not primarily as consumers, but as practioners of a way of life. Highlighting the Christian practice of breaking bread, Bass demonstrates how Christ transforms the practices of our life and faith.

Ellen T. Charry posits that many adults have retreated from the lives of adolescents rather than take up the difficult work of transmitting enduring moral values. Youth do not need "space," she argues. They need Christian adults in their life as a sign that they have an identity and a destiny in life and belong to something stronger than their peer group. Charry challenges us to offer youth an alternative to the ideology of autonomy by helping them to reclaim their baptismal identity every day in service, in prayer, and especially at the Lord's Supper.

L. Gregory Jones lifts up the power of caring mentors forming young people in Christian faith and proposes rethinking confirmation as apprenticeship. Jones then argues that grace and obligation belong together, with Christian practices, or obligations, opening up our receptivity to grace. He encourages

us to instill in youth the importance of cultivating habits oriented toward the grace we find in Jesus Christ.

James M. Wall invites us to join a search for grace in the practices of everyday life. He examines the secularity that stands as a barrier to finding God's grace and then considers avenues to finding God's grace within that very secularity. Our society, says Wall, is dominated by people and institutions that want to keep the sacred from being an essential part of our private and public lives. Wall challenges us to lead youth out of the secular mind-set and into a larger space where God will find us with a redemptive word of grace.

May these lectures encourage you and the youth you serve to practice the faith as you live in grateful response to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Faithfully yours,

Amy Scott Vaughn
Director of Leadership Development
Institute for Youth Ministry

2000 Lectures

Dorothy C. Bass
"Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ": The Consumer and the Practitioner
"Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ": Practicing Life Abundant

Ellen T. Charry
Grow Big and Tall and Straight and Strong
Thinking Ourselves Outward from God

L. Gregory Jones
The Apprentice's New Clothes: Shaping Christian Community
The Grace of Daily Obligation: Shaping Christian Life

James M. Wall
Practicing Faith with Adolescents: Searching for Grace in the Stuffness of the Secular
Practicing Faith with Adolescents: Overcoming Secular Barriers to God's Grace

The Grace of Daily Obligation: Shaping Christian Life[1]

When our oldest son, Nathan, was on the cusp of adolescence, at age ten, he discovered that his hero was getting married. His name was Brian Hartlove, someone our son had come to admire in our local congregation. He admired Brian not only because Brian is attractive and a terrific person, but also because Brian was a professional soccer player in Baltimore who inspired and taught Nathan to play soccer. Over time Nathan came to believe that Brian "hung the moon." He was also the one who could get through to Nathan lessons about life.

When he found out that Brian was getting married, and that my wife was going to perform the ceremony, Nathan immediately asked if he could come to the wedding. I was a bit anxious about this, knowing how Nathan tended to act in church on Sunday mornings. But he pleaded and persuaded us that he would be well behaved if we let him go. And so we made arrangements to let him come to the wedding. But, not wanting to push our luck, we planned for him not to attend the dinner that followed .

On the day of the wedding, I was slowly getting out of bed at about 7:00 a.m. and trying to turn on the coffee machine when Nathan came down the steps, already dressed in a suit, bow tie, and dress shoes. The wedding was at 2:00 p.m. I was astonished because Nathan is never up that early on Saturday morning, much less dressed like that. If it were a church day, he would definitely be in shorts and a tee shirt, saying that he didn't feel well enough to go. I told him he didn't need to be dressed that early because he might want to play basketball or do something during the morning, and we didn't want him to mess up his clothes. He said, "I want to be sure I'm ready. It's a special day." That whole morning he spent time reading and was well behaved. I thought, "This is terrible. He is using up all his good behavior before we even get to the wedding!"

We arrived at the church and my wife went to get ready for the ceremony. I sat down with Nathan, prepared to provide various forms of positive and negative reinforcement to ensure that he sat still. He didn't move during the entire service. He sat transfixed on what was happening at the chancel. When the Scripture was read, he leaned forward to pull out the pew Bible to read along with the lesson. I looked at him with astonishment. The service ended and Nathan had been wonderfully

behaved.

