

First Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018
Psalm 25:1-10; Mark 1:9-15

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Inward Practice: Meditation

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you missed the Ash Wednesday service, you missed important words of introduction to our Lenten series on spiritual practices. Let me just offer a few notable matters:

- 1) Beginners are welcome. Spiritual practices are something we never master. They are simply practices developed from scripture and tradition that have stood the test of time.
- 2) Not everyone will be drawn to any particular practice. Pick and choose. See what works for you.
- 3) These practices are not necessary to faith. God offers grace regardless of whether we engage in these exercises.
- 4) They are not requirements or tasks that I am telling you to add to your daily list of things to do. Lutherans, as you know, don't believe in legalism. The spiritual practices we will discuss are offered with the hope that one or more may be adapted or overlaid upon the life you already live.

Today's practice is meditation. And I hear something of a call to meditation in today's Psalm:

Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long. (vv. 4, 5)

and later:

You are gracious and upright, O Lord; therefore you teach sinners in your way.
You lead the lowly in justice and teach the lowly your way. (vv. 8, 9)

These passages speak to me of meditation—seeking after the ways of our Lord, yearning after truth and instruction in humility of heart and soul.

Meditation is not something we talk much about either in our culture or, in fact, in most congregations. And I suspect that it is not well understood. Also, as with silence in our day, I suspect that time for meditation is pretty hard to come by for most folks. Even if it is an avenue to God's grace. In our world, we major in less edifying things, such as noise, hurry, and crowds.

If we hope to move beyond superficialities, we need to be willing to go down into recreating silences, into the inner world of contemplation. In their writings, so many practitioners beckon us to be pioneers in this frontier of the Spirit. Though it may sound strange to modern ears, we are offered in Lent the opportunity to enroll as apprentices in the school of contemplative prayer.

Listening to God's word, reflecting on God's works, rehearsing God's deeds, ruminating on God's law, and more are encouraged in scripture. The stress is on changed behavior as a result of our encounter with the living God. Repentance and obedience are features of any biblical understanding of meditation. The psalmist exclaims, "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long...I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word. I do not turn away from your ordinances, for you have taught me." (Ps. 119:97, 101, 102) This focus on obedience and faithfulness distinguishes Christian meditation from its Eastern and secular counterparts.

As already noted, we hear such calls in today's Psalm. Psalm 63 likewise expresses a contemplative heart: "I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night..." (v. 6)

In the midst of an exceedingly busy ministry, Jesus made a habit of withdrawing to "a lonely place apart" (Matt. 14:13). He did this not only to be away from people, but so that he could be with God, listening and communing. We are invited to do the same.

Christian meditation, simply put, is the ability to hear God's voice and obey God's word. There are no hidden mysteries, no secret mantras, no mental gymnastics, no esoteric flights into the cosmic consciousness. God desires our fellowship, and meditation is one way to deepen that communion.

As we hear from Mark's gospel this morning, Jesus came in the fullness of time and declared that the kingdom of God was at hand, demonstrating for us what life could be for those who live in that kingdom. He established a living fellowship that would know him as redeemer and Lord. And in Jesus' intimate relationship with God, he modeled for us the reality of that life of hearing and obeying. "The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does these works." (John 14:10)

We see over and over again in scripture, both Jesus and the people of God learning to live on the basis of hearing God's voice and obeying God's word. And throughout the centuries, the church has urged us to live in God's presence in uninterrupted fellowship. The Russian mystic Theophan the Recluse says, "To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing, within you." Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when asked why he meditated, replied, "Because I am a Christian."

In meditation we are growing into what Thomas a Kempis calls “a familiar friendship with Jesus.” We are sinking down into the light and life of Christ and becoming comfortable in that posture. The old hymn that speaks so personally, “He walks with me and he talks with me.” becomes more than pious jargon. It is descriptive of daily life in Christ.

It is worth noting here that what is being described is not simply a close personal friendship or Christ as a divine pal. It’s more akin to what the disciples experienced in the upper room on that first Maundy Thursday, when they knew both intense intimacy and awe-filled reverence.

In meditation, we may come to know an emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to dwell more richly within us—to construct an inner sanctuary in our hearts. Meditation intends to bring this living reality of communion with Christ into all of life. It is a portable sanctuary that is brought into all we are and do.

What is being called for here is not the same as practices in Eastern religions. That is often about emptying oneself. Christian meditation is about opening the space that God yearns to fill. It is not about detachment from the world or being freed from the burdens and pains of existence. It is about attachment—leaving behind the confusions and distractions in order to reconnect, reattach, and commune with the living Spirit of God for the sake of being more fully a God-filled presence in the world. It is intended to be restorative, both of power and of purpose, sending us into our ordinary world with greater perspective and balance.

Those who have studied scripture with me have heard me repeat often the words of Brother Lawrence. “Prayer is the practice of the presence of God.” This seems to me the essence of meditation and of contemplative prayer. It is not only about setting aside certain times for practicing this spiritual exercise. It’s about coming to know that God is always present with us, to us, and in us. Paul exhorts us to “pray without ceasing.” (1 Thess. 5:17) That, I believe, is the objective—to approach every moment conscious of God with us, of Christ beside us, and of the Spirit within us, bringing God-consciousness and God’s love, grace, mercy, and peace into every moment as well as every encounter.

I really like the way some of the early church writers speak of this. If we are constantly being swept off our feet with frantic activity, silence for contemplation is far from us. A mind that is harassed and fragmented by external affairs is hardly prepared for meditation. The church mothers and fathers spoke of “holy leisure”—a sense of balance in life, an ability to be at peace through the activities of the day, an ability to rest and take time to enjoy beauty, an ability to pace ourselves. This is not easy in a culture that places such central value on work and production. We would do well to cultivate anew this holy leisure.

There are many techniques and processes that may be used to grow into the practice of meditation. A fundamental practice is to focus on scripture, internalizing and personalizing it—seeking to make a passage take on life in us, to be incarnated in our living. The phrase written about Mary comes to mind: “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:19)

Suppose, for example, you want to meditate on Jesus’ staggering statement “My peace I give to you” (John 14:27). Our task is not so much to study the passage as it is to be initiated into the reality of which the passage speaks. And what could be more refreshing in these days of so much sad news!

We might brood on the truth that Jesus is now filling us with peace. The heart, the mind, and the spirit are awakened to Christ’s overflowing peace. We sense all motions of fear stilled and overcome. Rather than dissecting peace, we are entering into it. We are enveloped, absorbed, gathered into that blessed peace. And self is forgotten. Worries evaporate. And no longer do we laboriously think up ways to act peacefully, for acts of peace spring spontaneously from within.

Another practice is “re-collection” or what Quakers call “centering down.” It is a time to become still, to enter into a recreating silence, to allow the fragmentation of our minds to become centered.

One can also meditate in and upon creation. One may meditate on the events of our time, seeking to perceive their significance, allowing for lament as well as for hearing the voice of call to action.

Meditation, of course, is not a single act, nor can it be completed the way one completes the building of a chair. It is a way of life. It is one way to continue learning and growing in the grace of God and the stirrings of the Spirit.

May your spiritual practice of meditation, whatever form it may take, lead you into inner depths and outward and vital action for the sake of God’s hopes for the world. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.

[Based on Richard J. Foster’s “Celebration of Discipline”]