

Preaching Lenten Discipline in a Youth Culture

Rodger Nishioka

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Discipline is not a word most people associate with youth in a friendly way. If they do associate discipline with young people, it is more along the lines of “Youth today need more discipline!” or “When I was their age (walking eleven miles to school barefoot in the snow uphill both ways) my parents taught me discipline!” So how do we preach Lenten discipline in a youth culture? First, we broaden our definition of discipline.

Discipline and Practice

I am convinced that a number of practical theologians (Craig Dykstra, Dorothy Bass, et al.) are on to something important when they relate Christian discipline to Christian practices. In his book, *Growing in the Life of Faith—Education and Christian Practices*, Dykstra writes:

The term discipline is virtually synonymous with practice, but we use both terms because several connotations of discipline are helpful in our context, particularly as we think of “spiritual disciplines” and “church discipline.” Disciplines are practices and all practices are of necessity disciplined. In the Reformed tradition, “spiritual discipline” and “church discipline” (or order) have never been separate matters. Rather they are reciprocal dimensions of one piety, a piety that is at once individual and corporate.¹

So what are we talking about when we talk about Lenten discipline? We are talking about Lenten practices. We are talking about the things we do, both individually and corporately, in this season of Lent. There is no sugarcoating here. I am not encouraging the use of practices in place of discipline because it will be more palatable to young people. Young people will be as challenged by practice as they will be by discipline. The motivation here is to use language that may not be so tainted for young people and to broaden the definition so that youth may see that these disciplines are attainable and possible. So first, we start talking about Lenten discipline by framing it as Lenten practices.

Second, we answer the crucial question about why we do these practices or disciplines. Dykstra writes, “engagement in the church’s practices puts us in a position where we may recognize and participate in the work of God’s grace in the world. By active participation in practices that are central to the historical life of the community of faith, we place ourselves in the kind of situation in which we know God accomplishes the work of grace.”²

We can help young people by letting them know that we are not challenging them to engage in these practices for our sake, for the church’s sake, or even for their own sake. We can let young people know that we are challenging them to engage in these practices for the sake of the Gospel and to “participate in the work of God’s grace in the world,” as Dykstra so powerfully says it. In this way we are saying to them,

“Somehow in ways beyond our knowing, O young person, your participation in these practices is an expression of God’s grace, especially in this time of Lent when demonstrations of grace are so needed.”

So how do we preach these practices to young people?

Preach Lenten practices in the midst of pain and suffering

I will never forget the night at youth group when I approached Amy, a wonderful, vivacious seventeen-year-old; I said something to her in jest, and she ran out of the room in tears. I was absolutely stunned and then felt completely miserable. I left the room, searched her out, and apologized profusely. After assuring me of her forgiveness, she explained through tears that she had learned earlier that her best friend had been saying bad things about her behind her back to a boy she liked; then on the way to youth group, she and her mom had gotten into a bad argument. Amy and other young people through the years have taught me that they know pain. They know suffering. They know brokenness. That is why it does not help young people when adults tell such lies as “these are the best years of your life” and “oh, how I wish I were young and carefree again just like you.” These forty days of Lent are an important time for the church. These days leading up to Easter are traditionally days of reflection and self-examination. These are days when we walk with Jesus Christ through his sadness and pain and suffering. Youth understand sadness and pain and suffering. Their songs are filled with the realities of betrayal and disappointment, depression and isolation, loneliness and loss. We cannot neglect the fact that young people live with pain and suffering. We cannot dismiss their pain as less important because they are not adults. Their pain is real. They need to know that we know that.

Preach Lenten practices with clarity

Be clear about these practices. Speak clearly about what they are and why we do them. Many of the young people listening to you are just beginning to make the jump in their ways of thinking from concrete to abstract thought. They need language that is clear and understandable; they will be helped greatly by your illustrations and examples of how you engage in these practices. One student here at Columbia Theological Seminary told me she still remembers from her high school days the sermon her pastor preached about how he prayed. She said it was so helpful to her to hear him say what he believed happened when he prayed, how he prayed, and how he had grown in his understanding and practice of prayer. This was an important part of her Christian formation. Your task is to talk clearly about the more traditional practices of Lent (fasting, self-sacrifice, acts of compassion, and contemplation), as well as others. Explain what they are, where they come from, and especially for the concrete thinker, how one does them.