After the service, Brian Hartlove's father came over to greet Nathan and me. After a few moments, he turned to Nathan and said, "Nathan, would you like to come to the reception?" I quickly responded, "No, no, we've got a baby-sitter back home." But at the same time, Nathan was saying, "Oh, I'd love to!" Mr. Hartlove said, "Please bring him."

On the way to the reception, I went back through the things that my wife and I had tried to instill in Nathan about table manners (that he rarely followed). I thought this was an important time to remind him what constitutes appropriate behavior at an occasion such as a wedding reception. At the same time, I was secretly hoping they had a separate children's room where he could do whatever he wanted without any adults watching. We got to the banquet hall and discovered the Hartloves had already arrived and had seated Nathan at our table. I recognized the name on the place card next to him: a highly respected dean of the school of engineering at a major university. I sighed deeply at the prospect of dinner.

After all, we had already exhausted most, if not all, of his good behavior energy for a Saturday. We got to the table for dinner and as we were seated, Nathan turned and shook the dean's hand to greet him. As they were seated, I heard Nathan say to the dean, "Tell me, sir, what do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of your school?"

I turned to my wife and said, "Who is that child and what have they done with Nathan?" We sat and marveled as, over the next half hour or so, Nathan and the dean engaged in a very serious conversation. I'd look over and the dean didn't seem to be aware that there was anyone else at the table; they were involved in a very animated conversation. At the conclusion of the dinner the dean said to me, "You know, when your son is old enough to go to college, I'd be glad to offer him a scholarship to attend my institution. He is a remarkable young man." I should have gotten it in writing!

You need to understand that my oldest son is enough like me that I worry about just getting him through adolescence without his ending up in trouble. And so as we drove home that evening, I reflected on the day. How was it that Nathan had been so different than we expected? That a child who on the whole is a good kid but certainly prone to all the ups and downs, the impatience and the joys, and the mischievousness of adolescence, had been so wonderful and mature that day?

I think what made the difference is that Nathan wanted to make Brian Hartlove proud of him. This was somebody who meant a great deal to him, and he wanted to live up to Brian's expectations of him. It was a special day, and Nathan wanted to live it in a special way.

That is not a bad description of Jesus' own account of the kingdom and the ways in which we are called to want to live in the kingdom because of our love for Jesus—

a love that reshapes us into a community where we no longer have to repent, but want to do so. We want to live differently because of the character of a new relationship we have discovered. The difficult task is to transform that one-day experience that Nathan had, or that one-day experience of a senior prom or of another very special day, into a way of life. How do you take the excitement, the passion, the desire to live differently, to live in a grace-filled community, from being a one-time experience to becoming a way of life that can persist over time?

To be sure, part of what enabled Nathan to live differently on that day was that he had already apprenticed himself to someone whom he admired, respected, and loved and who gave him a great deal of time and attention. But even more, on that day Nathan could recall certain habits that we had tried to cultivate in the home and in the church that he could draw on. The challenge for us is to take those experiences and to continue to cultivate them into habits over time.

Shaping Habits of Christian Life

Youth ought to be a time of enthusiasm, optimism, and good experiences that can become habits. Winston Churchill once said, "If you're not an optimist at age sixteen, you have no heart. If you're not a pessimist by age forty, you have no head." The charm of youth, Churchill thought, is its sense of optimism and excitement about the future. Yet he suggested that, by encountering enough life, by age forty one becomes a pessimist or a cynic.

The difficulty in contemporary American life as we try to transform experiences into habits is that so many of our youth have become premature cynics. They've already been hit with so many doses of reality that they want to say, "Been there, done that." Too many of them are already cynical about the world. They've seen the crises, the violence, the breakdowns of families and communities. Columbine has become a symbol for them of all that is wrong.

