

A Rule of Life for the Preacher: Whole-Life Spirituality and Holistic Preaching

Susan Gilbert Zencka

Prelude

Almost twenty years ago, when I was in seminary preparing for ministry, during the summer in 1995 I took one class in the Association of Chicago Theological Schools Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) in Preaching Program. It was a class in spirituality for preachers. I had been in seminary for two years and was having trouble establishing spiritual disciplines. I was quite surprised and disappointed to hear from the other students in class (all ordained ministers with three to eighteen years of ministry experience) that they all struggled to pray regularly, and most of them rarely read the Bible except to prepare for preaching or teaching. I had assumed that ministers did not find it challenging to pray regularly. I was wrong.

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Project

For the next twenty years I would continue to share the experience that my more seasoned colleagues had revealed. Establishing a regular routine of prayer remained difficult. Even though this was a problem that many ministers found challenging, I was intuitively certain that if I could establish more

regular prayer routines, it could be transformative. Now in my own D.Min. program, I decided to take on the challenge in a way that created some accountability: by making it the centerpiece of my second-year preaching ministry project. And not just prayer—a rule of life.

What is a rule of life? One author defines it as “a set of guidelines that *support* or *enable* us to do the things we want and need to do.”¹ He continues,

All of us have an unwritten personal rule of life that we are following, some with great clarity, others unknowingly. We wake at certain times, get ready for our days in particular ways, use our free time for assorted purposes and practice rhythms of work, hobbies, worship, vacation and so on. There is already a rule in place that you are following today. Isn't it time to give up our unwritten rule and prayerfully write one that more closely follows the heartbeat of God?²

I knew I was ready to undertake this journey: both to discern a rule and to commit to following one. The small city in which I serve is where the headquarters of the National Wellness Institute are located; there is awareness in this community of a multimodal model of wellness where it is understood that each dimension of health depends on other dimensions for the fullest holistic health. I knew that my spiritual life could not be healthy

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apart from my whole life becoming healthy, thus the desire for a rule of life and not simply a commitment to certain spiritual disciplines.

Before the 2013 residency, I started working with a spiritual director, Sister Debra Weina, whom I have continued to see at least monthly, and sometimes as often as weekly.³ Starting in July, I worked on outlining the basics of a rule of life. I consulted several resources, including Margaret Guenther's *At Home in the World: A Rule of Life for the Rest of Us*.⁴ By October, I had the framework of a rule, which I then refined by January (see Rule of Life on p. 31). I expect I will continue to refine it, especially in response to living it. The areas I addressed in my rule were my relationships with God, creation, my body, ethics, money, work, friends, and creativity. These were the areas that I felt were necessary to developing holistic wellness (physical, financial, social, emotional), spiritual wholeness (prayer, ethics), and some practices related to developing creativity (reading fiction, practicing some art, including knitting, photography, painting)—all of these together providing a nourishing foundation for preaching. Each of these areas was also an area of life I had been doing some discernment around in recent years.

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In terms of the holistic wellness issue, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (in which I am an ordained minister) has been working to develop a healthier clergy through a program called CREDO.⁵ Through CREDO, mid-career ministers are invited to an eight-day retreat in which they are educated about health issues, financial planning, burnout avoidance, and work-life balance; the retreat culminates in the development of a CREDO plan. I had been to CREDO in 2009 and had put together a plan. Some elements of my plan (improving my physical health—I had lost sixty pounds, more weight loss needed) had been somewhat successful, other elements of my plan (developing a better prayer routine, developing more active interests in my life outside of work) were going less well. I was realizing that not only would this lack of holistic wellness detract from my long-term health and satisfaction, it was also undermining my ability to develop into the preacher I wanted to become. And I could see that if I did not develop better routines and achieve more balance, I would be facing burnout issues. I already was dealing with increased stress—aging parents and spouse, young adult children—because of my stage in life. The church was dealing with budget issues and had cut back on some staff, which was increasing my workload. These are not unique challenges but are typical of some of the challenges clergy deal with, along with the challenges of caring for people in crisis while attending to a busy work life, being expected to administer the church, and being very much in the public eye while living and preaching from an inner well of spiritual work and nurture. We deal with a lot of stress, and holistic wellness can help us to be more resilient around those stresses.

