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Romans 8:18-27
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Contemplative Prayer

Newscaster Tom Brokaw once interviewed Mother Teresa about her prayer life.

“Mother Theresa,” he said, “When you pray, what do you say to God?” “I don't say anything...”, she responded. “I listen.” Somewhat surprised and taken aback, Brokaw replied: “Well...then... what does God say when you listen?” “He doesn't say anything. He listens.” Mother Theresa replied.

“And if you don't understand, then I can't explain it to you. “

Today we continue our series on Prayer as we turn our attentions to a more mysterious and ancient kind of prayer. Contemplative prayer or praying without words. It's a kind of prayer that the Apostle Paul talks about to the Roman Christians where the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf. Sometimes simply through groaning.

Let us hear these words from Romans 8:18-27.

18 What we are suffering now is nothing compared with our future glory. **19** Everything God created looks forward to the future. That will be the time when his children appear in their full and final glory. **20** The created world was held back from fulfilling its purpose. But this was not the result of its own choice. It was planned that way by the one who held it back. God planned **21** to set the created world free. He didn't want it to rot away. Instead, God wanted it to have the same freedom and glory that his children have.

22 We know that all that God created has been groaning. It is in pain as if it were giving birth to a child. The created world continues to groan even now. **23** And that's not all. We have the Holy Spirit as the promise of future blessing. But we also groan inside ourselves. We do this as we look forward to the time when God adopts us as full members of his family. Then he will give us everything he has for us. He will raise our bodies and give glory to them. **24** That's the hope we had when we were saved. But hope that can be seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? **25** We hope for what we don't have yet. So we are patient as we wait for it.

26 In the same way, the Holy Spirit helps us when we are weak. We don't know what we should pray for. But the Spirit himself prays for us. He prays through groans too deep for words. **27** God, who looks into our hearts, knows the

mind of the Spirit. And the Spirit prays for God's people just as God wants him to pray.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Today's Evangelical protestant church is skeptical of contemplative prayer. They see it as too "new agey" or mystical...something that our logical minds cannot wrap our brains around and understand. But this tradition reaches far back to the early church fathers and mothers. So to help us understand this sort of prayer, I hope to answer what is contemplative prayer? What does scripture say about contemplative prayer? How does Jesus model it for us? What have people said about contemplative prayer throughout the ages? And finally how can we practice this type of prayer ourselves?

Often in the Gospels, we are told that Jesus would retreat to a private place to pray...sometimes all night. We heard last week how Jesus prayed at the Garden of Gethsemane before he was arrested. He often went away to pray before major events, miracles, or where large crowds had gathered. He also went away to pray alone very early in the morning.

Do you ever wonder what he could possibly say to God for that long? My guess is that he wasn't just talking but doing something so much more, much deeper, more intimate than just pouring words upon words.

Ancient mystic Teresa of Avila a Carmelite nun and Spanish mystic of the 16th century said that prayer is more about being than doing. Being rooted in God and not just trying to make things happen. It's an intimate sharing of friends.

When Karen and I were first dating, we spent a lot of time together... talking...sharing words. It was a way for us to get to know one another. To learn what made each other tick. Got us excited. Made us mad. Or brought us complete joy. But the longer we are together, coming up on thirty years this next May, we already know many of those things. And so our relationship has morphed into one that is more about being together than doing together. Right Maw!

Contemplative prayer is just that. It's more about being than doing. Communing with God in a way that we live continually in a posture of prayer rather than just setting aside a particular time of day "to do" prayer.

Author, pastor, and founder of the International 24/7Prayer Movement Pete Greig says "that contemplative prayer is more experiential than logical. It's more like star gazing than astronomy. More like listening to Jazz than hearing a lecture about it."

He describes three levels of prayer like this...

Prayer at its simplest is us asking God for things.

Prayer at its best is relational.

Prayer at its deepest is silence and simple enjoyment of loving God.

Another theologian described contemplative prayer as “Us looking at God, looking back at us, in love.” Gazing into each other’s eyes.

While the bible doesn’t flat out describe contemplative prayer, it does point to it as a regular practice of God’s faithful.

