

SPIRITUAL SPRING TRAINING MEDITATION MARCH 7 2010
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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This is our third sermon in our Lenten series on Spiritual Spring Training and our focus today is on meditation. Last week we thought about prayer as a way of openly and honestly sharing with God whatever is on our hearts and minds. I hope many of you have been practicing prayer this past week as simply sharing our thoughts and feelings with God the way you would share them with a good friend. Today, we will think about meditation as a way of listening to God like we would listen to a good friend.

The Scriptures often speak of meditation as a way of listening to God.

There was a time in David's life when King Saul sought to kill him and David fled to the wilderness to save his life. During that time he sought God's guidance and direction for his life and he became still and meditated and heard the still small voice of God. Here are some of the verses of Psalm 63:

Read Psalm 63: 1, 5-8

A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.

O God, you are my God, I seek you,

my soul thirsts for you;

my flesh faints for you,

as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,

and my mouth praises you with joyful lips

when I think of you on my bed,

and meditate on you in the watches of the night;

for you have been my help,

and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

My soul clings to you;

your right hand upholds me.

O GOD, I SEEK YOU, MY SOUL THIRSTS FOR YOU...THEN I MEDITATE ON YOU IN THE WATCHES OF THE NIGHT... THEN MY SOUL IS SATISFIED AND MY MOUTH PRAISES YOU WITH JOYFUL LIPS.

In the New Testament, Mary is the model for meditation when she meditates on the events surrounding the birth of Jesus when Jesus talked with the elders in the Temple in Jerusalem: Luke 2:19: MARY TREASURED ALL THESE WORDS AND PONDERED THEM IN HER HEART....HIS MOTHER TREASURED ALL THESE THINGS IN HER HEART. Luke 2:51

Let us pray.

Many of you have heard me tell about an experience I once had while flying on a plane to a meeting in New York City.

I sat down next to a lady who looked at me very carefully. Then she asked: "Are you Mayor Rudy Giuliani? I responded, "No, I am just another bald headed guy with glasses."

She said: "No, you are the former mayor of New York City." I said: "I am not! I am a United Methodist Pastor from Indianapolis." She responded: "OH, THAT'S A GOOD COVER."

What I didn't tell you before is that she continued to talk with me during the whole flight to New York. She told me about her husband, her children, and her grandchildren and where each one was and about each one's hobbies and activities.

I just listened patiently to her as she shared everything she could think of about each member of her family. It was what you might call a one sided conversation. She talked and I listened patiently. She never stopped talking long enough for me to say anything.

Now a real and meaningful conversation with someone is where you share your thoughts and feelings honestly and they listen patiently to you. Then they share their honest thoughts and feelings with you and you listen intently to them. A real conversation is where there is sharing and listening on both sides. Unfortunately, sometimes we are like that woman on the plane who thought she was talking to Mayor Rudy Giuliani. She just talked well but she didn't listen well.

Now I understand her because I know that sometimes I talk too much and don't listen enough.

Someone once put it this way God gave us two ears and one mouth so we should listen twice as much as we talk.

Last week I talked about prayer as our honest sharing with God our deepest feelings, thoughts and concerns. Prayer is simply heartfelt talking with God just as we might talk to a friend and share our heartfelt feelings and thoughts with them.

However, we have genuine communication with God when the communication is both ways, when we talk and God listens and then when God talks and we listen.

I describe prayer as talking to God when we share our thoughts and requests to God and meditation as listening to God's thoughts and requests to us.

Unfortunately, sometimes our communication with God is all one sided. We may talk to God; we may tell God all of our concerns and requests but we don't actually listen to God and allow God to share God's thoughts and requests for us. We frequently just have a one sided conversation with God; we talk to God but we don't listen to God.

In the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible, there is both talking and listening to God.

Psalms 63 is described as a psalm of David when he was in the wilderness of Judah. David had risen to become a very successful military leader in King Saul's army and the people praised David more than they praised King Saul. So King Saul became jealous and sought to kill David. David fled to the wilderness of Judah to save his life.

However, David was very distraught. He felt far away from God so he shared his feelings with God:

O GOD, I SEEK YOU, MY SOUL THIRSTS FOR YOU AS IN A DRY AND WEARY LAND WHERE THERE IS NO WATER.

I suspect that there are times like that in all our lives, times when we are discouraged and our soul thirsts for God just as we thirst for water in a dry and barren land.

Then David meditated. (I THINK OF YOU ON MY BED AND MEDITATE ON YOU IN THE WATCHES OF THE NIGHT.) David meditated, he listened for the still small voice of God in the middle of the night and experienced the presence of God. So he concluded:

MY SOUL IS SATISFIED AS WITH A RICH FEAST, MY MOUTH PRAISES YOU WITH JOYFUL LIPS, I SING FOR JOY AND MY SOUL CLINGS TO YOU.