If we are going to transform one-day experiences into habits, we're going to have to stop trying to draw on youthful optimism and return instead to the Christian virtue of hope. Christians are not committed to optimism, which all too easily lapses into cynicism or pessimism. Rather, Christians are committed to a dynamic understanding of the movement between memory and hope. This hope is found by trusting in God and in relationships that are nurtured in the life of the church rather than by trusting naively that the world is going to get better and better. The youth of today don't believe that.

Can we instill in these youth a sense of hope? I believe the way to do that is by transforming experiences into a way of life shaped by holy habits. We can do so by discovering "the grace of daily obligation," a phrase I draw from novelist Gail Godwin.

The grace of daily obligation presumes in its very description that something hap-

pens in the midst of our daily commitments. It is important to distinguish daily obligations from routines. Routines are repetitive but have no purpose that is identifiable, no telos, no end toward which they are moving. Such routines become mind-numbing and character-destroying rather than character-building .

I believe that we need to emphasize the grace of daily obligation, the importance of instilling and cultivating habits oriented toward the grace we find in the God of Jesus Christ. The grace of these habits provides a reservoir that we can draw on in special times, on special days, especially in times of crisis. We need the grace of daily obligation.

In order to understand this phrase, we must acknowledge that many have made a significant theological mistake in equating grace with passivity and, by contrast, obligation/law/works with achievement or activity. We have mistakenly assumed that grace and activity, grace and obligation, are fundamentally opposed to one another. Part of the significance of the language of "practices" is to draw our attention to the ways in which grace and activity, grace and obligation, belong together. That is to say, I believe that precisely by reinserting a sense of obligation we will discover what it means to be recipients of grace.

When we were in Russia a year ago visiting churches and seminaries, we went to the Bolshoi Ballet. While watching these extraordinarily gifted ballet dancers, I was distracted by the comment of a person next to me. She observed, "My, how graceful they are." I began to think about the very notion of gracefulness.

Isn't it interesting that when we are talking about a ballet dancer, or, if you prefer, a Michael Jordan on the basketball court (someone who is very gifted and accomplished at a task), we describe them as being graceful—full of grace. Yet anybody who has ever undertaken the craft of ballet or piano or basketball knows how much work day by day by day goes into the cultivation of that gracefulness.

In this sense, gracefulness is not simply a process of sitting back and waiting. Rather, through the activity of daily habits people are prepared to move gracefully, in a way that transcends the day-to-day preparation. It becomes so natural that the graceful performer doesn't have to think it through. If Grant Hill is on the basketball court and has to stop and say, "Now do I turn and pass it here or there?" he's lost. Or when you're actually out on the dance floor, whatever the dance might be, if you stop to say, "One, two, three, here, now I go to this step there," you're lost.

The Importance of Disciplined Practice

The gracefulness develops over time so that eventually the steps come together in a powerfully new way, a performance. That happens only through daily obligation. It sometimes surprises me that in a world that stresses choices and the importance of self-expression, kids continue to submit willingly to daily obligation in music classes,

on athletic teams, in all sorts of settings. Unfortunately, the church has shied away from similar expectations for the life of discipleship. We have minimized what we ask of youth. They begin to recognize that if we ask so little of them, then Christianity must not be as important, demanding, or exciting as playing music or excelling in sports.

Our son Nathan, now a seventh-grader, ran cross-country and played basketball in his middle school this past year. He had two-hour practices every day, Monday through Friday. He wasn't particularly fond of the practices. He thought when he signed up for basketball that it really was just about games played in front of adoring fans. Then he discovered that when he went to the two-hour practices, the team rarely spent time shooting. They spent a lot of time without the ball, learning defensive moves, doing drills, running. It wasn't a lot of fun. Yet he became convinced that the daily obligation of those practices was critical to the players' learning how to play as a team, which would make a significant difference in how they performed on game days.

I noticed it even in listening to middle-school orchestra performances. They played beautifully together. There was a remarkable harmony; kids from different backgrounds and different experiences with different instruments came together to play beautiful music. The teacher commented, "This is their chance for self-expression." But is it really? Isn't it really a reflection of a team coming together after a lot of hard work and discipline and of submitting to a director who trains them to play beautiful music together?

