

"Come, Follow Me Home: Spiritual Practices"
Matthew 6:1-18

As disciples of Jesus, we are given the tools for a life that is grounded in eternity. In the Bible passage for today, we hear Jesus giving instructions to his disciples and followers about three key Jewish spiritual practices: Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. The people who were listening would have known about these practices already, but Jesus wanted to ensure that the people understood them through the values of the kingdom of God which he was proclaiming. Jesus was addressing a human problem that faces all of us. Even when we know the spiritual practices of faith, we fall short by misusing them to feed our egos. Some of us may use them to get more control on life. We may want to be more successful, powerful, peaceful, or joyful. Sometimes, we may use the spiritual practices to enhance our public image. We may give to the church or other causes to look good. Some may use fasting to earn God's favor and thus have a sense of eternal security. And so the very practices that are supposed to nurture our souls end up strengthening our egos: Our desires for control, esteem, and security.

The people during Jesus' time struggled with the same temptations, even though their context was different. In order to appreciate what Jesus was trying to say, we have to take a look at the practice of patronage or beneficence in the ancient Roman and Jewish worlds. A great resource about this is the work of Bruce Winter in his book *Seek the Welfare of the City*. At the time of Jesus, public works, public buildings, public baths, city festivals, feasts, and games were done by wealthy individuals. So the people of the ancient cities would praise the benefactors in public to show their appreciation. Even the emperor of the Roman Empire was part of this practice, giving of his own wealth in order to show off his power and generosity. Benefactors also supported individuals by providing them income and goods. In return, it was the duty of the recipient of such generosity to praise his benefactor in public writing poems or essays about his generosity or even waking him up in the morning to a hymn of praise. A second level of individual benefaction was the support of widows. A third level of benefaction was the support of beggars and the homeless. All these levels required public praise and recognition.

Against this backdrop, we can appreciate what Jesus was saying to the people. The system that promoted the power and egos of individuals and their social status had no place in the Kingdom of God. That system separated people from one another by class and social power. When the benefactors were not feeling generous, the beggars were left hungry. Basically, this system left many vulnerable to the whims and wishes of their benefactors. In the Kingdom of God, Jesus proclaimed a different vision where doing God's work in the world is the motivation without the rewards that appeal to our egos and social systems that oppress and abuse the needy.

The main remedy which Jesus offers to the social ills of the systems of domination in our world is the practice of spirituality in secret. This is not about being modest in prayer or not talking about one's faith in public. It is about letting go of the needs of our egos (both socially and individually). This is also rooted in the fact that God's action in the world and in us is often more hidden and subtle. God is not like the benefactors of ancient times (or

of our time). God works in mystery and in hidden ways. Jesus' actions and teachings followed the same pattern. He did not seek social status or power according to the ways of the empires of his time. In fact, he was willing to face death instead of using the means of violence and control to spread his message.

How do these teachings apply to our lives today? How do they help us live each day in light of eternity? I would like to invite us to ponder the wisdom Jesus was offering for detaching from our egos and connecting the presence of God within our souls by focusing today on the importance of using these practices to accept discomfort and uncertainty in life.

I have recently enjoyed reading *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* by Oliver Burkeman. In this book, Burkeman talks about how we each have an average of 4000 weeks of life which is about 80 years. Life is pretty short when you look at it this way. Therefore, Burkeman offers wisdom that is very similar to the values of the kingdom of God. The world around us calls us for speed, accomplishment, and accumulation. We are lured into believing that more is always better, and that control is possible. Problems are often seen as things to get over as quickly as possible. Burkeman gives two examples of people who try to counter such thinking. The first example is from Jennifer Roberts, an Art History Professor at Harvard: https://youtu.be/AnQVT_p6pxq. She gives this assignment to her students to go sit in front of a painting for three hours and to let it be. Imagine how this kind of experience goes against every fiber of the being of our modern world where we are addicted to speed, multitasking, and instant gratification. The second example comes from Finnish American photographer, Arno McKinnon, who uses the parable of the Helsinki bus station where all busses leave in the same direction. For the first part of the journey, the busses seem to be going to the same spot making identical stops. McKinnon invites photography students to think of each stop as one year of their career. It would seem that the first three years their work only produce pieces that are not so original. Most people get frustrated with this outcome as they would like to be more distinguished. But the key is patience. After several stops, the buses begin to take different routes, which is similar to what happens in real life. After three years in a career, things begin to become more original. It takes time and so much patience. This is very similar to what happens in the spiritual life. The invitation is to be patient and to persevere while relinquishing our desire for control. Whether it is sitting for three hours in front of a painting or taking time each day for prayer, even when it seems to be unfruitful, we are invited to let go of our ego-driven attitudes and controls.

