

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 5: Reconnecting With Spiritual Practice

Mark 1:35 Matthew 14:24 Luke 5:15-16; 6:12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
July 26, 2015

Your personal understanding of what it means to connect with God is a vital part of your journey of life and faith. Throughout this sermon series, we've been exploring – and hopefully broadening – our understand of the term 'spirituality' and what it means to connect with God. I'll save a review for an upcoming sermon, because I want to get right into this morning's topic: connecting with God by reconnecting with spiritual practice.

What do you think of when you hear the term 'spiritual practice,' or 'spiritual disciplines'? As good and faithful Presbyterians, we probably think first of the usual: prayer and Bible study. But you may be surprised to learn that our own Presbyterian *Book of Order* broadens that understanding by mentioning that spiritual practice also involves our personal discipleship in response to God's love and grace. It suggests we do that on Sunday mornings, for example, through:

- participation in public worship,
- engagement in ministries of witness, service, and compassion,
- activities that contribute to spiritual re-creation and rest from daily occupation.

Since the practice of prayer is brought up perhaps most often when thinking about connecting with God by reconnecting with spiritual practice, I want to focus on that for just a moment. I shared several scripture passages from the Gospels that reflect how important it was to Jesus to take a break from ministry, go off by himself alone, and pray. We learn, and many of us have experienced, that **ministry without prayer can lead to burnout and the loss of a grounded sense of purpose. Yet, prayer without ministry is simply unbiblical.** Here's what our *Book of Order* says about prayer.

W-5.4000 Prayer in Personal Worship

W-5.4001 **Prayer**

Prayer is a conscious opening of the self to God, who initiates communion and communication with us.

Prayer is receiving and responding, speaking and listening, waiting and acting in the presence of God. In prayer we respond to God in adoration, in thanksgiving, in confession, in supplication, in intercession, and in self-dedication. (W-2.1000)

It continues with what I find to be a very helpful list of ways our prayers can be expressed. Listen carefully.

W-5.4002 **Expressing Prayer**

Prayer in personal worship may be expressed in various ways.

One may engage in conscious conversation with God, putting into words one's joys and concerns, fears and hopes, needs and longings in life.

One may wait upon God in attentive and expectant silence.

One may meditate upon God's gifts, God's actions, God's Word, and God's character.

One may contemplate God, moving beyond words and thoughts to communion of one's spirit with the Spirit of God.

One may draw near to God in solitude.

One may pray in tongues as a personal and private discipline.

One may take on an individual discipline of enacted prayer through dance, physical exercise, music, or other expressive activity as a response to grace.

One may enact prayer as a public witness through keeping a vigil, through deeds of social responsibility or protest, or through symbolic acts of disciplined service.

One may take on the discipline of holding before God the people, transactions, and events of daily life in the world.

One may enter into prayer covenants or engage in the regular discipline of shared prayer.

The Christian is called to a life of constant prayer, of "prayer without ceasing."
(Rom. 12:12; 1 Thess. 5:17)

Hopefully this has helped expand and broaden your own understanding of what it means to pray. Take special notice of how prayer can be expressed in and through our actions and attitudes. Words aren't always necessary. Expressions of prayer can also be enacted in physical things like dance, exercise, and music. I think they may be hinting at yoga here, as well. And did you pick up on the words "meditate" and "contemplate." Now there's something we don't talk near enough about as Presbyterians. **I may be wrong, but sometimes I think that a congregation like ours does a better job with the action side of spirituality than the contemplative side.** So let's take a look at that.

John Philip Newell, in his book that I'm using as a primary reference for this sermon series, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, introduces us to **Thomas Merton** (1915-1968). Merton was a "great modern Christian prophet of restoring balance through the disciplines of spiritual practice." As a Trappist monk, he was not calling us to a monastic life. Rather, he was "inviting us all into what he called a '**contemplative orientation**' to life." Newell reflects, "Regardless of our particular vocation, age, stage of life, marital status, and family commitments, **we are invited to find balance – between being and doing, between inner awareness and outward engagement** – that will lead to a fuller fruiting of our lives and relationships." The key phrase in that statement is one that can never be emphasized enough: finding balance in life.

Merton believed, as he shared in this 1973 book entitled, *Contemplative Prayer*, **that spiritual practice is not a seeking "to know about God" but "to know God."** Newell writes:

Western Christianity has focused its attention not on spiritual practice but on spiritual belief. It has confused faith with a set of propositional truths about the Divine, rather than a personal experience of the Divine that could be undergirded and sustained by particular practices and disciplines.

