

2/23/20

Prayer & Meditation

Today is the last in our sermon series “Reaching For God: Different Ages, Different Calls.” We’ve considered how at different stages of our lives different spiritual paths may present themselves, and how our journey to God may be looked at through the lens of “head, hands, and heart.” The first weeks of the series focused on “Reaching Out” as we heard from Andrea Balliet about her work with the poor, from Roger and Brenda sharing stories from their international mission trips, and from our Kidz on a Mission about their work in the Cass Community in Detroit; last week’s sermon from Mary Fox on Sacred Journaling, and today’s sermon, are about ways of Reaching In.

Prayer & Meditation: some people consider meditation to be a form of prayer; some people consider prayer to be a form of meditation. The definitions are fluid, but prayer and meditation are inward ways to grow closer to the divine; as Psalm 46 says: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

A useful way to think about prayer and meditation is the quote on the front of today’s bulletin: “Prayer is when you talk to God, meditation is when you listen to God.” In other words, two sides of the same coin, two components of divine conversation.

Now there are many types of prayer, of talking to God. Every Sunday we share a corporate prayer, and usually have a few moments of silent prayer. We never fail to say the “Lord’s Prayer” together, which is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples as recounted in the Gospel of

Matthew, and which in a few sentences summarizes all of the Master's teaching: to trust and rely on God, to do His will in the world, to forgive and be forgiven.

They say "there are no atheists in foxholes," and whether that's literally true or not, there's no question that one of the times we reach out to God in prayer is in times of extreme stress or fear. We just sang "Nearer, My God, To Thee," which was the hymn the band played as the Titanic was sinking into the sea—we know there were plenty of prayers delivered from fearful hearts that day. Extreme situations remind us of how small we are in the vast universe, and sometimes we find ourselves asking God for favors even in times less extreme. Often, prayers of "asking" can veer towards selfishness, and operate on the assumption that we know what's best for us—a tenuous assumption, often proved wrong in the long run. My advice when asking God for a favor is to remember this phrase from the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done;" if the request is in accordance with God's will, let it be granted—otherwise, in the words of Rosannadanna: "never mind!"

However, a different type of "asking" is to pray for others—that's not selfish at all. We pray for our loved ones, for those on our prayer list, and yes—we pray for our enemies, or we try to. (Here's a hint: on days when praying for an enemy is especially hard, try praying "for all beings;" that will point you in the right direction!)

A special group of prayers are those of exultation, of praise, of gratitude. Consciously remembering to be grateful, to count our blessings, is a way to clear the road ahead on our spiritual journey. It is a type of prayer worth practicing—and often this kind of prayer

occurs spontaneously. One time I was camping alone, a silent retreat in the beauty of Nature. In the morning I awoke, left my tent, and walked down to a lake nestled deep in a pine forest; I gazed at the sun's reflection on the water, and I was truly moved, deep in my heart, with the wonder and majesty of Creation. At the beautiful sight, these words escaped from my lips: "You've got to be kidding!" Though not couched in the formal language of "Thee's" and "Thou's" we sometimes associate with prayer, God knew what I meant; it was simply a way of saying "thank you, God, for the many ways you still speak to us!"

Another type of prayer is not asking anything of God, or even glorifying him or thanking him. It is really asking something of ourselves, in the presence of God. Next to the Lord's Prayer, my favorite prayer falls in this category; it might be called a "prayer of affirmation." This one, which I've shared before, is from the book *A Search For God*, and echoes Biblical language: "Not my will, but thine, O Lord, be done, in me and through me. Let me ever be a channel of blessings, today, now, to those that I contact in every way. Let my going in, my coming out, be in accord with that Thou would have me do, and as the call comes, 'send me, use me.'"

Saints throughout the ages have encouraged us to be in a state of prayer or meditation all day long, a worthy goal, if hard to achieve. But practicing these skills is a little like training a dog—at least in the beginning, it's best to avoid distractions. That's why we kneel or sit in solitude and silence: we take a few minutes to be alone with God, alone with the Universe.

Meditation is a part of the Christian tradition just as it is in Hinduism and Buddhism, though perhaps not emphasized or defined the same way. I attended a Quaker school for eight years, and was accustomed to attending Sunday Morning Silent Worship; we never used the term “meditation,” but it was a centering process based on the understanding that there is an “inner light” in each of us. We’re more apt to speak of Jesus praying than meditating, but you can be sure that when He spent time alone with His Heavenly Father, whether on a mountaintop or wherever else he could find solitude, he spent more time listening than talking. Edgar Cayce, the humble Christian clairvoyant did use the word “meditation” in his “readings;” he believed that as we, the human race, progressed on our spiritual journey, we would soon come to recognize meditation as a daily necessity, like eating, drinking and sleeping.

Over the centuries, hundreds of different meditation techniques have been developed as ways to quiet the mind in order to better apprehend the Divine presence. Guess what: they all work. Pick a method that suits you and get started, or make up your own. Some methods develop a quiet spaciousness to prime us to hear God’s message. Many use concentration to train the mind not to run away with itself. One may focus on a mantra, a phrase; or a mandala, a centering image; many common methods focus on the breath, an aspect of the Life Force which is always there, our whole lives. We take our breath for granted and usually don’t even notice it, but by focusing on one thing instead of a million things, we grow mentally quiet and spiritually receptive.

Here’s an example I can share about a method that is related to meditation, in that it shows how relaxed concentration can lead to a

quiet expansiveness. I was about to go for a walk in the woods and a friend coming with me, who was visiting from Chicago, was a notorious chatterbox. She was sweet and kind, and her chatter was simply reflective of the chatter in her head, which was pretty constant. Worried that she'd spoil the walk, I decided to teach her a couple of nature awareness techniques. The first was the "fox walk:" like a fox, you take a quiet step forward, making sure, before you put your weight down that there is no twig underfoot to snap. The second technique was even more important: "owl eyes:" you widen your eyes a little and put yourself into observer mode, silently noticing everything about you. All of a sudden, the chatter stopped, our walk was wonderful, we absorbed Nature's beauty, and we both learned something about attentiveness and awareness. The same lessons that were applied outwardly that day in Nature, can be applied inwardly in meditation.

Of course, especially when we are first learning to practice meditation, thoughts seem to spring up out of nowhere: the mind is not used to being controlled! This is perfectly normal; when we notice a thought arise, we acknowledge it and let it go without judgment; instead of riding along with the thought wherever it chooses to take us, we go back to our quiet practice.

Because the mind is rebellious, ease gently into your meditation. Some folks try to do it at the same time every day, or have a special chair to sit in, with soft lighting or a candle—a routine can help get you accustomed to quieting yourself. Some folks pick up a Bible or a spiritual book for a few minutes first to set the tone; reciting an affirmation and focusing on spiritual ideals right before meditation is a great way to begin your session.

Meditation is not about belief. Because we're training ourselves to empty the mind for a few minutes, there are no beliefs to hang on to! The Buddhists don't even deal with the concept of God; they speak of meditation practice as a way to apprehend Reality, a way to learn to Wake Up: obviously, it is impossible to put the Spiritual Realm into words, and in meditation, we don't try. But I believe meditation, by quieting our everyday thinking, is the most direct tool available to help us answer the important life questions: What is our place in the universe? How can I learn to know God better every day?

Prayer & meditation; learning to be with God. Going inward to find the Divine presence. Choosing to make a few moments of sacred solitude part of your daily life. Jesus teaches that the Heavenly Kingdom is always at hand, and prayer and meditation can open our eyes to it. Remember what the Psalmist said: "Be still, and know that I am God."

Amen.