It was clear to me that achieving more holistic wellness was not just abstractly a good idea, but was an imperative nearing urgency.

Prayer

Relating to prayer in particular, I tried two basic approaches. First I tried a simple liturgy of the hours, pausing seven times daily for brief prayer wherever I was. Most often these became prayers of gratitude, but they began to orient me to (a) attending to God and (b) expressing gratitude all day long. I paused in the wee hours (around 3:00 a.m., when I customarily awake briefly), upon awaking, before work, at noon, at the end of work, at sundown, and immediately before bedtime: seven times each day. I decided that

I would not structure these times formally, but would simply commit to pausing, noticing God, noticing my surroundings, and saying a brief prayer of some sort—“Thank you, God, for the trees” being an example of such a prayer. A pause is enough to reorient me to God, to remind me that I am not the center of life, not even the center of my life. A pause, several times a day, helps keep a sense of proportion. The practice of the presence of God, coupled with the practice of expressing gratitude, have helped me to relax and to notice all the little and big blessings that surround me all the time. I found Macrina Wiederkehr’s book *Seven Sacred Pauses: Living Mindfully Through the Hours of the Day* to be an invaluable resource, having read many books on fixed-hour prayer over the years. Wiederkehr’s approach is gentle and non-demanding:

In the middle of my morning’s work I break for blessings: a deep breath, a glance out the window, a graceful stretch, a remembrance of God, a brief reflection on the nobility of work, an encouraging word, a grateful thought, a smile, a short prayer, a remembrance of who I am, a sip of freshly brewed coffee. The day, still young, is fresh with the dew of possibilities. My work, too, is bright with potential. When I have the wisdom to step away from work momentarily, I am able to see it as a gift for the entire world. A short, refreshing pause can enhance my awareness that all work has the potential of becoming love made visible—a blessing. This is the Spirit’s hour. I sense the overshadowing presence of all that is holy, and I remember that I am God’s temple here on earth, a channel for loving service. I hold out my hands to receive the blessings of the moment. When I remember to pause, blessings appear. I break for blessings.⁶

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I have learned from Wiederkehr and my own practice that this gentle approach to fixed-hour prayer discipline can be nourishing. Just these small turnings toward God, brief remembrances, momentary offerings of thanksgiving, requests for guidance, or noticing and greeting God—these little gestures awakened my sense of God’s faithfulness much as an occasional caress or endearment both mark and deepen the love between partners or parents and children.

The other style of prayer I have used during this year is prolonged contemplative prayer—spending anywhere from ten minutes up to an hour at a time in silent communion with God, usually thirty to sixty minutes. For the last three years of high school I had gone to a Quaker school where we gathered weekly for an hour of silent worship; I practiced Transcendental Meditation in college; I gathered with others later to share silence in Centering Prayer during Bible study. Under whatever name or mode, silent contemplative prayer has long been home for me. Using both styles (frequent brief pauses during each day and occasional longer contemplative sessions) qualitatively deepened my sense of God, my dependence on God, my gratitude to God during this year. But this is discipline at which I have to work to maintain any kind of consistency.

Practice

The other dimensions of my rule of life are also important. I have been working to develop more consistency in my eating habits, exercise, and especially sleeping. I have been reaching out to develop friendships (slowly). I have been reading more fiction, particularly short fiction. I have revived my interest in photography. I have kept track of my hours at work, although I have not yet been successful in bringing them down to forty hours a week.

Despite my commitment to practicing wholeness and health, I still ended up close to burnout at one point. I wasn’t practicing my prayer disciplines. I was not exercising. I had not connected with anyone socially for a while. I had grown very tired of the long, harsh winter we were having in the upper Midwest. And what a difference letting just a few of these disciplines slip was making! Why did I let those disciplines slip? It was a very demanding few weeks and I thought I didn’t have time for self-care. But I could tell I was quickly losing the resilience and richness that characterize my life when I am following my rule of life faithfully.

