

“GETTING IN THE RHYTHM”

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Sunday, March 10, 2019

It is so wonderful to be with you all this morning for worship. I bring greetings from First Congregational Church in Greeley.

This is my second time having the chance to be with you. A couple of summers back I came with the youth choir from my church when they sang here. We had a great time. And while the kids really enjoyed worshipping here, for most of them nothing was going to top their time at the hot springs. I do have to say it is quite a bit more restful being up here without a bunch of teenagers.

It was this past September when I was returning from my sabbatical that Rev. Rebecca asked me to come and share a little bit about my experience with you. I believe it was right after you all had just received the good news that Rebecca's sabbatical was going to be funded by a Lily Clergy Renewal Grant. Lily grants really kind of feel like hitting the lottery for a church, don't they!

I imagine the past months since then have been filled with a lot of planning and excitement for Rebecca and for you all as a faith community as she prepares to embark on her sabbatical soon. It sounds like it will be an amazing time. How many of you have volunteered to go in her suitcase?

This morning I wanted to share with you a little bit about the sabbatical journey I went on with my wife Caitlin last summer. I decided not to subject you to going through the thousands of photos we took during time. From my experience, interest wanes after the first dozen or so anyways. And that even holds true for my parents.

But I hope that sharing a little bit about my sabbatical and how I have grown spiritually through my experience may resonate with some of your own

spiritual journeys - and may also give you an idea into what Rebecca may encounter during her time away.

The idea for my sabbatical came from a growing interest I have had over the past many years for Contemplative Christianity. I first became aware of this stream of Christian faith through the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Thomas Merton for me, like I think he has been for many others, served as a gateway into a previously unknown world of contemplative spirituality native to our faith tradition.

I soon became acquainted with other contemporary teachers like Richard Rohr and Cynthia Bourgeault and the late Thomas Keating. I then made the shocking discovery that Contemplative teachers were by no means the new kids on the block in Christianity. This stream of faith flows all the way back to the earliest days of the church through figures like: Theresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, Meister Eckhart, Evagrius Ponticus, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Their names really do get more fun the further back you go!

What really attracts me to this stream of Christianity is that it's concerned more with experiencing God rather than just thinking or talking about God. God is not an abstraction to debate, but an experience to behold. This way recognizes that words can only take us so far into the mystery of an ultimately ineffable and incomprehensible God.

Like trying to describe a beautiful sunrise to someone who slept through it, Contemplative Christians recognize the limitation of language to capture the fullness of encountering God's presence. A presence, according to contemplative wisdom, that we are capable of sinking deeper and deeper into. Not by our own effort, but by opening to God's presence and action that is already within each and every one of us.

Experiencing a closer encounter with this stream of Christian faith almost naturally then became the focus of my time on sabbatical. Having the opportunity

to explore practices that cultivate a deepening awareness of God's presence was something I needed for both my personal faith journey and for my ministry.

This may come as a surprise to you - but pastors often don't spend their entire day in pious prayer and perfecting next Sunday's sermon. Schedules get busy. Sunday's come back around quickly - I heard one pastor call it the "relentless return of Sunday." Many weeks feel like they are consumed by just a lot of busyness.

My brother once asked me, "So what exactly do you do when it's not Sunday." I hesitated and responded - maybe a bit defensively - "Well you know...lots of different stuff. I know I'm busy, but nothing in particular is currently coming to mind."

And I'm pretty sure pastors aren't the only ones who feel this type of busyness and who desire a closer experience of God's presence in daily life.

One of the things I frequently hear from people is that spirituality is something they just don't feel like there is time for. It's the first thing that ends up getting pushed to the sidelines of everyday life. Spirituality becomes something that is feed every Sunday, or every third Sunday, or every Christmas and Easter. Few of us would keep that type of schedule for feeding our physical bodies. But it seems many of us go through life only partly aware of a great spiritual hunger that we don't know where to find nourishment for.

And while the witness of Contemplative Christians like Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating and Richard Rohr point us in the direction of deeper spiritual nourishment that is possible - we can actually see this fuller way of living embodied in Jesus' life itself.

I remember the first time I really paid attention to the Gospel reading we heard this morning. You may have noticed that it was quite short. It's an easy one to skim over. There are lots of stories in the Gospels that are way more action-packed and memorable.

But when I finally took notice of this easy to overlook part of Jesus' life, it struck me as important to slow down and consider it a bit more. Because this passage offers an important insight into the rhythm of Jesus' own life. To be sure there was a lot of doing, a lot of activity in Jesus' ministry. But interspersed between these times of doing were times of simply being in prayer. Times when Jesus stopped, was still, and rested In God's Presence.