Our inner life is what grounds us in the vision and mission of the Kingdom of God. In order to subvert the pressures and ways of the world, we must allow the power of God to grow deep within us. By asking the people to give, pray, and fast in secret, Jesus was asking his community of followers to dismantle a social structure that fed only people's egos, and which kept the status quo of injustice intact.

Our two confirmands have been on an intentional journey of learning the way of Christ. Confirmation is an intentional process of learning about the faith and getting connected to one's soul through the help of a caring community and a personal mentor. It is an

important step on the long path of life and discipleship. Learning to pay attention to God's work within is no easy task as these young people have a lot of demands on their time and attention. They had to be intentional about making time for this journey.

Just like our confirmands, we too are called to continue to allow God the time in our lives away from the social pressures of success, being productive, fitting in, being liked, or having social status and power. We have to be intentional to allow God to dismantle the power of the ego in our lives so that we can emerge able to do God's work selflessly. Richard Rohr talks about the importance of our secret life of prayer as the only way to truly be open to God's transformation. He says that the problem is that most of us don't want to go deep inside because we are afraid of going down. Our culture has conditioned us to always think of or do things that lift us up. But without going deep down into that soul space, we only live in the space where our egos are in charge and as a result, we are never content or happy!

In her book *When the Heart Waits*, Sue Monk Kidd writes in a chapter called "Quickaholic Spirituality" about her desire for spiritual growth without having to wait or to really practice spirituality in secret. She wrote, "I was a typical quickaholic. We are, I suspect, one of the fastest growing populations around. It was at this point that I traveled to St. Meinrad Archabbey for a retreat. One day after morning prayers, I walked to the edge of the pond and sat on the grass. I listened to the wind sigh over the water and tried to be still, to simply be there and wait in the moment. But almost instantly my inner chaos rose up. The need to keep moving to act, to solve everything overpowered me. I got to my feet. As I returned to the guest quarters, I noticed a monk, ski cap pulled over his ears, sitting perfectly still beneath a tree. There was such reverence in his silhouette, such tranquil sturdiness, that I paused to watch. He was the picture of waiting. Later I sought him out. 'I saw you today sitting beneath the tree -just sitting there so still. How is it that you can wait so patiently in the moment? I can't seem to get used to the idea of doing nothing.' He broke into a wonderful grin. 'Well, there's the problem right there, young lady. You've bought into the cultural myth that when you're waiting, you're doing nothing.' Then he took his hands and placed them on my shoulders, peered straight into my eyes and said, 'I hope you'll hear what I'm about to tell you. I hope you'll hear it all the way down to your toes. When you're waiting, you're not doing nothing. You're allowing your soul to grow up. If you can't be still and wait, you can't become what God created you to be.'"

Included in our scripture for today is what is known as the Lord's prayer. We are going to use that prayer for a simple practice of reflection using the cards you received when you came in.

Read the verses and pray about them.

Ask yourself:

Is there a word or phrase that jumps out at me?

What visual comes to mind? (It may be as simple as colors, an abstract, a word, or a stick figure)

Do the verses remind me of something or someone in my life?

If I was going to explain this concept to a 6-year-old, what picture would aid in understanding?

Draw a picture or write the words and let the Holy Spirit guide your thoughts.

Closing prayer: Our Father...