

Spiritual Practice I: Growing

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1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time



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Spiritual practice.

I've got a confession to make.

Just hearing the words, "spiritual practice," make me sigh with chagrin.

For years and years, I've wondered about why I haven't been immersed in some sort of spiritual practice. Heck, when I got my call to ministry I hadn't set foot in a church in over 10 years....

The word "practice" takes me back to the years of my childhood, when it meant hours spent in front of the piano or in the practice room at school running scales on my clarinet. Both of these instruments, by the way, were someone's else idea. And the practice hour quickly became a wrestling match between me and my parents on a daily basis. Of course, my instructors were in on it, too.

All of the usual arguments were used. You'll be glad when you're older. It will help you with your math skills. Music lessons are a privilege - you should be grateful that we can afford them. Logic, reason and guilt. None of them worked for very long. By the time I was a sophomore in high school and still consigned to the less than concert band, I was done with practicing music.

Now, for all of you out there - whether you're the student or the cheerleader/coach - who are having this same wrestling match - I want you to know that I am grateful for the practice that did have for those years. I'm glad someone made me practice. It's made me an educated listener and a supporter of the arts. I'm in one of the few professions where it is part of my job to sing each and every week, and decide what hymns we're going to sing, so I'm glad I can read music. Music is something that I delight in and respect because I know how much work it takes to produce. So - in my case, practice didn't make perfect - but it made something slightly dented and scratched and that's good enough for me.

In my spiritual life I have tried many practices.

I've been a part of prayer groups. This worked the best when I was on Cape Cod and we met for a stroll on the beach each week.

I've tried any number of daily devotional books.

A pastor friend told me that one of her mentors told her that clergy should read three psalms each day in the morning, and that's what she had done for over 25 years. I think I lasted for about 15 psalms.

This last spring, in an effort to try another route, a small group of us met to journal our way through Lent. Every other week we'd meet to talk about how it was going. By the 2nd meeting, my journaling had become a task, and by the end, I must admit that though I read the book, my pen did not touch the page in my journal.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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So - this is a very long way to tell you that I am on a journey when it comes to spiritual practice. I'm still sort of stuck back there in my childhood - wrestling with the idea of practicing anything. And I'm resisting the urge of generalizing my whole life in ministry as a spiritual practice. That doesn't seem quite right.

In the next few weeks, we are going to use some spiritual practices. Some will be incorporated into worship. Christy led us in a guided prayer, for example, this morning. We're going to add some visual practices, too. We will light a candle as we ask God to illuminate Scripture. And we will reflect on the art and poetry of Ron and Miriam Pederson.

Ron and Miriam's collaborative practice of sculpture and poetry, is a well seasoned spiritual practice, I think. They hope that the collaboration continues when they set their work into public view. So, I'm going to reflect on one or two works each week in my preaching. And I invite you to do the same by spending some time with their installation in the Gathering Place.

I hope that in the next few weeks we may all come to find something that speaks to our hearts, something that will stake a claim at our centers and become a practice that will continue to keep us growing in understanding and knowledge of ourselves in relationship to our God.

This first sermon in the series is about this kind of growth. It is about moving from the practices of children to the practices of maturity.

To engage in another spiritual practice, this Sunday, I am going to preach in a different format so that we can get a feel for a way of spiritual reading called *Lectio Divina*.

Lectio Divina was really refined by St. Benedict in the 6th century. But the Reformers practiced it, too. It is a way of reading that slows us down and helps us not only to read the Word of God, but to be read by the Word of God. For those of us who are more visual - this kind of reading is different from our regular reading in the same way that traditional painting is different from the spiritual painting of Greek and Russian icons.

When we look at a traditional painting, we are drawn into it by the way in which the artist creates a vanishing point by having all the lines of perspective converge in a particular point. A religious icon painter reverses these lines. We become the viewed, instead of the viewer, as all lines of perspective converge upon us. It is thought that this reversal points to a spiritual reality that is beyond what we see with our eyes.

And when we become the viewed, all kinds of things can happen.

Instead of seeing the words on the printed page, and studying them with all the tools of interpretation available to us, we study them like we read a love letter or a poem. We seek formation instead of information. We "read between the lines," or resonate with the blessing that is hidden in the text.

The pastor and teacher Marjorie Thompson says that this kind of reading can also be uncomfortable. She quotes Hebrews which says, "...the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing... it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (4:12-13). Thompson says,

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If we are open, God's Word will penetrate to our very depths, discerning secret motives and intentions. As the "sword of the Spirit," (Eph 6:17) God's Word reveals us truthfully to ourselves and lays us open to radical transformation at those points of our unlikeness to Christ.

This leads to a "simultaneous comfort and discomfort of ... nakedness before God. (*Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, Westminter/John Knox: Louisville, KY, 1995, p. 20.)

So, this morning, Allison will read the Scripture three times. After the first time, which is called the *Lectio* Lection, there will be a minute of silence. After the second and third readings, I will take your place in the process and meditate on the text. And lastly, I'll form a response to the text.

