UNBOUND

Longing for Wholeness

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES FOR LENT

By: Rev. Susan Engholm

Introduction

Contemplative prayer is an ancient and simple discipline. At its heart, it is an opportunity to slow down, to create space, and to notice the presence of God. When we slow down, we can hear the inner stirrings a little clearer and we start to notice the ways God is already at work in our lives and in the world. Contemplative prayer practices help us be in the world with solid footing, clarifying our understanding of how God is calling us to serve our neighbor.

Throughout these weeks in Lent, we will use Thomas Merton's famous prayer from Thoughts on Solitude as a guide. (You can easily find this prayer online if you'd like to reflect on its entirety.) Merton (1915-1968) was an American Trappist monk who lived at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, KY. Merton wrote prolifically about faith and spirituality and is credited as one of the people who reintroduced contemplative prayer into Christian practice. Merton's prayer offers an honest look at the ways we might wrestle with our faith towards God and the ways we delicately step into a future that can appear so uncertain, making it an ideal companion in this season.

Each week you will be offered three practices:

Thomas Merton's Prayer

You will be invited to hold a couple of lines of Merton's prayer to consider how it might help you hear that week's scripture readings in a new way as well as how it may help you enter into the contemplative practices even more deeply. Merton's prayer is like a flashlight, illuminating the dark corners, helping us to go a little further and deeper into our reflections and practices.

Question to Consider

These questions are an invitation to notice. You are invited to notice things like the ways that God is at work, to perk up to the ways the Holy Spirit is present and develop a deeper awareness of how the Divine is showing up around you. Perhaps this question will lead you to write, using it as a journal prompt. Or perhaps you will want to take note in a different way, such as taking a picture, jotting it down on a sticky note, or simply contemplating the question as you go about your daily life.

Contemplative Practices

These are practical methods for deepening your spiritual life. You are invited to try a new practice or revisit a familiar one. Try the practice once a week or try practicing it every day of the week – the way you enter this is up to you!

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If you don't do every part of these offerings, or if you end up skipping a week, don't worry! You're not messing anything up and you're not going to have an incomplete experience because you didn't do every part. Instead, understand all of this as an invitation to find space for your spirit to settle, space to hold this Lenten season in a new way.

As we begin together, consider the first lines of Thomas Merton's prayer:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Let these words serve as a kind of blessing to the beginning of the Lenten season. Even though we don't know how we might be changed by the end, we trust that God is leading us through it all.

Blessings upon this Lenten season!

Rev. Susan Engholm

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MEET YOUR GUIDE

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Week 1

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 4:1-11 / Genesis 37:3-11

In some ways, both readings for this week illustrate the folly of putting ourselves at the center. In the temptation of Jesus found in Matthew, the devil tries to lure him to use his power to serve himself. In the reading from Genesis, we hear about the toxic nature of favoritism and the ways Joseph's dreams play into the hurt of his brothers.

Consider this section of Merton's prayer and its call toward a humble understanding of our own knowledge:

> *Nor do I really know myself,*
> *and the fact that I think I am following your will*
> *does not mean that I am actually doing so.*

QUESTION:
What are some of the questions you consider when you try to discern the difference between your own will and the will of God?

PRACTICE: LABYRINTH
Labyrinths have been around for thousands of years, but it was in the Middle Ages that they became popular and more commonplace in Christian practice. During this time, pilgrimage was an important spiritual practice, but due to the violence and crusades that were prolific at that time, it became nearly impossible to complete a pilgrimage safely. Labyrinths of various designs frequently became incorporated into church architecture as a way of providing a pilgrim-like experience closer to home. If you do not have a large labyrinth near to you to walk, try using this printed version.

Begin by taking a few deep breaths. Allow your body, mind and spirit to be present to where you are and to the moment. Some like to enter into a labyrinth with a question and use the time to reflect on it. Others prefer to come in ready to receive what the time might have to offer. Using the labyrinth printed, simply trace the path inward with your finger. Then, once you have reached the middle, trace the path out once again. Take a few moments afterwards to consider the experience, paying attention especially to any changes you noticed within yourself.

Week 2

SCRIPTURE:
John 3:1-17 / Genesis 37:12-36

In the Gospel of John, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by way of darkness, carrying the questions of his heart and mind. In Genesis, Joseph is sold into slavery despite his brother Rueben's plan to rescue him. When we become acutely aware of our shortcomings, it can be difficult to move forward. Read Merton's tender prayer assuring us that the desire to please God does in fact do so:

> *But I believe that the desire to please you*
> *does in fact please you.*

QUESTION:
What are the things, moments, or people throughout your day that help to remind you that you are beloved by God?