When this happened, I met for an extra session with my spiritual director; I had an extra massage; I started using light therapy in the mornings; and I met with my liaison to the personnel committee at church. I wanted to make sure that the personnel committee was comfortable with my spending time in exercise and prayer disciplines. I wanted to ease my sense that I was “too busy” to do these things. I wanted to be assured that the personnel committee understood these time commitments as integral to my effective work. And I did receive this assurance.

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Preaching

I’ve discussed my general sense of how my health, happiness, and effectiveness are impacted by my committing to a rule of life. But how is my preaching affected by undertaking these disciplines? More specifically, how does my commitment to holistic health contribute to the goals I set for myself in this

project, namely: “more holistic preaching, including the emotive, cognitive, and intuitive dimensions of experience in my sermons,” and “greater integration, centeredness and freedom in the preaching moment that will result in preaching with more immediacy and without being tethered to the manuscript”?

It was an interesting year, preaching-wise. To get feedback for my project, I identified three sermons to be developed with and reviewed by a team of people from my congregation. These three preaching occasions, as it turned out, were ideally suited to observing my resilience and my ability to deal with stress as I preached.

During the first sermon, a church member passed out. I stopped preaching when the paramedics came and resumed after my church member was able to sit up again. While I was preaching my second sermon, I was keenly aware that my mother was in surgery at that moment for a broken hip, sustained in a fall down a flight of stairs with my father the previous day. The third sermon came during a week of bitterly cold weather, a week in which the harsh temperatures had resulted in closing the church for two days at the beginning of the week. While it was difficult weather, the church closure created a week with more rest and relaxation than I usually experience in the workweek.

The first sermon came before I had even finished developing my rule of life. Also, it was at a local park, not at our usual setting. I realized as soon as I started preaching that I had not taken enough time to organize the setting: the microphone was off to one side, and the music stand on which the manuscript rested was not at a good height. Consequently, when I was trying to preach (even before the woman passed out), I was not in a good position (literally) to be freer from the manuscript. It was a great example of how taking a little more time in advance would have resulted in a more effective worship service.

My feedback team did have positive things to say about the emotive and intuitive dimensions of my preaching, however. They reported:

Her comments related to [our lives:] who among us hasn’t visited the friend with cancer? . . . [Connections with] the younger congregants related to befriending someone who is not liked . . . [These comments] made a connection to young and old alike. . . . The effect of incorporating this technique into

her sermon makes it current, relevant, and relatable.⁸

My work on holistic preaching was bearing fruit, but I did not yet have the resilience in the pulpit that undergirding my work with holistic health practices could help provide.

By the second sermon I had been working more intentionally on developing the rule of life and had been practicing fixed-hour prayer for several months. I was taking care to get consistent sleep. I was able to stay present to the preaching task, to remain lively and engaged in the sermon, despite my worry about my mother's surgery. The stress was shown, however, in that I was speaking extremely rapidly. My professor's closing comment in her evaluation of the preaching was "Just slow down—not just in preaching, but in life."⁹ Despite the rapid speech, however, because of increased use of pauses, vocal modulation, expressiveness, and gestures, the congregation and feedback team were able to follow the sermon well. They concluded:

We liked the sermon and believe that Susan has improved her preaching skills. We liked the way that she incorporated pauses and nonverbal communication throughout her sermon as well as the way she occasionally stepped away from her manuscript.¹⁰

By the time of the third sermon, in January, I had been working on my rule of life with greater consistency: exercising regularly, eating healthfully, sleeping consistently, praying regularly, reading fiction, pursuing photography, even socializing a little. The church had been closed for two days so I had worked only forty-two hours that week, far fewer than usual. I approached the preaching task from a place of rest and peace—I had slowed down in life that week.

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more natural use of pausing, gestures and voice for emphasis of individual points. She was able to emphasize the connections between Jesus' baptism as the start of his service with our baptism as a start of our service to the world with her movement around the front and connections with the baptismal font.¹¹

My adviser also noticed the more relaxed and spacious delivery in her enthusiastic oral comments (transcribed by me):

It's just fabulous to compare when you started with now, all the things you're doing in your morning routine for self-care and spiritual nourishment and how that is very obviously paying off not only in your preaching, but in the preacher—in the person.¹²

I appreciated her remarks, especially because she has been watching me preach for two years. And I also appreciated her remarks because I, too, notice some significant differences in the way I am growing and centering this year as I become more consistent in following my rule of life, including both prayer and general health practices. And I noticed such a difference in coming to this sermon after a week of more rest and relaxing, including working closer to forty hours that week. It is, indeed, something to aim for as a general practice.