If you want to hear self-expression, you are more likely to get cacophony than harmony. Even the music teacher had inadequate language to describe what had been accomplished by the students. We need to focus less on undisciplined self-expression and more on the ways daily obligations create habits over time. Such habits enable a deeper level of expression by individuals, because our selves have been formed in ways that foster deep creativity. The grace of daily obligation creates habits that become part not only of our cognitive memory but of our body memory as well.

I played a lot of basketball growing up. I used to practice by shooting two hundred free throws every day. Now, even though I have bad knees and can't play much, I can go out with my kids and make eight or nine free throws out of ten. The shooting touch is carried by my body memory, so it comes right back to me. But when I start thinking about what I am doing, and my bad knees, it all falls apart. Over time, habits develop body memory as well as cognitive memory that provide a reservoir for us in life.

But this reservoir is only developed through that sense of obligation, of going to practice even when you don't feel like it. One of the things I learned when I went to teach among Catholics was how much Protestants lost with the loss of obligatory

Sunday church attendance. The Catholic kids I knew, even when they were rebellious, even when they were frustrated or depressed, still had the sense that they needed to go to Mass. At our United Methodist congregation I kept encountering adults who came once every two or three months and considered themselves regular church attenders.

Obligations and Receptivity to Grace

If we only go to church when we're in the mood for it, we're not going to be there when we most need it. To be sure, there are times when it is difficult to go because we are just not in the mood. Perhaps we're feeling burdened, distracted, or troubled. Yet if we have a sense of obligation, we still go because it is an expectation. Often, those are the times when God works the most amazing miracles of grace—the music, the fellowship, a word spoken that makes a crucial difference. There is a grace to be discovered in daily obligation through the cultivation of habits that open us to God's work in our lives.

One time when I went to church only because I felt I had to was when I was in Hawaii. I was at the World Methodist Conference meeting in Honolulu, serving as a youth delegate. I really wanted to spend Sunday at the beach, but it was instilled in me that on Sunday morning one goes to church. I don't know if I felt like something bad would happen to me if I didn't, but I knew I had to go. I decided that I would go to a Filipino congregation of United Methodists.

I got to the church for the 10:00 a.m. service, thinking I could get to the beach earlier by going to an earlier service. I snuck in, assuming I would sit in the back row. It was a fairly small congregation, and mine was virtually the only white face. I noticed in the bulletin that they had a time for welcoming visitors, and I cringed. I wanted to be anonymous so that immediately after church I could slip back out and go to the beach. I was just there to do what I had to.

I hadn't expected that they would ask visitors to stand. It was not difficult to guess that I was a visitor. So I stood up and the leader asked me, "Could you tell us something about your faith journey?" And I thought, "Well, no." But you don't say that, so I said something else in response. Two people then came over and put leis around my neck. They embraced me and welcomed me and said, "We're so glad to have you here. We hope you'll stay for lunch after church." I thought, "No way. I'm headed to the beach."

I don't remember anything about the sermon; I don't remember much about the service. I remember thinking about how I was going to get back out the door. And I remember they sang wonderful music. At the end of the service, right after the benediction, I felt like the entire congregation was gathering around me to take me downstairs to lunch. How could I not go?

I looked at my watch. I figured that if I ate quickly I could still get to the beach by the time the sun was at its hottest. Downstairs, there was a huge feast. I commented to one of my hosts, "Wasn't I lucky that I got here on the day you had pot luck!" She said, "We do this every Sunday. It's part of what it means to us to be the church."

Then we sat down. They didn't take the covers off the food, because it was time to sing. It was festive and enjoyable; the people were making me a part of the community. At 1:30 p.m. we started to eat. It was a feast. Their hospitality was extraordinary. I finally left at 5:15 p.m. I never made it to the beach.