PRACTICE: FIVE MINUTES OF STILLNESS AND SILENCE
Holding stillness and silence sounds like a relatively simple practice, which in principle, it is! Despite the simplicity of form, however, it can be one of the more difficult practices to stay with as a daily practice. Every day we are bombarded with so many stimuli, that when we are presented with stillness and silence, our mind quickly fills the space back up. It is typical to have our mind wander to our to-do lists, grocery lists, and moments that happened throughout the day. Our mind is always at work.

The goal of a stillness practice is not to find some perfect amount of stillness or silence. Instead, it is an opportunity to let the inner snow globe settle down again. Our lives and the world at large can make us feel stirred up, not knowing which way to look next. When we practice stillness, we practice creating a settled feeling within, which helps us experience and engage with the world differently and more clearly. It ultimately becomes a practice of listening to the presence of God.

To enter this practice, find a space where you are likely to be uninterrupted for a few minutes. Sit with your feet flat on the floor, back straight, and close your eyes. Allow the distractions to melt away and take a few deep breaths. Notice how simply by breathing deeply, your body already begins to find some ease. Set a timer and enter into stillness for five minutes. If (and when) you find yourself mentally wandering away from stillness, simply return to your breath. Allow yourself to be present to the moment, to yourself, and to God.

When the five minutes are up, take a moment to notice what the experience was like for you. Notice any changes within yourself.

Week 3

SCRIPTURE:
John 4:5-42 / Genesis 39:1-20

In these readings, we hear a lot about longing. The Samaritan woman longs to be truly seen and to be in relationship. As Jesus names the truth about her, others are brought to believe in him. In Genesis, we hear about a more selfish kind of longing: Potifar's wife yearns for Joseph and has unrequited love for him. Because of her position of power, Joseph pays the price for her desires.

Thomas Merton continues his prayer, praying that the desire to please God would remain central to all we do:

> *And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing.*
> *I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.*

QUESTION:
So often we think of our body as a liability. But, thanks to the incarnate Christ, we receive freedom within our bodies, even in the midst of the ways we feel bound by them. In what ways do you experience Divine blessing upon your body?

PRACTICE: VISEO DIVINA (DIVINE SEEING/LOOKING)
Viseo Divina, or "Divine seeing/looking," is a practice of using images to become more attuned to the Divine. To do this practice, you may use the image provided *(next page)* or find an image of your own.

Begin with finding stillness: take a few deep breaths, allow yourself to be present to the moment, and ask God to show you what this image may have to offer in this time. Place the image in front of you and simply sit with it for a few minutes, taking time to enjoy the image. Next, recall what part of the image caught your eye when you first looked at it. Take a minute or two to gaze only at this part of the image. After you have done this, return to looking at the entirety of the image. What feelings does it evoke for you? What questions emerge? Are there areas of your own life that the image speaks into?

As you conclude, you may want to close with a word of prayer to God, giving thanks for the many ways the Divine speaks to us.

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Week 4

SCRIPTURE:
John 9:1-41 / Genesis 41 and 42

In the Gospel reading, the healing of the blind man leads to a new way of understanding of how the Divine shows up. In Genesis, a time of desperation and famine leads to a deeper understanding of family bonds. Both readings illustrate that sometimes a course correction can come from unexpected places. Merton's prayer reiterates this:

> *And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,*
> *though I may know nothing about it.*

QUESTION:
What have been some of your "best" mistakes? When has your perspective changed so that you could see possibility in something that had only looked like a dead end?

PRACTICE: LECTIO DIVINA (DIVINE READING)
Lectio Divina, or "Divine reading," is the practice of spending time with a text in an intentional, deliberate way, so that we might hear it anew. For this practice, use the full prayer of Thomas Merton, or choose one of the scripture readings for this week.

Once again, to start, take a few deep breaths and allow yourself to be present. Read the text slowly, preferably out loud. As you read, notice what words, phrases, or images seem to "shimmer," or draw your attention. Hold that word, phrase or image in prayer. Be still for a minute or two. Keeping that word in mind, return to the text and read it one more time, noticing how your experience of the text has changed. Ask God what truth it might hold for you right now. Conclude this time with stillness or perhaps with a prayer.

Week 5

SCRIPTURE:
John 11:1-45 / Genesis 50:15-21

This week's texts speak to a kind of letting go. Those around Lazarus had to let go of their understanding of how death works. They had to let go of their understanding of the ways that God shows up. Joseph's brothers had to let go of their previously held assumptions about him as well as let go of their guilt.

In these final lines from Thomas Merton's prayer, we join with him in letting go of control and trusting where God may be leading us.

> *Therefore will I trust you always though*
> *I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.*
> *I will not fear, for you are ever with me,*
> *and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

QUESTION:
When is it time to finally let go of the burden you may be holding? What would letting go free you to do, or to be?

PRACTICE:
Pick one of the practices of these past weeks to revisit. Find one that you might be able to carry with you out of this season that could be a new practice for you.

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