You see, David shows us both how to share openly and honestly with God our pain and suffering and then to meditate- to listen to God. When we speak to God honestly and then listen to God intently, then we will rejoice and sing for joy because we have experienced deep communication with God, both speaking and listening.

In the New Testament, Mary is a model for meditating. There are two places in Luke's Gospel where something happens with Jesus and we are told that Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

I love how it says Mary treasured all these things in her heart. It means that she thought deeply about them and meditated on them to see what God was saying to her through them.

Prayer is when we share our honest feelings with God and meditation is the other side of the conversation when we listen for the still small voice of God speaking in our hearts.

So how do we meditate; how do we become still and listen for God's guidance in our lives?

Most meditation teachers suggest that we find a quiet place in our homes and a quiet time when we will not be disturbed by the phone or other people for 15 to 20 minutes one or two times a day. We can talk to God anywhere and anytime; we can talk to God when we are driving the car or doing something else. But, for me, I need to set some special time aside to listen to God in meditation.

I think meditation works best when we get ourselves physically comfortable, usually sitting up in a comfortable chair in front of a window, a home altar, or around plants or beautiful pictures. Some people come here to the small Meditation Chapel to the left of our main entrance or into Robertson Chapel or this sanctuary to become quiet and meditate.

Then, when we are physically comfortable, we focus our attention on our breathing.

In John's Gospel, we are told that Jesus breathed on his disciples and told them to receive the Holy Spirit. The spirit of God came into the disciples when they breathed in God's living presence.

I believe that Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into to us today just as he did to the first disciples and we receive God's spirit through our breath. So begin meditating by paying attention to breathing in the living spirit of God.

I like to begin meditating by thinking the words from Psalm 46:10 where it says BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD. It means that when we become still and quiet in our hearts and minds, then we will

know God. When I am so busy running from one place to another with my mind filled with thoughts and conversations then it is hard for me to listen to the still small voice of God speaking to me.

So when I inhale I think the words "BE STILL" and when I exhale I think the words "AND KNOW GOD."

Why don't we try that right now?

Take a deep breath and when you inhale think to yourself the words "BE STILL". And when you exhale, think the words "AND KNOW GOD." Be still and know God. Be still and know God.

When you are meditating on your own just focus on your breathing and it will help to put your mind in neutral so that you might come to a peaceful place with God.

Now, if you are like me, you will do that two or three times and your mind will kick in again. Your mind will tell you this is a dumb thing to do-that you have more important things to do than this. Your mind will want you to think about something that happened in the past or it will bring up things you have to do right now and you don't have time for this. Our minds are constantly thinking about things from the past or the future but they don't want us to be fully present in this moment thinking about our breathing.

Some of the saints of the past have had the same problem and have said that our minds are like wild horses that constantly run from one part of a field to another and never settle down in one place. Others say our thoughts are like monkeys swinging from tree to tree in the jungle and it is hard to get our thoughts to settle down and be still.

Now whenever my mind begins to wander and it always does, I gently bring it back by thinking BE STILL when I inhale AND KNOW GOD when I exhale. I may have to do it several times, but eventually and with practice, our minds do settle down and quit running around and allow us to be still and know God.

Then we come to a quiet place in our hearts and minds and bodies. And it is in that quiet place where we experience peace and may feel a gentle nudge or hear a word of guidance from God.

When I practice meditation, I don't often hear a specific word from God but I do experience the peace of God. It isn't so much that God is giving me specific instructions for a specific situation but making me a peaceful person to face every situation in my life.

Meditation is another exercise that we might practice during our time of Spiritual Spring Training. Make a commitment to spend five to ten minutes a day sitting quietly, focusing on our breathing, and allowing God to bring peace and acceptance as we face every challenge in our lives.

Now another way to practice meditation is called guided meditation. In guided meditation, we are asked to use our imaginations as a way to turn off our active rational minds. In guided meditation, we listen to someone else speaking and follow their directions in meditating.

The Spiritual Life Center has produced a Guided Meditations CD that we can use during Lent to help us meditate and listen to God. I recorded one of the guided meditations and Barbara Burke, Carol Ernst and Scott Semester recorded the others. You can purchase this CD in our bookstore this morning or you

can go on line to stlukesumc.com and click on the Lenten Opportunities section and then to Guided Meditations section to hear them.

Now to do a guided meditation you have to be able to use your imagination. On the meditation CD I ask people to imagine that they have corks or plugs at the end of each of their fingers and toes. Then I ask you to imagine that they pull all of these corks or plugs out of their fingers and toes and set them aside.

Then imagine that you have a hinge at the back of your head that opens up the top of your head. Then imagine that the living spirit of Christ is behind you, opens up the top of your head and pours in a cleansing liquid. This cleansing liquid flows through your mind and washes out all of your painful memories; it washes out any feelings of fear, worry or anxiety you may have in your mind out of your body.

