

In the name of God, the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. Amen.

I have a very firm belief that a cup of coffee and a to-do list can make any bad day better. It can make any overwhelming situation feel manageable. It can make any unsolvable problem at least seem solvable. It's true. If you don't believe me, come, tell me about your problem and I will make you a list.

Any accomplishment that I've made in my life, I can attribute to a scrap of paper with bullet points scratched out and a coffee ring stained around the edges. My supervisor for pastoral education, clinical and seminary, had to teach me how to add new phrases to my vocabulary when providing spiritual care for people. Now, I try not to only say, "have you made a list about that?" And also swap in, "have you prayed about that?" I'm a work in progress. You'll see, we all are.

Things are much easier with the clarity of bullet points. On a checklist, it's either done or it's not. It's either on the list or it's off. It also gives a bit of control if things get checked off. Then we assume that this goal of progress is being made and there's so much comfort in that control.

As helpful as a to-do list might be in achieving goals or helping us focus on what to do, it's not very enticing in a life of faith, although I truly wish that it was. Jesus doesn't give us a checklist unless we count the "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and love your neighbor as yourself" in Matthew's Gospel. Or unless we count the dozen or so times when Jesus said, "follow me", which are both rather open-ended instructions. Well sure, I'll follow you. Is there a manual or something for that? Even better, a list? A list would be great. Is there a due date? How do I know if I'm doing it right? What signs will there be that progress is being made? ...All left out of the assignment.

In today's gospel reading, we're met with the Pharisees to-do list, their rubric for washing food and other household items in order to keep the dietary laws and purification rituals that were passed down from their elders. Interestingly, these rituals the Pharisees are referring to are not found in the Hebrew Bible, not even in the depths of Leviticus. They're found in the oral tradition of the Mishnah, an additional account that was written down as people had expanded on the meaning of the Torah. These laws were often quite detailed, difficult to execute and took up incredible amounts of time, dedication and strict standards in order to do

them correctly. These were the rules that the Pharisees were demanding people follow, and these were the rules that Jesus insists on people being freed from. In defense of the Pharisees, I can really see where they were going with the whole strict adherence to the list thing. If we do everything that we're supposed to do and do it all right, shouldn't that guarantee us something?

This week you probably won't believe it, but I had a list fail me. It's true. Gasp, "cute" gasp. It's terrible, I know. Here's what happened. My oldest child, my first baby, is starting kindergarten. I know. So, to get her out the door in the morning, so surprising, I have a list of everything that we need, and would you believe it, on Thursday of this week, I overlooked the water bottle. I realized it after it was too late to correct my mistake, and I thought, all right, we're going anyways. She's going to be okay, dropped her off, but all morning I had this sense of guilt and dread and these big feelings about this relatively small problem, a minor bullet point that I had left, checked off my list.

So, I took some time to think about it, these big feelings. I said, I'm not going to go bring her one. I'm just going to think about this. And the problem wasn't that my list failed me, but in that in sending her off to kindergarten, I was losing control. My baby was growing up and I couldn't stop it. I'm not there to wrap her up in this big hug if she gets hurt. I can't be her friend if she doesn't have one. And her having every single thing that she needed on that list, water bottle included, gave me the illusion that I still had some control over what happened to her while she was away from me.

So, I wonder about these Pharisees, if in their eagerness to follow these rules perfectly, if they were only trying to control something that felt totally uncontrollable? This God, who at times can feel so present to us and then at other times feel so distant, is it maybe just human to try and tame him?

One of the main challenges with a spiritual life that is solely based on a strict adherence to incredibly difficult to follow laws is that we can check things off the list and still not have a guarantee of this experience with God. To me, a spiritual life dependent only upon doing it right or only upon checking everything off and doing it correctly, seems like we're missing something.

This week I read an interview with Billy White, the owner of Red Rose Tattoo in Zanesville, Ohio. In 2016, he offered to cover up any tattoo that had a message of

hate to the first 10 people who responded to his offer. All for free. And to his surprise, so many people contacted him that he felt like he had to keep going. So today he has covered up hundreds of tattoos with messages of hate, with new and beautiful ones. In his interview he said this, "All kinds of people have approached me. I'm not here to judge them and I'm not the end of their journey. Human growth isn't linear and it's not as simple as covering up an old tattoo. But for me in my shop, it's important for people to know consistently that we're here, that they're loved, and that we don't expect any one person to be perfect."

For the Pharisees in this story, it was the strict adherence to the dietary laws and the purification standards that Jesus is trying to free them from. And if I'm honest, it's rather easy to read that story and say, well, of course Jesus had something to say about that, wanted to do something about this. But for us, might we also have some similar beliefs when it comes to practicing our faith? I know that I am the first one to declare that I have the right set of beliefs and that I have the right practices.

And the church, the Episcopal Church and the global church at large, struggle with this all the time. It was only 50 years ago that women were ordained in the Episcopal Church, which means that that decision and the conflict it brought along with it is still in the living memory of many people today. I once talked to a woman in my parish who remembers being opposed to women's ordination because she didn't know what shoes they would wear when they celebrated the Eucharist, which seemed awfully funny to her now, but at the time it was a totally, totally reasonable reason to be opposed to this. In time, after that decision was made and after she experienced women serving in her parish, she grew to love and appreciate the many gifts that women brought to that ministry, including their excellent choice of shoes at the altar.

This is why it would be so much easier if Jesus spelled it out for us a little bit more. We would have less fights. But alas, we do not have a checklist or even many specifics on how exactly to follow Jesus. And so, for centuries, we've gone about mucking it up in plenty of good ways, insisting that our ways are the right ways, digging our heels into certainty, when to me, living a Christian life actually seems rather open-ended. "Follow me." Okay, yes, sure. But still unclear about what exactly that means.

On Sundays, my favorite part of our liturgy is when we read the gospel, not just because I love the gospel, but because of the way that we do it. In seminary, I learned that this practice we have of turning towards the gospel was developed in the ancient church hundreds of years ago, because back then they didn't have a sound system, and the gospel was not widely available like it is today. And so, to get as many people to hear the gospel as possible, the clergy would walk it down from the altar to the center of the people, and naturally people would turn towards this gospel to try and hear what it said.

Today we have sound systems, but we still turn, and that's my favorite moment, that we physically change our orientation toward this gospel message. This turn, this very physical, very concrete turn, reminds me that there is a Savior who was and is, and is to come. And thank God it's not any of us with our to-do lists and our right beliefs and our rubrics and rosters over who's in and who's out, but the one and only Jesus, who was born of a woman in flesh and blood and who drew a circle wide enough for us all, and said, "Come, follow me."

Every Sunday, collectively and individually, with all of our flaws and all of our failures, we turn toward that gospel message and say yet again, "yes Lord, we will follow. Show us the way."

Amen.