...As Merton says, **spiritual practice is not about an idea or concept of God. It is about seeking the experience of presence.**

One of the many things I and others are learning about the wonderful tradition known as Celtic spirituality, is to **see God not so much as an Almighty Divine Being out there somewhere, but as a Sacred Presence that can be experienced in and through all things!** And that begins by recognizing and acknowledging that what is deepest in us is of God. Newell writes:

[Merton emphasizes that] in spiritual practice we return to this deepest center. In meditation, he says, we penetrate the innermost ground of our life. This allows us to **find our true meaning not from the outside, he says, but from within.** It means that we identify ourselves not in terms of social status, race, religion, or sexual orientation but by our truest identity in the very ground of our being.

Do we dare claim that divinity can be found from within, as well as found from without? I'm finally starting to believe that we can.

Along those lines, there is a particular spiritual discipline in which you may not be familiar. It's called '**mindfulness.**' You will find a wealth of information about this by googling "mindfulness." Here's some of what I've found. In a blog by Zachary H. Avery, entitled, "Consciously Embracing What Is: The Path of Presence & Mindfulness," he writes:

Our fast-paced, multitasking, instant messaging, drive through, fast track, 24/7, tweeting, iEverything, microwaving society has lost (or perhaps, forgotten) some things. One of these things that we've forgotten is how to live present in each moment. You see, Buddha said, "The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, worry about the future, or anticipate troubles, but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly."

Practicing mindfulness, being present, and living in the moment are all attributes recommended by coaches, psychologists, and spiritual teachers alike. Wikipedia defines mindfulness as **the intentional, accepting and non-judgmental focus of one's attention on the emotions, thoughts, and sensations occurring in the present moment.**

Doctor Herbert Benson (author of the infamous book *The Relaxation Response*) adds, "**Mindfulness is the practice of learning to pay attention to what is happening to you from moment to moment. To be mindful, you must slow down, do one activity at a time, and bring your full awareness to both the activity at hand and to your inner experience of it.**"

Rather than being intentionally aware of what's happening in front of and inside of us, we constantly turn to phones, computers, and TVs that distract us from the here and now.

...When we embrace mindfulness, the world opens up to us. We're suddenly able to see beauty and grace in ways that we've previously overlooked or taken for granted. The normal, boring, mundane, and common suddenly becomes infused with life and brilliance. And, perhaps best of all, we find **peace**. **Lao Tsu said thousands of years ago, "If you are depressed, you are living in the past. If you are anxious, you are living in the future. If you are at peace, you are living in the present."** You see, peace is one thing that money, the Internet, smart phones, and social media can't give us. It's something that our society is so hungry for (hence the explosion in practices such as yoga and meditation).

Being fully present in the world in which you and I live, therefore, is a spiritual discipline unto itself. The present moment is underrated. It sounds so ordinary, but we spend so little time in it.

For instance, how many of you are already wondering when this sermon will end; thinking about what you are going to do after the service later this afternoon; reflecting on something that happened to you earlier this week or just this morning; thinking about how badly you want to check your cell phone right now; or any number of countless distractions running through your mind at this very moment?

Just yesterday morning, I took a break from writing this sermon and walked down to my pond with my dog, Jack. I realized how my monkey mind was juggling so many thoughts all at the same time. Like, when will I mow the grass, what will I fix for lunch, how I was going to conclude my sermon? I wasn't really seeing the things right in front of my face. When I realized what I was doing I chose to refocus my attention to the present moment.

At once, I heard birds and insects and the wind rustling the leaves that I hadn't heard a moment earlier. I noticed hundreds of dragonflies hovering above the surface of the water. I saw the magnificent beauty of the lush trees that surrounded me. It was indeed an experience of sensing God's presence. And it brought me peace.

So remember, spiritual practice doesn't always involve bowing your head and holding your hands together in prayer, nor just attending worship and reading the Bible, nor just burning incense and sitting crosslegged on the floor. **Do whatever works for you in order to sense the presence of God in your midst. But you must be intentional about it.**

And I encourage you to explore mindfulness, the practice of being present in body, mind and spirit in the present moment. Try it for just 10 minutes a day and see what happens.

Amen.

Resources:

John Phillip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2014