As you listen, this first time, try and listen as if you hearing this familiar passage for the first time. Notice which words stand out. Ask what God is wanting you to hear just now. And let the passage enter you with complete grace - perhaps remembering this lovely image of Scripture that one writer has given us, " Sounding in and through the human words of scripture, like the sea within a conch shell, is another reality, vaster than the mind or imagination can compass. God has chosen to be bound to the words of scripture; in and through them, the Holy One comes near." (*Ibid.*, p. 19-20) So settle yourself, close your eyes if you wish, take a deep breath and let it out. Watch as the candle is lit and the prayer is said. Then let your mind and heart curl around the words as water curls into the chambers of a conch shell.

Please, pray with me....

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

(Minute of silence...)

The second reading prepares us for the *Meditatio* or meditation. Meditation in the Christian sense is different from meditation in the Far Eastern tradition. We believe that God's word is living - and therefore our meditation involves an active mind. Not analytical or critical. But allowing the words to live in us and move around in our memories and imaginations. And we must remember that these words can also act as a sword of sorts - opening and exposing long submerged or hidden things. So, listen for God's word as Allison reads for us again.

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I've already mentioned that spiritual practice reminds me of my childhood reaction to practice. It's difficult for me to let go of these childish ways. I wonder about the way in which these verses about letting go of childhood seem to be at the center of a letter about love. "Love never ends." "The greatest of these is love."

Childish ways can be understood in more than one way, I think.

Sometimes childishness sort of reflects the little quote at the beginning of the bulletin. "To insist upon a spiritual practice that served you in the past is to carry the raft on your back after crossing the river."

Sometimes we resist when we insist on things - dig our heels in on things - the way a child can dig their heels in - when someone who is in authority wants us to conform our lives to a particular practice. We all know that when an adult parent or teacher or mentor begins to teach us manners, we've got no idea what they're talking about. We all know the words, "I'm sorry," long before we understand what it means to really means to feel regret for what we've done. But the practice gets us there somehow, right?

Do we do this with what we learn about God?

Sometimes we know folks who know the Bible so well that chapter and verse seem to be on the tip of their tongues. Or the questions of the Heidelberg Catechism are a breath away. I have a feeling that if I asked the first question... Let me try that one: Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

And the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is often so deeply curled into the folds of our hearts and minds, that even in the darkness and labyrinth of Alzheimer's and dementia, we can say the words.

Because this is true, does this mean we are on the right path?

Does it mean we are not?

These are all good and comforting things.

But do they fall into the same category as prophecy and knowledge and speaking in the tongues of angels? Is this only part of what love is calling us to know?

As far as putting off childish ways - well - part of me wonders if Paul ever heard what Jesus had to say about children. "Let them come to me. Unless we are like children, we will never know the kingdom of God."

With all these questions, I'm starting to feel and maybe even look like Ron and Miriam's work called "Holding Breath." Her poem reminds me of that children's game we've all played, when we held our breath to see how long we could last. Miriam writes, in part:

How long can you hold your breath?
I'll time you.
When you think you've reached your limit,
count to ten....

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I'll count and then you'll count
and finally, when your face is crimson,
and all your will is spent,
allow your grievances to crash into the world -
unhoused, exposed, ridiculous.

Ron's sculpture - seems to me a head - with no body - the glaze all red and raw. It looks like an explosion of breath - the exhalation making flame like ripples inside the throat of the piece - the force of the crashing desire to breathe - to live - rippling back the clay to expose wide, ridiculously empty, eye sockets that house nothing.

But there are mirrors here - dim, but things that reflect us back to ourselves.

When I stand in front of Ron's piece, I feel like I am standing in front of an icon - with the lines of perspective ending at my nose. I'm out here trying this and that - but still - my heels feel dug in and I long to know what it is I'm supposed to know, in part, by being known. Standing in front of this exploded face, I wonder if I am afraid. After all, it is one thing to have learned what is important about God. But it is something completely different to have knowledge of God. Seeing God face to face. What would that mean? What would I have to relinquish, leave behind? When my will is spent, what would happen? And folks, I'm not here by myself. We are in this together, right? I am part of this community - and where you go, I will go. And my people, they are your people. Your God is my God.

This third reading prepares us for *Oratorio* - Oration. It is the time for spoken or written expression - traditionally - but not always - in the form of prayer. This is about how we want to live into the Word. The response can be confession, because the sword of the Word has exposed our sin. It can be jubilation and thanksgiving, because we have transformed our hearts. *Theoratorio* can include supplication, directly to the heart of God, because we are overwhelmed with desire for God's presence and wisdom. The oration itself can be a journey of discovery. It can be filled with questions and doubts. It can be a declaration of purpose, complete with a plan and a covenant. There is no wrong way to respond. God is the Lord of our whole life. So listen again for the Word of God....

I try and remember the last time when something happened that made my faith, hope and love evaporate in frustration and annoyance and my judgmental heels dug into the dirt and I exploded with those little exasperated exhalations that speak volumes - Hrrrumphhhh.

Shirley Sherrod comes to mind.

Most of us have heard about Shirley in these last weeks.