Progress

The feedback team had commented upon the improvement in each sermon, and they also noted overall improvement in the summary report for the year:

We have noted continued improvement in Susan's preaching this year. She's attempting to follow a new rule of life—involving a routine of prayer, solitude, exercise, and meditation, among other things. She finds that this has made a positive impact on her, enabling her to deal with others in a more holistic manner. When she must deviate from that routine, she finds she's more in her head. *We find that her preaching is more spontaneous and authentic, and that she seems more centered.*

In addition to commenting on the rule of life work, they also noted improvements in the preaching performance:

By speaking more slowly, she's made it easier for members of our congregation to understand what she says. She looks at her sermon notes less now, so she's establishing better eye contact with individuals in our congregation. We've noted that she uses volume and inflection well to control our attention and emphasize specific points she makes. Her nonverbal communication is also excellent, including not only facial expression and hand gestures but also movement and whole body communication. She reads the Bible passages in an emotive and engaging manner. Finally, she seems more comfortable expressing her personal theological perspectives than she was before, while not forcing them on the rest of our congregation. I believe this builds her rapport with the congregation, since in being more forthcoming she shows her trust in them and her confidence that they will reciprocate that trust.¹³

These reflections about my increased comfort in preaching and in sharing my own understanding are accurate—I have not only become willing to share my own theological reflections, but I have come to understand it as part of the call in preaching: to read and study the Word, to prayerfully reflect upon it myself, to carry the congregation in prayer

to the Word, and to bring back a particular Word for them. I believe that understanding and claiming this preaching call has come in part from my increased centeredness and health, resulting from defining and practicing my rule of life. I am becoming more comfortable with who I am, who I am called to be, and how I am called to this congregation, including but not exclusively related to preaching.

I believe that understanding and claiming this preaching call has come in part from my increased centeredness and health, resulting from defining and practicing my rule of life.

Postlude

This has been an important year for me: as a preacher, a minister, a person. This project was not merely an academic exercise for a year. It was the long-sought, perpetually elusive model of faithful living that I had yearned for since before attending seminary twenty years ago. And in this year, I have learned a couple of things that will help me to continue to live faithfully into the future.

The first of these is the importance of *persistence*. None of the disciplines I engage in for my rule of life make much of a difference in a single day—but days turn into weeks, weeks into months, and eventually habits into a life, and it is not long before the marks of persistence begin to show. This is especially true for the absence of persistence. As the great Polish pianist Paderewski famously said, "If I miss one day of practice, I notice it. If I miss two days, the critics notice it. If I miss three days, the audience notices it."¹⁴ I notice the dryness in my soul before others do, and I need to be honest with myself. It will eventually show in my relationships and in my preaching. Persistence matters.

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The second of these is: *progress not perfection*.¹⁵ While persistence matters, perfectionism is its own problem (also known as scrupulosity). Perfectionism can actually get in the way of persistence—on a busy day, twenty minutes of prayer may not be as nourishing as sixty, but it is better than none.

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The imperfections, the challenges,
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The final thought is *pilgrimage*. Usually we think of a pilgrimage as a special journey with a spiritual purpose. And indeed life is a special journey with a spiritual purpose. It is easy to miss the possibilities of each unique day because of the ordinariness of it all. But if we understand life itself as a pilgrimage, the journey matters. The imperfections, the challenges, and our responses to them matter as much as the beauties and the successes. The way is made by walking.

