

Sermon #9: The Heart of the Matter: Spiritual Practice

Amos 5: 21–24; Deuteronomy 5:1–21 p. 877 VU; Ephesians 1:15–19;
Matthew 5:43–6:17

I want to begin today by asking you to close your eyes, place your feet flat on the floor, lay your hands loosely in your lap, and enter into prayer. Take slow, deep breaths. As you inhale, say silently in your mind, the words: “Lord Jesus Christ”, then as you exhale, silently repeat the words, “you are the Light of the World.” Inhale again “By your boundless grace” and exhale on “grant me your peace.” “Lord Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world; by your boundless grace, grant me your peace.” Inhale, and exhale on those words – then as your mind begins to quiet, let go of the words, and simply be open to God. If your mind starts travelling in circles, simply return to those words for a while... [take five minutes]

You have just participated in two aspects of prayer: the verbal prayer, which uses words - this time unspoken words - and the prayer of internal silence – seeking to become quiet and still inside, in order that God may guide and replenish us.

Today we get to the heart of the matter we have been learning about together: the practice of Christian faith. In our readings today we hear of many aspects of Christian practice. We read Paul’s prayer for those in the church - the way he holds those he cares about in positive thought and prays for their growth in the faith. We hear Jesus talk about prayer and fasting and the offering of money to the poor in ways that are genuine and humble, rather than showy and boastful. We hear the Ten Commandments, which are the basis of our ethical life. We hear Amos calling us to hate evil and to choose what is good – to live a life that feeds the cause of justice and builds up the store of compassion in the world.

As Marcus Borg said earlier in his book, the emerging understanding of Christianity tells us that faith is not primarily about believing, or about a certain set of behaviours. It is about relationship – relationship with God, with that ultimate source of meaning and purpose in life. Spirituality is paying attention to that relationship. So Christian spiritual practices are not done simply for the sake of the behaviours themselves – but for the sake of keeping us attentive to God.

The primary private form of spiritual practice for Christians is prayer – both the prayer of inner silence and the various verbal forms of prayer – spoken aloud, spoken in the heart, written in a journal, sung within a congregation. Several weeks ago I talked about intercessory prayer – praying for others – and the challenges it presents within this emerging understanding of Christianity. For those who find it impossible to believe that God intervenes sometimes and not other times, or that God reaches down from a distant heaven and changes things on earth, they may wonder why, then, they should pray? Well, for one thing, it is a natural human instinct, to hold those we care about in our hearts in this way. For another, regardless of how intercessory prayer works, all prayer builds our

intimacy with God. How do we become close to a friend if we never talk to him or her? Prayer is an essential part of Christian life.

What a wonderful thing to know that someone somewhere is praying for you and for me! When we pray for others, there is the potential to change both their life and ours. A friend of mine gave me a tip some time ago that I'll pass on to you. Is there someone in your life that you're really having trouble dealing with? Then I invite you to pray for that person every day for a month – and if you miss a day, you get to start again from scratch. Try that, and just see what happens! I think you will discover that prayer truly does have power! I try to begin each morning with what one spiritual writer calls “the prayer of the teacup”. I sit with a hot drink and as the steam rises, let my good intentions and hopes for those whose faces come to mind, rise with the steam to heaven.

The primary public form of spiritual practice is Christian worship – being part of a faith community that nurtures the growth of that relationship with God. The kind of Christian community that does that for you will depend on your background and your personality. One of the struggles we have in the United Church is trying to provide worship that addresses the needs of many very different types of people in building their relationship with God. We all kind of hang together and hope there will be at least something for each of us in the services.