Psalm 1 “Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But their delight is in the law of the Lord, and this Law, they meditate on it day and night. They are like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers.”¹

Psalm 19 “May the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”²

Psalm 46 “Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”³

Psalm 62 “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.”⁴

Psalm 131 “My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful of me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.”⁵

Romans 8 “We don’t know what we should pray for. But the Spirit himself prays for us. He prays through groans too deep for words. God, who looks into our hearts, knows the mind of the Spirit. And the Spirit prays for God’s people just as God wants him to pray.”⁶

1 Thessalonians 5 “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”⁷

So there is this biblical sense that contemplative prayer is a posture of the soul...quieted and undistracted by what’s going on around us, constantly focused on the Lord. In contemplative prayer we meditate or chew on God’s words. We digest them so that they become part of us...which provides solid ground when life

¹ Psalm 1:1-3

² Psalm 19:14

³ Psalm 46:10

⁴ Psalm 62:1-2

⁵ Psalm 131:1-2

⁶ Romans 8:26b-28

⁷ 1 Thessalonians 5:16

get's shaky. In contemplative prayer, we commune with God, abide in Him, and become One as Jesus prayed for...whether we use words or not.

In Matthew 6, Jesus taught, "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."⁸

In contemplative prayer, we do not make a big thing about it. It's not a show. Not to impress. Not to do anything really. Except be with God.

Throughout the ages, faithful people have practiced and spoken about the importance of contemplative prayer.

In the 3rd century AD, Saint Anthony of Egypt, for example, was a religious hermit and desert father. Anthony dedicated his life to seeking God through prayer and solitude. He is considered the grandfather of monasticism and the contemplative life, demonstrating that seeking God is best lived out in the context of community.

In the 4th century AD, Gregory of Nyssa was a prominent church father who viewed contemplative prayer as a crucial path to understanding God and achieving spiritual growth. He said, "Prayer is intimacy with God and contemplation of the invisible. It satisfies our yearnings and makes us equal to the angels. Through it good prospers, evil is destroyed, and sinners will be converted. Prayer is the enjoyment of things present and the substance of the things to come. The contemplation of his face is the unending journey accomplished by following directly behind the Word."

Basil of Caesarea also in the 4th century AD, was a theologian and Bishop of the church who emphasized that contemplative prayer, achieved through stillness of mind and withdrawal from worldly distractions, allows one to ascend to the contemplation of God. He used the analogy of a fixed gaze to illustrate how a tranquil mind can clearly focus on truth.

Basil said, "When the mind is not dissipated upon extraneous things, nor diffused over the world about us through the senses, it withdraws within itself, and of its own accord ascends to the contemplation of God."

Also in the 4th century AD, Augustine of Hippo viewed contemplative prayer as the soul's resting in God, a state of pure awareness and stillness where God does the work of union. Contemplation for Augustine involved a shift from seeking

⁸ Matthew 6:5-8

God outside oneself to finding Him within, a journey of listening and surrender. St Augustine captured his notion in his famous saying “O Lord, our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Teresa of Avila emphasized that contemplative prayer is a “Divine union, in which the Lord takes His delight in the soul and the soul takes its delight in Him.” She described it as “nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.”

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel viewed contemplative prayer as a means of self-transcendence, shifting the center of one's life from self-consciousness to a surrender to the divine. He saw prayer as an act of “self-surrender, an immersion in God,” where one's “vital thoughts in fierce ardor would burst the mind to stream toward God.”

Dutch pastor Henri Nouwen viewed contemplative prayer as recognizing God's presence within oneself and in the world. He viewed it as a discipline that cultivates a deep awareness of God's love and invites a closer relationship with Christ.

Nouwen said, “Through contemplative prayer, we keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own and to God's heart. It keeps us home, rooted and safe, and even when we are on the road, moving from place to place.”⁹

And finally contemporary pastor Eugene Peterson emphasized the importance of contemplative prayer, particularly for pastors, in his book, *The Contemplative Pastor*. In it he advocated for a deliberate slowing down and quieting of oneself before God to hear God's voice and be led by God's presence. Contemplative prayer, for Peterson, was a way to experience God beyond words and thoughts, a union with God in silence and stillness.

So we can see that throughout the ages, many respected theologians and pastors have valued contemplative prayer as a means of connecting to and staying connected to the heart of God.

“Us looking at God. God looking at us. In love.”