*Caminante, son tus huellas
el camino, y nada más;
caminante, no hay camino,
se hace camino al andar.
Al andar se hace camino,
y al volver la vista atrás
se ve la senda que nunca
se ha de volver a pisar.
Caminante, no hay camino,
sino estelas en la mar.*

Wanderer, your footsteps are
the road, and nothing more;
wanderer, there is no road,
the way is made by walking.
By walking one makes the road,
and upon glancing behind
one sees the path
that never will be trod again.
Wanderer, there is no road—
Only wakes upon the sea.¹⁶

- Rule of Life
(as of March 22, 2014)
- Body care
 - Sleep at least 7 hours/night, regular rising time
 - Eat healthfully (high-nutrient whole-food vegan)
 - Exercise 4–5 times weekly (walking, running, swimming, bicycling)
- Prayer
 - Liturgy of the hours (pause for prayer several times daily)
 - Longer contemplative time several weekly
 - Spend time outdoors in creation
 - See a spiritual director 1–2 times/month
 - Practice gratitude
- People
 - Develop friendships—at least once a week, meet a friend
 - Stay connected online with distant friends
 - Visit family during the year frequently
 - Forgive others, seek forgiveness
- Hospitality
 - Once a quarter or more, have people in
 - Be welcoming to others wherever you are
 - Be honest and kind
 - Listen deeply to others
- Financial
 - Pay bills, buy carefully
 - Give as committed
 - Live simply—let go of stuff
- Justice
 - Work for justice (poverty, prisoners, other?)
 - Care for the earth and all who live on it
- Creativity
 - Read some fiction each week—at least a short story or see a movie
 - Continue knitting, photography, and/or watercolors
- Work
 - Preaching journal, intentional work in ACTS program
 - Visit people
 - Empower others—let go of control

Notes

1. Stephen A. Macchia, *Crafting a Rule of Life: An Invitation to the Well-Ordered Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 14.
2. Ibid.
3. Sister Debra Weina, of the Sisters of St. Joseph Third Order of St. Francis, a religious community in Stevens Point, WI. She was trained at the Siena Retreat Center Program in Spiritual Guidance, a program of the Racine Dominicans. I had undergone training in the Spiritual Guidance program of Shalem Institute of Washington, DC, in 2006–2008, and I find Sister Deb’s approach to be very compatible with my background in spiritual guidance.
4. I owe a huge debt to this book. Guenther has written extensively about spiritual direction, and this book, on preparing a rule of life, is written in the open-ended, nonprescriptive manner of an experienced spiritual director. Finding this resource was a great gift.
5. From the CREDO website, presbyteriancredo.org/about-credo, “The Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is particularly concerned with the well-being of pastors who serve the church. We know that spiritual, physical and financial issues can directly and indirectly affect a person’s holistic health. The Board has conducted research that has shown that these areas are of particular concern to pastors serving out congregations. . . . The Presbyterian CREDO conference provides time for clergy to step back from the non-stop pace of ordained ministry. CREDO provides a foundation for participants to embrace wellness and to prayerfully discern the direction of their personal and professional lives. It addresses, individually and in community, the questions of “Who am I?” and “Who is God calling me to be?”
6. Macrina Wiederkehr, *Seven Sacred Pauses: Living Mindfully Through the Hours of the Day* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2008), 71.
7. Susan E. Gilbert Zencka, *Learning Covenant for the Preaching Ministry Project*, Learning Goals, 1.
8. Cathy Scheder, *Group Response Form 2013–2014*, August 25, 2013, 1–2.
9. The Rev. Dr. Ann Hoch, e-mail message to author, December 13, 2013.
10. David Colby, *Group Response Form 2013–2014*, November 3, 2013, 2.
11. Eric Singsaas, *Group Response Form 2013–2014*, January 12, 2014, 2.
12. The Rev. Dr. Barbara Cathey, Year 2 Sermon 3 evaluation, mp3 file, February 3, 2014.
13. Ibid, GRP-2.
14. Ignacy Jan Paderewski, quoted online at poloniamusic.com/Paderewski.html.
15. “We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.” From Bill W’s *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (aka *The Big Book*), 4th ed. (New York City: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 2001), 60.
16. Antonio Machado, “Proverbios y cantares XXIX” in *Campos de Castilla*, found on the website Abbey of the Arts: Transformative Living through Contemplation and the Arts, at abbeyofthearts.com/blog/2007/09/21/the-way-is-made-by-walking.