And so it seems, as we seek to follow Jesus, that it would be good and faithful for us to attend to getting into a similar rhythm in our own lives - where we are both engaged in work and also intentional about simply resting in God's presence. And this pursuit of a different, more spiritually nourishing rhythm of life helped guide my sabbatical journey into Contemplative Christianity.

I used a simple motto to help shape the intention of my time. Ora et Labora. Prayer and Work. This motto comes from the Benedictines, the oldest contemplative and monastic influence in the Western Church. Saint Benedict believed that, with the integration of prayer, we can deepen our relationship with God in everything we do. Prayer, not in the often understood sense of saying words. But more broadly - prayer as a deepening awareness that we are always in the midst of God.

Benedict taught that while one's hands were at work, one's heart and mind should be with God. And that idea inspired the rhythm of life Benedictines have sought to follow for nearly 1500 years. Ora et Labora. Work and Prayer.

Now full disclosure, I made a slight tweak to this motto. Because as the Lily grant application made it very clear, your sabbatical shouldn't be a time of work. It was to be a time of renewal. So, side note, if you're hoping that Rebecca will return with having completed a systematic theology treatise or worship planning through next Easter, well then you are likely to be disappointed.

Seeing that "work" was a word Lily discouraged us from using in our application, instead of using the motto Prayer and Work, I reframed the Rhythm of Life we sought to be a time of Prayer and Play.

And that is exactly what Caitlin and I tried to practice as we traveled for nearly three months to different contemplative Christian communities throughout Europe. We spent a lot of time experimenting and exploring spiritual disciplines like centering prayer, chanting, labyrinth walking, and pilgrimage while we visited places like the Taize Community in France, the Camino de Santiago in Spain, Assisi in Italy, and Iona in Scotland. And don't worry, we didn't pass up partaking in prerequisite paella in Spain, pastries in France, pasta in Italy, and in the UK - fish and chips of course. I'm from Wisconsin, so I'm always up for a good fish fry!

Now, seeing that Rebecca said you would expect me to preach for at least 45 min. - I thought I would go through each one of these stops with you. No, that is actually not true. And if you are disappointed by that, I am happy to talk with you in more detail - and even show photos - during fellowship time.

At the risk of oversimplifying my experience and the impact it's had for my personal faith, I want to offer you just one insight from our experience delving deeper into contemplative Christian communities and practices.

It became clear to me that there is a very simple ingredient that can get us into a Rhythm of Life that feeds our spiritual hunger. This ingredient is perfectly summed in our reading from Psalm 46 this morning - *Be still and know that I am God*. That psalm honestly came up at every stop and in many different forms along the way. Inscriptions in stone, sermons, songs, prayer times, conversations with people I meet. It seemed like a message God just wasn't going to let me miss.

Stillness, stopping. It's something that doesn't honestly seem complicated enough to lead us into a deeper encounter with the Divine. It's something that is so easy for us to overlook and dismiss in our lives. And it seems with how long it took me to take notice of our Gospel reading today - something that is easy to overlook and dismiss in the life of Jesus as well.

Did I need to travel to Europe for this insight? Well, if anybody from the Lily Grant is here listening, I would say yes!. But the truth of the matter is that the

thing many of us are looking for to nourish us spirituality in our daily lives is something that, like God, is always with us. But it just gets covered up in the busy rhythms of life that we become swept away in.

While some people choose to enter a monastery in order to integrate stillness more fully into their lives, most of us are probably aren't planning to go that route. For the rest of us, we can use the example Jesus set through his own life - finding time and space to bring silence and stillness into the rhythm of our days.

Upon returning from sabbatical and getting back to my work in the church it didn't take long for me to feel like I didn't have the time to "be still and know God," that there was too much to get done! And I think this is a common feeling many have towards this idea of integrating more stillness into the rhythms of Our Lives. Where would I find the time! And to make matters worse, we had an hour taken away from us today!

I once heard the story of a man who was the executive of a large corporation. He started going to a spiritual director to help him with his connection with God. The spiritual director told this man the he should sit in silent prayer for 15 minutes a day. The man responded there was no way you could find 15 minutes a day to sit in silence. And the spiritual director responded, "Okay, well in that case, you need to do it for 30 minutes a day then."

As we begin the season of Lent, many of us may give up something like chocolate, our favorite latte drink, or our favorite Netflix show. But this is also the perfect time to try getting into a little different rhythm of life. Adding silence many very well at first feel like a practice of giving something up.

But I have come to believe that the simple practice of bringing stillness and silence into our lives is the source of spiritual nourishment, of a deepening connection God, that so many of us desire.