

## **“An Alternative Mind”**

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, May 15, 2022

Based on Richard Rohr *Breathing Under Water*, Chapter 11

Texts: Psalm 46: 8-11; Ephesians 4: 17-24 and Mark 1: 35-39

“Be still and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10)”. Well, that’s easier said than done, isn’t it? I’m not sure which is harder, being still or knowing that God is God! Let’s tackle the hard one first: who is God? Now, that is an exhaustive question, but we more easily say, than believe, that God is God and we are not. We live as if we are in control, have it all figured out, and simply need God to support our actions, beliefs, and plans. We don’t want to believe it, but if we think about it...

Isn’t that how we pray? God, here is my will, please do it. I want this, I need that, I hope for his, I plan to do this, ... I’ve been good, please do my bidding. Think about how we pray. A lot of words, and most of them about what we want. If prayer is to be a conversation, then perhaps we might need to do some listening as well as speaking! It might mean that we need to be still, and to see if it’s possible that God might have something to say. Our church believes that “God is still speaking” -- and it is true -- but useless if no one is listening.

Prayer is many things, but first and foremost it is a chance for us to listen for and hear the voice of God. To do so, we must, at times, be still.

Am I saying that we can never pray for the things that matter to us? Of course not! I am saying, however, that if we think about it, I think you'll agree that most of us spend ninety percent of our prayer time talking, petitioning God for one thing or another. While not bad, it is sorely incomplete.

Step 11 of the twelve steps reads like this: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, *as we understood [God]*, praying only for knowledge of [God's] will for us and the power to carry that out. The most important words to me are "conscious contact with God". Is our prayer conscious? I mean do we pray by rote and routine and sometimes do it unconsciously? Prayer is a two-way street, a dialogue, a joint effort, if you will.

Richard Rohr says that, "when you 'pray,' you are supposed to take off one 'thinking cap' and put on another 'thinking cap' that will move you from an egocentric perspective to a soul-centric perspective." We trade our "calculating mind" for the "contemplative mind". The first type of "mind" is what we're used to where we are almost totally and always in control. Ephesians 4:22-23 says it this way, "you must put aside your old self which has been corrupted by following

illusory desires. Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution.” In fact, Rohr says, “we need a whole new operating system” to pray.

The calculating mind we know well, and with it we see everything through the lens of our own private needs and hurts, angers, and memories. It’s too small a lens to see truthfully or wisely or deeply. “I’m sure you know,” Rohr tells us, “That most people do not see things as they *are*, they see things as *they are!*” Some even think we pray to please God somehow...something we did when we felt otherwise helpless. When all else fails, pray – as it were.

Prayer really is about God, and allowing God to do something to us. Again, it’s not that we can’t pray when all else fails, or we can’t pray with a calculating mind, it’s that these prayers will be, by themselves, too limiting. Prayer is to open our mind, even empty it (!), so that we can be filled with the mind and heart of God. Put another way, “Prayer isn’t about changing God, but being willing to let God change us, or as Step 11 says, ‘praying only for the knowledge of his will.’” Jesus goes so far to say (Matthew 7: 7-11) that true prayer is *always* answered. Now we all know that isn’t factually true – unless he is talking about prayer in the sense that I am trying to describe it.

Richard tells us that “True prayer is always about getting the ‘who’ right. Who is doing the praying? You or God in you?” The Psalmist reminds us, “Be still and know that I am God.” This is amazingly Good News, because if God is God, you don’t have to control everything! You don’t have to be all in all. We have someone for that. Someone who is much more than us, bigger than us, and far more in love with us than we can ever imagine! A God who wants to share with us in our moments of deepest hurt and fear, “I love you, and I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Or, “I will not leave your orphaned.” Or whatever else it is you need to hear if you are listening! Our small mind cannot deal with Bigness and Newness, which God always is!

Jesus says it this way: “When you pray, go to your inner room, and shut the door.” He knew, Richard tells us, that there was no such thing as an “inner room” in a Jewish one-room house. Just ponder that for a minute. Jesus tells us to pray from a room that does not physically exist. Now where do you suppose he meant we should pray? He was talking about your inner self, which we would now call the unconscious, your personal inner room, as it were. This is also indicated by “his double use of the word *secret* as both a place where the truth is waiting unawares and a place hidden to most of us – in which God ‘dwells’ and from which God ‘blesses’ (Matthew 6:6).”

Honestly, Richard has much more to say about this than I do, so I entrust this chapter to you. It is one of the best we have encountered so far. I want to sum it up by saying it this way (in Richard's words): "How you first live inside is how you will deal with things outside. If prayer itself is largely an external performance of any kind, there is simply *no* inner life to keep us honest and real and grounded."

But before I end this morning, I'm sure that someone is thinking, "but then, how do we pray when we're together?" Maybe that's why everyone is afraid to pray at a meeting, or before the church, or even at the family table. It's not God they are afraid of, but the other people around the table (or on the Zoom call). We're afraid that someone might be offended by what we say or what we don't say. In other words, we won't pray in front of each other not because of what we fear God thinks of our prayer, but someone else.

Now isn't that interesting? And here's a secret: I have this fear as well. It's embarrassing to tell you, but it's true. History tells me that my best prayers have been when I've been silent for a moment or two, wait for the words to come from somewhere I cannot quite name, and then speak them.

I did a public prayer yesterday, and yes, I did write it out beforehand. I did that for me. But when I wrote it, I did everything I could to simply be quiet and let the words flow. And flow they did. People thought I did a fine job, and that's great, but more importantly, I knew that I spoke the prayer from the right place. And if we can do that, we'll always do it well, whether or not anyone else around us believes it. For that prayer will be a conversation with God, putting on the mind of Christ, and speaking from the heart. Other people just overhear it.

Using few words (unlike this sermon!) to speak what truly is on your heart. A heart filled with the love of God that will never let you go and will always give you the words you need.

Richard begins every meditation in this way and I share it with you knowing how helpful it has been for me:

Be still and know that I am God;

Be still and know that I am;

Be still and know;

Be still;

Be.