

March 6, 2022

Lent 1:C

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

All Saints', Littleton, NH

A week ago this morning I was at Holy Cross Monastery just above New York City for the last day of my retreat, and enjoyed Sunday morning Eucharist with the monks, retreatants, and visitors. I say 'enjoyed', but Ukraine was much on everyone's mind and there was a somber tone, and one of the monks, who had Ukrainian heritage, preached a really powerful sermon. You can find it online on their website or Face Book page, as I think I put in an email last week.

And so we begin Lent. I thought I'd just share some thoughts about prayer and how to step into a deeper relationship with God – something which Lent is meant to inspire us to do. Let's first talk about the kinds of prayer. [Ask the congregation: intercession, supplication, praise/adoration, vocal, singing, corporate prayer like our Prayers of the People, and personal silent or contemplative prayer]. As you know, I've had a contemplative/centering prayer practice for 43 years, and this way of prayer is very important to me. This kind of prayer takes its scriptural precedent from Matthew 6, which was read on Ash Wednesday...."But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

I know I talk a lot about this kind of prayer, and in fact we have a little group of practitioners that meets on Tuesdays to practice this prayer together and encourage one another. Maybe you think that I want all of you to be 'contemplatives', and maybe I do to some degree---at least to the degree that each of us is happy in silence with God and know how nurturing and grounding that can be. Hopefully each of us as Christians have an intimate relationship with God that can and should include all those kinds of prayer we mentioned; and that each has its place in our walk with God. I love my contemplative time, but I also love my time with you in worship to share our lives together and encourage one another in 'putting on the mind of Christ', to use St. Paul's phrase.

Now let me tell you about my retreat as a way of teaching about centering prayer and an encouragement for some prayer practice during Lent. At the monastery much of the day is kept in what is called 'the Great Silence' where there is no talking, even at meals; and there are 4 'offices' or prayer times every

day – Morning Prayer, Mid-day Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline, and Eucharist at 9 o'clock in the morning every day. I would usually go into the chapel about 30 minutes before each service to sit and practice centering prayer as well as other times throughout the day. You know, I went to the monastery all primed for silence and so ready for time to sit in contemplation of God...but I went with expectations too! You'd think after 43 years of this I would know better, but I went with hopes of achieving a deep calm, but instead most of the time it was just silence and my distracted mind! It wasn't 40 days like Jesus, just 4, but man did I ever run head-on into temptations which were the distractions. You see, the point of centering or contemplative prayer is just to put everything aside and wait upon God. There is something spiritually powerful in getting to that still point, but it takes time and a constant letting go and re-focusing on God. It is basically, making oneself available to God!

I was tempted with all kinds of 'shoulds' – I should be planning this, or doing that, or making sure that..., etc., etc. I had to let them go. Usually I'm pretty good about putting things aside after all these years of practice, but I still run into bad days. I was tempted into worrying and non-stop intercession for Ukraine---well, that's holy isn't it?! Yes, but I wasn't there for intercession...and there was plenty of intercession in the prayer offices. I had to let it go. I was tempted by concerns about money and security. I had to let them go. And I persisted and just kept the practice going even though I was not visited with great consolations. The story of Jesus' time in the desert was actually giving us a teaching about how, when we enter retreat and contemplation, we will be tempted too. It's interesting what will come up when you start this practice.

What one knows about this practice is that in that holy waiting you are training your mind and heart to rest in God's love. As you approach the stillness, even if you don't 'feel' it every time, you are creating the space for the Holy Spirit to heal you and make you a better lover of and for God. And often, without realizing it, you are deepening the peace of Christ and putting on the mind of Christ.

You also wake up to a deeper sense humility. I'm not sure if you remember, but after coming back from sabbatical where I practiced this prayer a lot, I shared with you that one of the things that happened to me regarding this deepening humility, was a wishing that I was a better priest. I didn't say this to get reassurances or pats on the back, because I didn't feel neurotic about it; I just wished I was better because I felt God's love so much and wanted it to show more in my life!

And here's an interesting thing.....I remember saying to the Centering Prayer group one time after our prayer time that there was something about this kind of prayer that also felt like it helped me prepare for my own death. Paul and I had an interesting conversation about this after the Ash Wednesday service this past week, because the big point of that service is being marked with ashes with the words, 'Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return'. We both felt that we are ok with that, and as we grow older we think about death a lot more with a certain amount of peace. Paul isn't too keen on the showy display of ashes and penance, largely because the gospel lesson for the day actually councils against it: Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven." So, it is interesting that we read that gospel and then administer ashes, which some wear all day if they go to an early service. Some prefer to wipe off the ashes soon after the service specifically because of the gospel lesson.

But the point, of course, is to remind ourselves of our mortality and the grace of God. And for me, in my centering prayer practice, this shadow of mortality can sometimes hover around, but not in a menacing way. There is a peace that comes with it and an assurance of God's love that makes me just want to let my shoulders drop and let out a big sigh. And then there's the 'knowing' that comes, like Julian of Norwich's saying that came to her — "And all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." I know this may be hard to hear with the world going to hell in a hand basket, but this kind of grounded and centered life in Christ is what each of us are called to, and our practice really does well up into those living waters that shape not only us, but the world around us. Well, I hope that whetted your appetite for prayer as you walk into Lent.

The Centering Prayer group is currently reading a classic of Christian spirituality from the 14th century called, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which is all about contemplative prayer practice. The title takes its name from a concept or experience one has when one practices contemplative prayer---that one rises into this cloud that is really hard to describe. The version we're reading is actually a 'distilled' translation based on the Middle English in which it was originally written. To end this homily, I thought I'd read a couple of the chapters that speak of this practice that I thought were both wise and humorous. Don't worry, they're 'distilled', so not long, and really more like short poems. [*The Cloud of Unknowing, Distilled*, by Daniel London, chapters 34 & 35]

...and so, let us practice for a minute!

Chapter 35: The Mirror of Prayer

Sometimes when you sit down to pray in this special way,
You will feel tired and restless.
Pray anyway.
And please understand that “prayer” can include much more
than this particular practice of piercing the cloud.
Prayer can also include reading books of spiritual value,
Reflecting on sacred Scripture,
Listening to inspiring sermons,
Gathering with the saints in song,
Sauntering through the forest with grateful heart,
And drinking from the well of the church’s ancient wisdom
Just as you use a glass mirror to see your face,
Use these forms of prayer to peer into your soul
And with these mirrors,
You can wipe the spiritual schmutz off your face.

Chapter 34: Consent

Let the perfect grace have its way with you.
When it asks for your consent, say, “Yes.”
Be the wood, and let it be the carpenter.
Be blind and let go of your desire to know.
If you don’t understand what I’m saying,
That’s OK. Much of this will make sense to you
After you have had your own direct experience
Of God’s love.
Don’t let any priest get in the way.