This cleansing liquid flows down your neck and takes away any pain in your neck or shoulders and washes it out the tips of your fingers. Jesus pours more cleansing liquid through the top of your head and it washes any pain or illness you may have in any internal organs or in your legs or your feet out through your toes. Imagine that all fear, anxiety, pain or illness has been washed out of your body by Christ's cleansing liquid. Imagine that you are sparkling clean inside.

Then imagine that you replace the plugs in your fingers and toes. Then imagine that Jesus pours liquid light which is warm, loving and healing through the top of your head. This golden liquid light fills up your toes, your feet, your legs, all the organs in your torso, fills up your shoulders and runs down your arms and hands. The warm liquid light fills up your mind with peace and compassion.

Then you just sit there enjoying the feeling of being cleansed of fear and pain and being filled with the liquid loving and healing light of God brought to us through Jesus Christ.

Last week, I woke up one morning at 5 a.m. which is earlier than I normally get up. A friend told me that when you wake up early in the morning, it may mean that God has some business with you so you should pay attention. So I got up and found a peaceful place in our home to meditate.

I took some deep breaths and became quiet and still. Then I did the pull the plugs meditation and realized that I was carrying some tension and fear about a certain situation. I imagined that Jesus washed my tension and fear away and replaced it with liquid loving light which filled me full to overflowing with peace. I have been in a much more peaceful place in my life since that meditation earlier this week.

Do you see how using your imagination can be a channel for experiencing the peace of God which is beyond all rational understanding? If you are interested in trying this kind of meditation you can get the CD in the bookstore or off of the web.

Another way of doing meditation is by doing a walking meditation. Some people discover that when they go on a walk through the woods or in a park, it helps to quiet them down and make them more peaceful and open to God.

There is a walking meditation called walking the labyrinth. It is an ancient design of a walking path in which we walk along a specific circular path to the center of a big circle and then walk the path out

again. This morning we have a canvas labyrinth laid down in the Great Hall if you would like to try it after worship today.

Now, let me warn you, our rational minds will tell us this is foolishness. Our rational minds will tell us that we have more important things to do than to walk around in circles for about 15 minutes. Our rational minds will tell us that this looks strange.

However, just remember that it is our rational mind that gives us ulcers and headaches also, so we don't need to listen to our rational mind all the time.

Many people like to walk the path to the center of the circle as a way to surrender their burdens to God. When any concerns, fears, or anxieties come to mind as you walk along the path, just surrender them into the hands of God. When you reach the center, you may want to just stand there for awhile and meditate on the word "peace" and allow the peace of God to enter into your heart.

Christians throughout the centuries have practiced walking meditation as a way to quiet their minds and listen to the still small voice of God.

However, in recent years, medical scientists have discovered how meditation helps us physically as well as spiritually.

Medical scientists tell us that meditation can lower our blood pressure. In our high stress society, high blood pressure is one of our major physical problems and can lead to strokes and heart attacks. Scientists at a Cardiac Center in Los Angeles discovered that regular times of meditation lowered the blood pressure and the risks for another heart attack for nearly all of the heart patients who practiced meditation for at least four months.

Researchers at the University of Arizona discovered that meditation increases serotonin levels and allows the body to stop producing so much adrenaline which often leads to increased stress.

Researchers at the University of Wisconsin discovered that long periods of meditation improves brain functioning. They studied monks who meditate for long periods of time and discovered that their total brain functioning was better than people who never meditate at all.

Now, many doctors recommend that people practice meditation because it will reduce stress in their lives and the stress of modern society is one of the chief causes of much of our illnesses.

Jane Sweet is a long time member of St. Luke's. Over 20 years ago, she discovered that she had some serious physical challenges in her life which caused a great deal of pain.

Jane discovered that the only way she could be pain free for a few hours was by lying completely still in an absolutely quiet place. So Jane would spend hours each day in absolute silence.

She discovered that if she just focused on her breathing she would become very peaceful and content. She discovered this herself long before all of these medical studies were done showing the positive affect on our physical health.

While she was lying there silently she would think “be still” when she breathed in and when she exhaled she would think “and know God.” She discovered that spending a great deal of time each day in quiet meditation helped to heal her physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Jane was so impressed with how meditation had helped her heal that she wrote a little book entitled: *BE STILL AND KNOW GOD*, a practical guide to Christian Meditation. It is a wonderful book for people who would like to learn to meditate and discover the deep peace that comes when we become still and listen for the still small voice of God.

Professional baseball players are in the middle of Spring Training in Florida and Arizona; they are working on their basic skills of pitching, batting, catching, throwing and running.

The followers of Jesus are in the middle of our Spiritual Spring Training season and we are working on our basic skills of praying, meditating, speaking to God and listening to God. One question: how is spiritual basic training going for you this year?

This morning I invite us to make communion a real conversation between ourselves and God. Before you receive communion offer your honest prayers of concerns, fears, anxieties or joys to God. Then when you receive the bread and the cup, imagine that it is the living presence of Christ coming to bring peace into your life.

Let us pray.