Yet it would be difficult for me to imagine a more memorable experience of church, especially when you think of church as a verb. It all started with a sense of obligation, which opened me up—in quite unanticipated ways and perhaps even in ways I resisted—for God's grace to work in and through that community. It was a wonderful day shaped by an extraordinarily hospitable congregation.

Hospitality is about the way we break bread together, about the giving and the receiving of food. That community knew the significance of practicing hospitality as a regular obligation. By contrast, if you ever want to find a community that has broken apart, notice how rarely they eat together. The importance of eating together is powerful. One of the challenges we have in our culture, particularly with youth, is cultivating hospitality as a practice and connecting the activity with its Christian significance.

Several years ago I taught a course to college students that focused on the significance of hospitality. We spent time on Jesus' parables of the kingdom and the vision of a messianic banquet. I also talked about the ways Jesus was criticized for eating with the wrong kinds of people. We went to Baltimore and worked in a soup kitchen. We talked about how much easier it was to serve others than to sit down at the table and eat with them, and how it was even more difficult to be served by them.

We had spent a lot of time focused on eating together and on hospitality. So at the end of the semester I invited the students to our house for a meal and discussion of the film *Babette's Feast,* which we had watched earlier that afternoon. Every student in the class was perplexed as to why we would watch such a film in a theology course. They were perplexed because we have trained ourselves to think that when we're watching a film we are engaged in entertainment, which is different from what Christian faith and life is about. They had a difficult time seeing the connection between the practices of hospitality and learning how to think about those practices theologically in a medium such as film.

We have compartmentalized things so they no longer connect, so that doing good has become disconnected from what we claim to believe, what we claim to experience and to feel. We need to be able to connect the daily obligations that we've

begun to cultivate with a vision of God's kingdom as the goal and purpose of what life is all about. When we begin to make those connections, then even the task of doing the dishes is no longer a routine. It becomes an activity connected to a larger purpose. We ourselves must be able to make those connections, and we must be able to make those connections for and with our youth.

Shaping Christian Life through Interrelated Practices

The letter of James is one of my favorite books of Scripture. It is a powerful book, and I want to reference the closing verses from chapter five because I think they have a lot to do with the grace of daily obligation and how practices of Christian living open us to God's grace. The first sentence is pivotal to what follows: "Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation." The pericope continues: "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." (James 5:12-16)

First, notice the activities described in these verses: truth-telling, praying, singing, confessing, anointing, healing. These are activities of a community that shape relationships in life-giving ways rather than in ways that diminish, divide, and destroy. Interestingly, in this passage forgiveness is the only passive construction: "Anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven." It is as if in the midst of the community's gathering to sing, to pray, to anoint, to heal, to confess, your posture opens you up to God's forgiveness.

Perhaps it is by being located in different habits, obligations, and activities in Christian life that we actually open ourselves for the miracle of God's forgiveness to work in our lives. We discover it not so much by trying to find and achieve it as by being located in a community that sings and prays together, confesses to one another, anoints one another, and offers healing. After all, James suggests that these activities are connected. We know this to be true in the sense that our bodies and souls are connected, though somehow we have disconnected them from each other. For example, we have disconnected healing from Christian practice, locating it in medical centers and separating it from issues of forgiveness. We also know ways in which singing can be transformative for both healing and forgiveness.

But I want to refer back to the injunction, "Let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No'

be no." If we ask ourselves why youth become so cynical, we probably ought to acknowledge that a significant part of the answer is that they have seen too much deception and lying in adults. They wonder whether we are trustworthy, and they worry as much about us in the church as about people in the broader culture. Is our word good?

I have told my kids that the worst thing in life they can do is to lie. I have said to them that regardless of what they have done or had done to them, I would not be as frustrated if they told me the truth. If they try to cover things up or deceive me, the consequences will be much worse than if they come forward and tell the truth.

So committed have I been to this principle that I had my undergraduate students focus on the theme of lying in Augustine's *Enchiridion.* When Augustine is describing evil in this book, a handbook for new Christians, he doesn't describe burning people at the stake or murder or arson, he focuses on lying. He writes that lying is always wrong.

