

Lent 1 A: February 26, 2023

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Genesis 9: 8-17

Psalm 25: 1-9

1 Peter 3: 18-22

Mark 1: 9-15

Welcome to Lent. We put away the word 'Alleluia' as a sign of a more penitent season of the church year. We enter a somber and reflective period. We focus on holiness of life (not self-righteousness) – things we do that bring us closer to God. Each season of the church year has its own special accent, and Lent is one for self-reflection, prayer, and amendment of life. If we think that the sum total of our Christian life is just coming to church on Sundays, and going through our beautiful liturgies, then we have missed the point of Jesus' teaching. We are only feeding the dinosaurs, if you get my meaning.

In the Ash Wednesday service we have a reading from Matthew 6 with this verse: "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." Lent is a time for this kind of prayer and further developing this kind of prayer. As in the Gospel this morning, Jesus did this kind of prayer after his baptism. It was not all sweetness and light, just like our lives after our baptisms are not all sweetness and light, but through prayer he persevered and connected to the source of his hope and power. So, I want to tell you again about the beginnings of my love affair with prayer. And my initial withdrawal into the wilderness.

The year was about 1978. I was in college and I was struggling with what God was calling me to do and be, and a friend gave me a book. I'm sure many of you are aware of books in your life that did not have great literary worth or evocative prose, but because of how they hit you where you were at the time, have had a deep and abiding meaning in your life. This was true of a book titled, *The Genesee Diary*. It is a book by Henri

Nouwen, one of my favorite pastoral theologians; and was a diary written during his 7 month stay in a Trappist monastery in upstate NY. Trappists, of all the religious orders, are deeply committed to silence and contemplative prayer. For those who have read some of his works, you may remember that Thomas Merton was a Trappist.

The book had this effect on me: it made me long for the silence and solitude that are part and parcel of contemplative prayer – it made me long for space to find my center as it were. And I gotta tell you, silence is very uncomfortable! My life was college and classes, but whenever I could, I retreated to a small Roman Catholic monastery on the edge of Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, founded by a Polish Franciscan priest, Fr. Robert Dubrowski. Fr. Robert had survived Dachau. There were about 1800 Polish priests sent to Dachau, and about 900 of them died there. He was one of the lucky who survived.

Fr. Robert founded this little monastery of St. Anne in Oklahoma after the war. It was there, to his monastery, that I retreated to search for silence and solitude – and there be confronted by it! Father Robert let me come almost any time and sit in their chapel in silence. Many weekends I'd go for the whole weekend and just sit in silence. I still remember his warm welcome in his thick Polish accent and his encouragement of me in my life in prayer.

At first it was exciting to enter into retreat. The book had so whetted my appetite for silence that it was so comforting to enter that holy place for prayer. I'd take my Prayer Book and Bible and a note pad and at first there was such great contentment. Then, as time wore on and I began to realize just how fractured my thoughts were, I would retreat to reading scripture and saying the Daily Offices from the Prayer Book. Ah, how much holier could you get!

Then I began to realize that when my mind wasn't wandering during the prayers and readings, that it was trying to run away in them! Have you ever been so terrified by how crazy your own thoughts are, or fractured they seem to be, that you would retreat into some busy activity just to give your mind something constructive to do – something that you had to spend some effort concentrating on?

As the Holy Spirit began to woo me, I began to let go of the things that tempted me to stay busy. One of the tools I used was the ancient 'Jesus Prayer', do you know it?: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner." This prayer goes way back into the early centuries of the Christian church and is still used extensively in monastic life as a centering prayer. I began to learn to pray the prayer in time with my breath and my heart beat – it began to become part of an organic experience of my whole being. For those of you who practice Centering Prayer, it is not unlike the practice of having a 'sacred word' that you use to bring you back to center when your mind wanders.

And you know what I had to do, I had to leave the Prayer Book and the Bible behind in my little cell – the little room they would give me when I visited the monastery. I had to leave them behind because they became a temptation to distraction. Out of the Jesus Prayer came a deeper and deeper calling just to sit and listen. I would focus on the crucifix over the altar and repeat the Jesus Prayer. I would wait up on God. I did allow myself to take two things in with me – a pencil and piece of paper. I took those in so that when something came across my mind on which I began to worry or plan or ponder, I would write it down as a way of saying to myself, 'I'll get to that later'. And I would come back to the Jesus Prayer and waiting upon God.

And you know one of the most interesting side effects of this practice – it raised in me such an incredible sense of exhaustion! I fought it at first, but after a while I realized that when I had allowed myself to relax to that extent, then I just had to go take a nap, and so I did. I remember in the early days of this practice that I had to nap a lot! But gradually, the exhaustion passed. I began to breathe more deeply. I began to experience the world in a whole new way. I became so deeply aware of the beauty of everything around me and a longing to tease out love and joy in everyone and every circumstance.

I wish I could say that I have lived consistently in that space since that time. The sad news is that I have had some very dark days in my life, and times where I have been consumed with the cares of this world. And I still struggle, as do we all. But, and this is the truth about contemplative prayer, it is not something you achieve, it is something you practice. I think

this is partly why the first Christians were not known as Christians, but 'people of the Way' – the 'way' being an expression of how they followed Christ and how they practiced prayer.

And if this sermon challenges you to begin to explore contemplative prayer as part of a Lenten discipline, I urge you not to go there without a spiritual director or spiritual friend. Contemplative prayer can be very, very intimidating and scary. But at the very least, take this message to heart this Lent, that though we are tempted throughout this life by so many things that would cause us to spin off center, there is a way to come home, to come to center, and that way is discovered and deepened in prayer; and it is there that we meet Christ and the overwhelming love of God.....and when truly met, we cannot help but want to share that love in many and varied ways. Oh yes, this practice of prayer is not real and not complete or authentic if all it proves to be is a lovely navel-gazing experience. If your practice is true, you will not be able to help yourself from wanting to help others; because true practice yields the understanding that you are connected to everyone, and 'self-offering' is not just the example of Jesus, it is what sets us free and gives us joy. My standing before you is witness to that! May God grant you such a holy Lent....Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner.