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# Spiritual Practices— Glory in the Mundane or Characteristically Damaged?

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by Claire Johnson

Spiritual practices—glory in the mundane or characteristically damaged? That is the subject in a comparison of, and reflection on, Tish Harrison Warren’s *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Every Day Life* and Lauren F. Winner’s *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin*

Tish Harrison Warren supports the celebration of spiritual practices within the framework of the mundane. Throughout *Liturgy of the Ordinary*,<sup>1</sup> Warren offers her own narrative of how she has learned to incorporate eleven different spiritual

practices into her life in unexpected ways. Duke Professor Lauren Winner, orthodox-Jew-turned-Episcopal-priest, writes *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin*.<sup>2</sup> In it, Winner details the sinful, detrimental ramifications of three “sacred” practices: the eucharist, prayer, and baptism. While neither of these books was written in response to the other, they argue opposite emphases. Warren’s hope-filled narratives encourage faithful followers of Christ to incorporate spiritual practices into everything, and as Andy Crouch wrote in the “Forward,” Warren “dismantles that most stubborn of Christian heresies: the idea that there is any part of our lives that is secular, untouched by and disconnected from the real sacred work of worship and prayer.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Winner reminds faithful followers of Christ that nothing on this earth—not even “sacred” practices—has been left untouched by the fall.<sup>4</sup>

While reading both of these books, I found myself wrestling alongside the authors. With Warren, I was empowered to recognize the active work and presence of God in the mundane. Much of our lives are spent in commonplace routines, and, as I began to employ Warren’s practices, I recognized the value of treating every breath as an act of worship to God. Winner taught me the art of refusing to accept things—even seemingly holy things—as absent from the effects of the fall. I had expected Winner’s book to be in direct opposition to Warren’s book, but it wasn’t,

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exactly. Where Warren proposed recognizing the “infinite worth found in obscurity,”<sup>5</sup> Winner illustrated the “characteristic damage”<sup>6</sup> of church practices.

An example of their difference is the matter of baptism, which they both associate with identity. However, while Warren affirms Christ’s work in us, Winner suggests there is fallenness in the ritual. In chapter one, Warren suggests that in remembering our baptism, we are remembering the belovedness with which we were sealed by the Holy Spirit, writing, “As Christians, we wake each morning as those who are baptized. We are united with Christ and the approval of the Father is spoken over us. We are marked from our first waking moment by an identity that is given to us by grace: an identity that is deeper and more real than any other identity we will don that day.”<sup>7</sup> There is great beauty in Warren’s affirmation of baptism. It is in baptism that we are reminded of Christ’s work and our renewed purpose because of the work of the cross.

However, Winner proposes that the purpose of baptism is to showcase and affirm “the local in judicious tension with the extraction” in the relationship between the believer and the family of Christ. According to Winner, baptism, in a few specific instances, fails to accord with “Jesus’ teaching [which] both erases and affirms family bonds.”<sup>8</sup> She focuses on the “christening parties that became fashionable in fin de siècle America,”<sup>9</sup> where baptism is a materialistic display. When we stray from the original intent of baptism, as Winner argues we have done, our practice of remembrance becomes tainted.

The two writers vary in the extreme when discussing the Eucharist. Warren connects the practice of the Eucharist with the nourishment received from the Word of God. She claims that the Eucharist, designed to remind us of our great need for Christ, is also remembered by our need for food—spiritual and physical. Our spiritual food, of course, is the Word of God, whereas our physical food often looks a lot like leftover taco soup. “[B]oth Word and sacrament are profoundly related to food,” Warren writes. “These two central acts of worship, Scripture and Communion, are compared to my bowl of taco soup, my daily

bread. Both are necessary because both, together, are our nourishment.”<sup>10</sup> Warren isn’t saying that taco soup replaces the Eucharist, but that “The Eucharist—our gathered meal of thanksgiving for the life, death, and resurrection of Christ—transforms each humble meal into a moment to recall that we receive all of life, from soup to salvation, by grace. As such, these small, daily moments are sacramental—not that they are sacraments themselves, but that God meets us in and through the earthy, material world in which we dwell.”<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the beauty found in Warren’s descriptions of Eucharist, Winner’s reflection was down-right horrifying. Winner recalls the history of gruesome violence centered around the Eucharist, particularly with the mistreatment of Jews in response to host-desecration acts. During the Middle Ages, the Eucharist served as a scapegoat for unwarranted violence towards the Jews and eventually Protestants, who did not share Catholic views on transubstantiation. While the Eucharist has “characteristic damage,”<sup>12</sup> the damage doesn’t absolve the power of recognizing our great need for Christ through the Word and the Eucharist. While grieving the sins of past generations misusing the Eucharist as a means of self-righteous violence, we also must remember our own need in our daily bread—both spiritual and physical—as it transforms our actions now. There is beauty in both recognizing the fallen aspects of humans practicing the Eucharist and, at the same time, understanding that it is precisely for this fallenness that we practice the Eucharist, even in the mundane—to remember Christ’s atoning sacrifice and our daily need for his sustaining grace.

In reading both Winner’s and Warren’s books, I plan to apply the practices suggested by Warren while recognizing the dangers warned by Winner. Much of the Christian life is mundane, and recognizing the active presence of God in our lives daily is an essential aspect of evangelical theology. However, we also must not be blind to the past that Winner uncovers in her book; the church must be “on the lookout for the ways good Christian practices may, and inevitably sometimes will, do the very opposite of what those practices were made, in their goodness (in

God's goodness, and in God's good hopes for the church), to do."<sup>13</sup>

It would be a misreading of both Warren and Winner to suggest that either is advocating for the complete and total removal of the liturgical practices. Warren makes practices accessible, while still supporting their traditional role in the church. Winner makes practices transparent, highlighting the dangers with a plea to faithful Christ followers to recognize the effects of the fall, even the realm of the church. Both are necessary contributions to the 21st century and represent voices that deserve amplification.

#### Endnotes

1. Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Every Day Life* (InterVarsity Press, 2016).
2. Lauren Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (Yale University Press, 2018).
3. Warren, 9.
4. Winner, 1.
5. Warren, 22.
6. Winner, 1.
7. Warren, 19.
8. Winner, 107.
9. Winner, 98.
10. Warren, 63.
11. Warren, 71.
12. Winner, 1.
13. Winner, 3.