I asked the students to contemplate that passage: "What do you think about Augustine's claim?" A student quickly offered the standard counterexample: "You're in Nazi Germany, the Nazis come knocking on the door, they want to know if you're hiding Jews. What are you going to say?" I turned the question back to the students. "What do you think Augustine would say?"

There was a long silence. A young woman in the back of the room raised her hand and said, "I think Augustine would say that the Nazi example presumes we're fundamentally truth-tellers who occasionally might lie for a noble purpose, when in reality we are people who are prone to lie at the drop of a hat and so we ought never to justify it." That was better than what I was going to say!

I told the students, "Well, let's test this hypothesis. We've got two different descriptions. One says we are fundamentally truth-tellers who on occasion, for a noble purpose, might lie, and the other says we are people who will lie at the drop of a hat and so ought never to justify it. Which one do you think is a better description of your life and of the world as we know it?" There wasn't much discussion. So I said, "Let's try our own empirical test. How about if, for the next seven days, all of us covenant that we will not knowingly tell a single lie to any other human being. Then we'll come back for class next week and see how easy or difficult we found it." No one wanted to try the experiment. I suggested that this very lack of participants might tell us something about which of the two descriptions fit us more accurately.

That night I was on the phone at home, talking to one of those people who is capable of a one-way conversation for very long stretches of time. The other person's virtual monologue had been going on for forty-five minutes. Finally, I said, "Well, I had better go. I think someone is knocking at the door." I hung up the phone. My wife said to me, "Why did you say there was someone knocking at the door?" I said, "What

are you talking about?" She said, "Well, you lied to get off the phone." I said, "No, I didn't." She said, "You said someone was knocking at the door. It's late at night. You know darned well no one was knocking at the door." And I said, "Well, it was just a convenient way to get off the phone."

On the same day I had taught an undergraduate class focused on the destructive character of lying, I was caught lying for no good purpose. I wondered how many times my kids, whom I have told that lying is the worst thing they can ever do, have heard me say such untruths. What kind of example am I setting?

What would it mean to develop a daily obligation of letting our "Yes" be yes and our "No" be no? How might that affect our relationships with youth if they knew they could genuinely trust what we say to be true? What if they knew that regardless of how other places in the world are deceptive—whether in advertising or in school, whether with their parents or their friends—there was a community where people would be truthful with them? A community that was committed to challenging the vices they have come to love and affirming the gifts they are afraid to claim. What kind of grace might youth find in such a community?

Could truthfulness be linked, as in James, to singing? Why is singing linked to the other activities in James? I think it is because music has a way of touching our souls and our memories—potentially painfully, but also redemptively. Good singing reaches us in ways that can powerfully shape our lives.

Singing and music have a way of stirring the soul and teaching us about community as voices join together in harmonies or sing in rounds. The beauty of the music depends on everybody in the community singing together. It can change our feelings.

One example of the power of music happened the week my father died quite unexpectedly in the summer of 1982, at the age of fifty-three. I was traumatized, angry, offended. I wasn't sure whether there was a God. If there was, I wasn't sure it was good news. I could not figure out why a good God would allow my father to die at a time when I needed him so much. I was twenty-one years old, still struggling with vocational decisions. He was a key person on whom I relied and in whom I trusted, and now he was dead. He hadn't been sick. I had no time for goodbyes. I didn't want to go to a funeral service, but I knew I had to—the grace of daily obligation.

I wanted to go up to my room, pull down the shades, climb under the covers, and not talk to anyone. But I knew I had to go to church for the service. The preacher was an old family friend. He preached a good sermon with thoughtful things to say about my father, and he proclaimed the gospel. Yet most of the service washed over my body and didn't get close to my soul—until the end. After the benediction, the choir began to sing—some fifty-five people who had left work to gather together in memory of my father and in honor of my mother, who had served as their choir director in the past. The choir's choral benediction was Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus."

