

Title: In Step with the Spirit: Let Silence Form Us

Here in the month of July we are exploring ways to cultivate a life that keeps in step with the Spirit. Our launching point has been Gal 5:1 – For Freedom Christ has set us free. We are trying to work out the implications of what it means to be set free from law and sin in order to be set free for something greater. In order to grow in our freedom, I am suggesting that we:

Let scripture read us.
Let silence form us.
Let experience teach us.

Preaching a sermon about the value of silence is, to say the least, ironic. So if this is the first time a preacher has commended the practice of silence to you, it would only make sense. That said, scripture is not silent about the value of silence! The psalms in particular recognize that silence is as much an expression of worship as making a joyful noise would be:

Psalm 27:14 Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD.

Psalm 62:5-6 My soul, wait in silence for God only, For my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold; I shall not be shaken.

And from our call to worship this morning:

Psalm 46:10 10 Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.

The gospels make a point of describing critical moments when Jesus would go away by himself for extended periods of solitude and silence. He spent 40 days in the wilderness between his baptism and the beginning of his ministry. He spent the night in prayer before calling the Twelve. Later he would regularly withdraw from the demands of the crowds. In silence, Jesus could remain grounded in his identity as God's beloved Son, and resist the temptations put before him to try be more than that: More popular, more relevant, more powerful. Jesus knew how to practice being still. The practice of silence was how Jesus was able to never forget himself and always and only do what he saw the Father doing (John 5:19-20).

In that powerhouse of theological thought, Romans chapter 8, Paul describes a critical link between freedom, silence, and keeping in step with the Spirit. He begins with this amazing assertion:

Rom 8:1-2 NRSV

8 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

And then, having unpacked this idea through the course of the chapter, he comes to this amazing conclusion:

Rom 8:26-27 NRSV

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Nothing is more hopeful than knowing that God is for us, is not condemning us, and wants us to be free. But while there is no condemnation, there are still sighs (or in the NIV, groans)! There is a deep - and deepening - form of prayer available to us that cannot be accessed through thoughts and words. This form of prayer has always been part of the larger Christian tradition, even if it feels foreign and suspiciously eastern to us. This is an incredible shame, for at least three reasons.

First, it is part of our birthright as children adopted into God's family through Christ. Christian prayer – that is, the approach to prayer that Jesus modeled and taught – begins with the assumption that God knows, God cares, and God is always and immediately present.

In this last's weeks blog posts about "Doorways to Christian Contemplation" Richard Rohr wrote: "Despite what Christians have often been taught, prayer is not a technique for getting things, a pious exercise that somehow makes God happy, or a requirement for entry into heaven. **"It is much more like practicing heaven now by leaping into communion with what is right in front of us."**

The goal of Christian prayer is to cultivate a taste for the Presence of God as not just a daily, but a moment by moment experience. Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite monk from the 17th century, was a person who cultivated stillness and silence as he did his daily work in his kitchen. He wrote down his experiences, and they have been published again and again under the title *Practicing the Presence of God*. He wrote:

When we walk in the presence of God, the busiest moment of the day is no different from the quiet of a prayer altar. Even in the midst of noise and clutter, while people's voices are coming at you from all directions, asking for your help with many different things, you can possess God with the same serenity as if you were on your knees in church.

Second, contemplative and meditative practice are more desperately needed than ever. If Brother Lawrence struggled with "noise and clutter," how much more do we do so! Sitting for 20 minutes in silence sounds like the easiest thing in the world to do, until you try to do it!

Why? Because the same brains that created modern technologies are ill-equipped to handle the affect those technologies have on our brains! We are more disconnected from God, from creation, and from one another than we have ever been in human history. Just recently Mike Clark was telling me about the book *What Happened to You? – Conversations on Trauma, Resilience and Healing* by co-authors Oprah Winfrey and Bruce Perry. Near the end of the book they reflect on how our increased dependency on technology is fundamentally changing how our brains work – and not for the better. We are able to flood our brains with stimuli faster than our brains our equipped to process it. Meanwhile, the ancient ways human beings have managed trauma – close kinship groups, rhythmic practice like music and dance, and staying closely connected to nature – are largely lost to us.

Yesterday I got to see some friends I hadn't gotten to see since before Covid. When we met up the first thing one of my friends said was, "When I tried to text you, my phone died. After I plugged it in, I forgot it. Being without my phone for a day has really shown me how much I depend on it! I think we can all relate to this. We need to rediscover what it means to present to God, in the present, and to be present to ourselves without the compulsive behaviors our technologies and trained us into.

Finally, many spiritual seekers are finding mindfulness and meditation to be essential to their growth and well-being yet receive no support from the church for practicing it. In a culture in which people are more likely to describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious," it is probably good to remember that Jesus didn't come to start religion. We can also remember that Jesus' best conversations were with spiritually curious people. To the extent we have experienced God's presence, we can be a support to a generation of people hungering for it. We need to reclaim our birthright.

So let me describe Centering Prayer:

<Description will include...>

Intention vs attention. From Cynthia Bourgeault's *Wisdom Jesus* (143ff):

Centering prayer starts with an intention. "Generally speaking, you are in the right ballpark if your aim is to be deeply available to God—that is, available at the depths of your being, deeper than words, memories, emotions, sensations; deeper even than your felt sense of "I am here." You are simply asked to attend, to give yourself completely into that deeper, mysterious presence."

Sitting, Breathing & a prayer word - What comes up for you when you hear the word "freedom"? For me, it's about being able to breathe!

Doing the deal: Using the prayer word to release thoughts

The image of a river

Freedom from judging yourself

To summarize (you can look in your bulletin)

The practice:

1. Set aside 20 minutes for a “sit.” (Twice a day is best.)
2. Come to the time armed only with an intention, a prayer word, and a willingness to “do the deal.”
3. You may begin with a short prayer, or by saying this aloud:
 - Be still and know that I AM God...
 - Be still and know that I AM...
 - Be still and know...
 - Be still...
 - Be...
4. Connect your prayer word to your breathing.
5. As thoughts come, return to your prayer word. This will help you let the thought go.

If it helps, remember the image of God’s grace being like a river. Centering prayer is a way to sink down into that river of grace. Thoughts may float along the surface of the river. Just let the float by. When you notice yourself reaching out to grab the thought, return to your prayer word.

<Describe why this is important to **me** unto “keeping in step with the Spirit”>

Right sizing my ego,
More fruit of the Spirit, less operating out of the flesh
Doesn’t change what I see, but how I see. I can see and sense more of God, in more places, doing more in and through the world.

The Call

Try Centering Prayer 3 times this week.

Close in prayer