Preach Lenten practices as ritual

There is something amazing about ritual. For many young people whose bodies and lives are in constant transition, ritual takes on a new importance. Rituals do more than provide structure and organization. They help provide meaning. In their book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley write:

It is our contention that rituals are essential and powerful means for making

the world an habitable and hospitable place. They are a basic vehicle for creating and expressing meaning. They are an indispensable medium by which we make our way through life.³

To frame these practices as ritual is to help young people create and express meaning in their lives. To frame these practices as ritual is to help young people answer the fundamental questions of identity and purpose. *Who am I?* You are a disciple of Jesus Christ and a participant in Christ's community. *How do I know that?* Because you engage in the practices that are a part of being Jesus' disciple and a participant in his community.

Preach Lenten practices in community

Community is so important for young people. Friends matter so much. Being accepted is such a struggle and even more of a gift when it comes. Too much of what we say and do reinforces the rampant individualism of our day. That is why it is crucial that you frame these practices in the context of the community. While having dinner with a family, I was startled when Matthew, a loud, raucous fourteen-year-old suddenly blurted out, "What time is it?" When his mother confirmed that it was "that time," he jumped out of his chair and left the room. Honestly, I thought it meant that some favorite television show was starting, so I was even more surprised when his father explained that Matt does his best to stop whatever he is doing at exactly that time every evening to *pray*. "Oh, it only lasts a few seconds usually. He'll be back here in less than a minute," his father assured me. I was more than intrigued. It turns out that after a series of bomb threats and rumors about imminent shootings at several schools in the area, the youth at Matthew's church made a pact with youth from several other churches in the area to try to pray every night, even for a few seconds, for their schools. When I tried to talk to him about it when he returned to the table, he would not. Later, his mother said she was surprised that he had kept up this commitment for so long (it had been almost three weeks). She said it seemed to be very important to Matthew to know that at that moment, all over their part of the city, young people were stopping to pray just as he was. Matthew had the extraordinary sense of being a part of something bigger, something beyond his own self. That is why we preach Lenten practices in the context of community.

Preach Lenten practices boldly

Finally, do not be afraid. I know. Some of you are thinking, "Yeah, right. I'm going to challenge a bunch of young people who sit in the last pew in the balcony and never even look at me to engage in these Lenten practices!" Again, *do not be afraid*. After all, young people are already engaged in practices in their everyday lives. Young people get up and go to school, perhaps not so willingly, but still they do it. Many do hours of homework each night. Many are involved in the practice of sports or performing arts or fine arts. Many do chores daily in their homes. I know one young woman who is up at five o'clock every morning to go to swim practice before school starts. By the time I arise, she has already been at the pool for ninety minutes. Recently, I was invited to a gourmet coffee shop at 6:30 a.m. where I met with eleven high school students and their associate pastor. They gather there every Wednesday for an hour of Bible study and prayer.

Young people are already engaged in many practices—most they do without even thinking about them. You are challenging these same young people not just to add something else to their daily checklist. You are challenging these young people to “recognize and participate in the work of God’s grace in the world.”

My friend Mark Yaconelli, who directs the Youth and Spirituality project at San Francisco Theological Seminary, puts it another way:

Christian practices are the means through which Christians seek to respond to God’s invitations of love. They are the habits, disciplines, and patterns of life through which Christians seek communion with Christ and solidarity with others. Just as Paul invites the Ephesians to be imitators of God, Christian practices are the way in which Christians seek to imitate the intentions and patterns of Jesus Christ.⁴

In preaching Lenten practices to youth, you are challenging young people to respond to God’s invitations of love, to deepen their communion with Christ and solidarity with Christ’s church, and to be imitators of Jesus Christ. How can we preach such challenges timidly? Surely we cannot. So preach boldly to that last pew. Preach boldly and with clarity. And then...let them surprise you!

Notes

¹ Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith. Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva Press, 1999), 48

² *Ibid.*, 41-42

³ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 22

⁴ Mark Yaconelli, “Focusing Youth Ministry through Christian Practices,” in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 156.