As they started to sing, I wasn't very happy, because the music didn't fit my mood. It seemed entirely inappropriate. Yet as they sang, my brother said that my body started to straighten. Pretty soon, he said I was actually standing on tiptoes. My sister told me I started singing along. Something happened to me and to the whole congregation while singing the "Hallelujah Chorus."

Similarly, something happens in a youth group's singing. Something happens for a kid who was recently dumped in a dating relationship, who just experienced the breakup of his or her parents, or who is suffering because of the death of a friend. In the process of singing together, something happens for all the kids, the ones in pain as well as the ones who are filled with joy, something that makes a difference. That something helps to replenish the reservoir of faith and hope and love; it nourishes the souls of the youth and of the youth group as a whole.

Yet that something would not happen if youth came only when the mood fit. In a youth group where there is an obligation to be at every meeting, miracles can happen. Grace is discovered precisely in the activities of gathering together. There is a grace to daily or weekly obligation. It's about the rhythms of Christian life, about placing ourselves in contexts where we can be open to the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is never too early to start working with people on cultivating that grace. My daughter Sarah, our youngest child, had already learned the habit of singing the blessing by the age of eighteen months. She didn't know the words, but she could fold her hands and hum with us. Indeed, at a clergy gathering my wife and I attended, everyone started eating lunch while little Sarah was sitting in her high chair, hands folded, singing. She was reminding us that we hadn't yet said the blessing.

We need to cultivate the grace of daily obligation and recognize the power of habits a lot earlier than in youth group. We should begin our focus not only in preschool and elementary Sunday school classes, but literally in the nurseries. I am sure that work with youth would be richer and easier if there were stronger programs, catechesis, education, and discipleship for elementary school kids, if there were more frequent occasions for singing. My local congregation has a Bible study for elementary school children. I'm grateful. It has become a cool thing for kids to do. It needs to start early because we can't sell the kids short on what they're capable of in discipleship and understanding.

The hardest theological questions I've ever been asked came not from students in seminary or college, but from my kids when they were three and four years old. When we say, "We'll talk to you about it when you're older," it is a way of saying, "These issues don't matter. The church doesn't matter." We can't give them the full definition and the technical explanation of the *filioque* clause in the Nicene Creed, but we better be able to talk to them about who God is in a way that matters.

We need to emphasize the cultivation of habits of life together in community, of

shaping Christian life, of placing ourselves in contexts where we open ourselves to the working of God's grace in ways that make a difference. Our responsibility as leaders of youth is to help make the connections with them so they see that what they do, what they feel, and what they believe ought to somehow come together.

Conclusion

A few months ago my wife was putting our middle child, Benjamin, to bed, and they started to say prayers together. Susan had just finished praying with Ben when he leaned over and pulled her head back down to him. He pulled her forehead to his lips and he kissed her seven times. She said, "Ben, do you realize that you kissed me in the shape of a cross?" He said, "Yep, I planned it that way." She said, "Why did you do that?" He said, "Well, when we do the service of remembering our baptism, we mark the cross on people's foreheads with water and on Ash Wednesday we do it with ashes, so I thought I'd do it tonight with kisses."

I realized I had sold my own son short on what he understands about the activities of the church. He does not particularly like to go to church, and yet he knows that it's an obligation we have. We don't negotiate on Sunday mornings. We just go. And therein he has discovered the grace of obligation, and he passed along that grace to his mother and, through hearing the story, also to me.

Kisses in the form of a cross are perhaps as good a description as I've ever encountered of the drama of Holy Week and the shape of the Pascal mystery in which we locate our lives. I learned it from a nine-year-old. There is perhaps no more important task for us in shaping the life of discipleship than to recognize the power of the apprentice's new clothes, the power of the grace of daily obligation in shaping Christian community and in shaping Christian life. As with the child in the story of the emperor's new clothes, the child that Jesus talks about, and the little child who offers kisses in the form of a cross, it is often we who need to apprentice ourselves to them. ▼▲

NOTES

1. This essay originated as a lecture delivered orally. I have sought to preserve the oral character of the lecture, and its informality, in this essay.