So how then can we practice contemplative prayer ourselves?

First we must understand that this not some far eastern philosophy like Buddhism which teaches us to empty our minds and be connected to the world and others around us.

No! We aren't emptying our minds, we are filling them with the presence of Christ.

⁹ Henri Nouwen quoted in Pete Greig, *How to Pray, A Simple Guide for Normal People* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPres, 2019), 143.

This also is not a heavy bible study. It is less focused on gathering head knowledge and education but more about revelation and encountering the living God.

Pete Greig describes three movements in contemplative prayer. Meditation. Contemplation. And Communion.

First, we begin with meditation as the gateway to deeper communion with God. Here our focus is on “Me and God.” Find a quiet place to get away with the Lord where we can be comfortable, awake and undistracted. Put away our cellphone or at least put it on silence. Use scripture, an image, a song, or something else to serve as a portal through which you can access God. In the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church, icons are used to achieve such focus.

Note that it is really quite easy and normal to get distracted. So it is good to have a simple breath prayer to bring us back to the presence of God. Such as... “My God, my All.” or “Thank you Jesus.” Or we could use words to a favorite worship song.

Take notice of our breath. Breath in deeply and exhale. Normally, not unnaturally. Place our feet on the ground.

What we will notice after some time is that our focus will begin to shift from Me to God. Words will become less necessary. And we’ll move into the next phase of contemplative prayer. Contemplation.

In Contemplation our focus is on God and Me. Not Me and God. We listen more and are attentive to whatever God says to us or puts in our minds.

Pete Greig writes, “My prayer life can easily become quite self-absorbed: a one-man echo chamber of egotistical pleas. But when I pray contemplatively, I have to show up, shut up, and look up.”¹⁰

And finally we reach communion with God in the same way that Jesus was one with the Father. Now, only God is in focus. Time stops as we step into a new dimension. We are refueled and consumed by God’s love. There are no words. Just living out our purpose in life according to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.”¹¹

Remember we are not “doing prayer.” We are just being with God.

This past Monday, I spent an hour in contemplative prayer. And so from 3:30 to 4:30pm, I was alone in the sanctuary. It was quiet. To center my soul I read the refrain from a song we will hear today “For you, O Lord, my soul in stillness waits; truly my hope is in you.” This was my breathe prayer so that when I felt my mind begin to wander, I would sing those words out loud and my mind would come back to the presence of the Lord.

¹⁰ Greig, *How to Pray*, 142-143.

¹¹ Shorter Catechism of the Westminster

There wasn't a huge ah ha per se. But just a calm stillness in my soul. An anchoring.

And over that time, when my cell phone would buzz with text messages, I really had to fight the urge to look at them. Or I'd notice something out of place in the chancel, or the uneven rows of chairs, and I'd want to go over and fix them. Still I had to fight the urge to do something instead of just being still and waiting. I'd sing the refrain "For you, O Lord, my soul in stillness waits; truly my hope is in you."

About thirty minutes into my prayer time, I noticed how the sunlight coming through the cross window upfront bends toward the communion table and upon the cross which becomes ablaze with light. Slowly the light travels across the table and onto the floor, and eventually it fades away. It was spectacular. It was like watching the Lord carry the sun across the sky and create something beautiful right before me.

It was very calming and soothing. I could sense the presence of God.

At one hour my alarm went off to signal the end of my time in prayer. And I thought, wow, that wasn't long enough.

If sitting still for an hour isn't for you. Start smaller, try ten or twenty minutes. Or try walking instead. This time last year, I had just finished my pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago in Spain. When you walk for long periods like that there is great time to empty one's mind and be in tune with the presence of God all around you. St. Augustine said, "Solvitor ambulando" or things are solved by walking. Indeed God seems to bring clarity when we walk and work things out with him.

This is contemplative prayer. Give it a try.

So may we not be afraid of exploring this sort of prayer. May we know that we are communing not just with God but with faithful people throughout the ages who found intimacy with God through contemplative prayer. And may we know that it is not in the doing for God that matters, but in the being with God instead.

I will close today with these words from The Book of Common Prayer. Let us pray.

"Oh God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and trust will be our strength; by the power of your Holy Spirit quiet our hearts we pray, that we may be still and know that you are God, through Jesus Christ our Lord."