Being part of a Christian community helps us build our Christian identity – another very important part of spirituality. It helps us understand who we are and who we are becoming as Christian people. I often think that there are many who put themselves down as Christians on census forms and questionnaires but don't really know what a Christian is! As we absorb the hymns, the prayers, the Scriptures, the creeds of the church, we define ourselves in God's terms, rather than the terms of our culture. We see ourselves as children of God, with a unique calling and a unique perspective to offer the world. We also see the world around us from a different perspective, recognising its wonder and its value in God's eyes. It is also in Christian community that we provide education and growth opportunities, to deepen our understanding and our intimacy. And the Christian community provides an opportunity to make changes for the sake of justice and compassion that we simply cannot make on our own. Together, we are stronger than we are apart.

We recall the words of the prophet Micah: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” And we heard today the voice of the prophet Hosea: “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The daily practice of Christian faith requires a commitment to what is just and right, a constant awareness that what God cares about is the redemption of the world, and every living thing on it. And so, the first of the commandments are about how to love God with our whole being; and the rest are about how to love our neighbour. Within the Christian church there are organisations that promote compassion, and organisations that

promote justice. Or another way of putting it is that there are groups that try to relieve suffering, and others that try to change the conditions that cause suffering. Both are important, and both require our commitment and our support. Our Mission and Service Fund helps support both types of programs; but we might also ask ourselves if we are supporting both types right here at home. This too, is spiritual practice.

The practice of Christian friendship is another way in which we can strengthen our Christian identity and deepen our relationship with God. I can't remember if I've mentioned the word "amchara" before. It means "soul friend" – having at least one person in your life with whom you can share your faith journey intimately and with total honesty. I hope that there are those here who have found someone like that to accompany them on the path of faith.

There are so many practices that can nourish our relationship with God – that can help us recognise the Holy shining through the thin places in life, that can open our closed hearts, that can remind us of God's presence and action in our lives. Daily Christian practice is at the heart of Christianity – for after all, the earliest name for our faith was "THE WAY". Not "the belief" or "the commandments" or "the doctrine" – The Way. Christianity is meant to be a way of life that opens us up to God and enriches our relationship with the divine.

I often give thanks for the family I was raised in, and especially for my parents – for it was from them that I learned about The Way. I've shared with you before that every day I can recall – and to this very day – my parents would sit together on their double bed, sometimes with us kids gathered round and sometimes on their own, and read to each other from a devotional book before bed time. We said grace at meals. At one point, we had regular family meetings that included a devotional. We marked the seasons of the church year both at home and in church. We attended church regularly – with both Mum and Dad, and were active in the community. My mother used to get up at 6 or even earlier every morning to spend an hour with God. Both parents enjoy leading worship and contributing to the life of the church, and they both have led Sunday School or youth programs and helped out at Christian camps. They have given ten percent of their income to the church and to other charitable organisations for as long as I can remember. They were my earliest and most consistent models for The Way.

You might be thinking, "No wonder she turned out to be a minister." But that's actually missing the point. Spiritual practice is essential, not only for those of us called to designated ministry in the church, but for every single Christian. Without the practice of our faith our relationship with God remains a casual, shallow affair, rather than the deep intimacy of a truly loving and committed relationship. God's love for us is so deep, so constant, so faithful – and that's a love that I need in my life! That's a relationship I can count on – and it's worth investing some time in.

At Bible Study one day I was asked about what makes the difference between a good person, and a good Christian. I believe that the difference is primarily in two things: one, our allegiance to Jesus, and two, our following in his Way, by engaging in the spiritual practices that deepen our relationship with God. You can be a good person, and never say a prayer; you can be a good person, and never go to church; you can be a good person, and never give a penny or a minute's work to support the body of Christ. But be a good Christian and neglect all of the traditions of Christian faith and living? I don't think so!

It is not necessary to undertake all of the spiritual practices I have mentioned at once – and there are many that I have not mentioned this time around which might help you on your spiritual journey. They are not a list of requirements, but time-tested and proven ways of deepening our life with God. God wants to be in relationship with us –that's a part of God's very nature. I am so very glad to know God – and I hope you can celebrate and share with me the presence of God in your life. Even if it's only for a few minutes here and there throughout the day, take time to remember God and to be attentive to where the Spirit is leading. May it be so.