Shirley, an African American, employed by the USDA in Georgia, was exposed as a racist by a journalist of sorts. A video of her was played on line as she told a story about herself at a meeting of the NAACP. She admitted to being reluctant and less than helpful in a situation where she had to work with a white man who was about to lose his farm. Didn't seem fair to help him after watching many black people lose their farms. The national media picked up the

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story and ran with it. Her boss at the Department of Agriculture called her and eventually asked her to resign. The White House supported the decision. The NAACP soundly bashed her.

The privileged white person in me shook my head, hrrummphed a bit wondered what in the world the NAACP was up to.

Then, along with the rest of the world, I heard the rest of the story. Shirley's remarks were made 24 years ago. They were edited, cut short. The rest of the tape showed that she went on to say, that during this process, it was revealed to her that this wasn't really about being a white farmer or being a black farmer. Yes - it was true that many more black farmers had lost their land. And yes - it was true that this white farmer might have been trying to make her feel inferior. But it was revealed to her that this was not only about race. Shirley said, "It's about poor versus those who have. It's not so much about white..."

Well - I was able to back pedal this time without looking too ridiculous, too exposed. After all, we'd all been misled by the media. And, of course, then I went on to blow off steam about the media, and sputter about what was the Administration doing taking it's cues from the news and on and on. I'd had a chance to look in the mirror. But I let the errors and omissions of the reporters and administrators deflect the lines of perspective headed my way.

Then even more of the story came out.

Turns out Shirley's family had suffered a great deal at the hands of others. One relative was lynched. The killer was set free and then imprisoned finally for depriving the lynched man of his civil rights. The US Supreme Court overturned the decision, and the killer went free.

In 1965, when she was a teen, a year after the Civil Rights Act was signed into law, a cross was burned on her family's front lawn. Her father was not there because he'd been murdered by a white man who was never indicted. Shirley recalls that at her father's funeral, after years of making plans to leave, she made a commitment in her heart to stay in the South. And she asked God to show her how she could help the most. (Valerie Everton Dixon, "Shirley Sherrod's True Revelation," *Sojourners*, July 22, 2010.)

When I read these words, I was brought up short.

When I read these words, they read me. And I knew that Shirley Sherrod had something to teach me - something to teach us all. It took my breath away that even in the face of such a family history, Shirley could see the spiritual reality beyond the painful reality that she had lived through.

She saw that in the end - it is not only about white and black. Our racist tendencies can and do serve the powerful; it is about the haves and the have nots. Maybe it's no accident that Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed about five months after beginning the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement - the Poor People's Campaign. An Economic Bill of Rights for the Poor with a \$30 million dollar price tag may have been a burning cross on the front lawns of lawmakers and movers and shakers....

I find myself moving from the bursting head of the first piece to stand in front of Ron and Miriam's work called "Troubles." This sculpture is a sort of a hollow torso. There are no arms, no neck or head. This torso is rather static on the outside. To get another, even deeper perspective, look inside. Peer through the spaces were the arms should be, or the head. Deep

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inside, at the base, curves of clay resemble the curls of a sea shell or the paths of a labyrinth. And filling the spaces are heaps of stones.

Miriam's poem names the stones - some are light, some are heavy.

Some represent loss, and pain. Some are deeply imbedded, she writes,

...in the fixed
design of your uniqueness.

Others will roil and churn
through your days and nights
of endurance
until somehow,
a settling, a reprieve,
a forgetting, a forgiving.

As I've watched Shirley Sherrod live with such transparency and authenticity these last days, I have found my faith and hope and love have returned somewhat changed. Hearing her life's story and watching its effects, feels like that moment of enlargement that comes when a poet gets exactly the right word, or the artist exactly the right perspective. Her life is an icon that helps me see how I truly look, how I am known. Her life is a sea shell that I want to flow into like water. Her courage helps me overcome my fears a little. And her dignity - well her dignity wants to make me sit at her feet and hang on her words and follow in her footsteps.

She has done more than endure and forget. She let God's word live in her, teaching her how to lay down her stones and let them settle into a forgiving. And we stand nearby, hoping that these lines of perspective will converge upon us with a piercing force that will burst the old wineskins of our life with her new wine. She knows her God and her God knows her. Shirley teaches us with her life that God does not want us to be better people. God wants us to become new people.

And this is hard. This takes practice - spiritual practice. And it only happens bit by bit, story by story, word by word in ways that are as changeable, various and beautiful, messy and painful, glorious and arduous as each and every one of us and the complex and lively and broken communities and nations and systems we form.

I believe that is no accident that our spiritual growth from childlike to adult is surrounded by love that never ends, love that is the greatest of all.

When love loses its childlike perspective, it grows from a love that is centered on the self into a love that is directed toward the other.

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When we let go of child -like reasoning we can move from the narrowness of the immediate present to the more generous vista of striving for long-term benefits - life in fullness - for all.

When we stop speaking out **only** about our personal concerns or rights and speak out for the good of the whole, then we show forth, with our community and personal lives that there is a love that is the greatest of all - that hopes all things, endures all things.

As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be. Love without end. Amen, Amen.