

Reconnecting with Practice  
Ephesians 3.8-21; Romans 8.26-39  
July 30, 2017  
Pentecost +8A  
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We left off last week with an understanding of prayer as renewal of soul-force “Where do we find the strength to live [as peacemakers] in our lives and our world,” J.P. Newell asked. “Gandhi taught that the great soul-force of our lives—the source of “strength to live nonviolently in our lives and world—comes to us in prayer and meditation. Prayer “‘has saved my life,’ he said. “As food is necessary for the body, prayer is necessary for the soul.”<sup>1</sup> Or as Dr. King put it, “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”

We pray not as an end but a beginning. We pray that the words of our prayers will be lived out in through our words and actions. We pray that the peace and love of God might become our own. This way of praying is not calling out to God like a genie in a bottle but drawing ourselves into God’s story, aligning ourselves more fully with the unfolding path of God.

This morning we will focus on what that spiritual practice looks like. I worked with a congregation while i was in seminary that was following trends of a couple of megachurches, and somewhere along the way a checklist developed for staff and top lay-leadership. If you were ever in Southern Baptist churches in the 20th century, you likely remember the envelope system or the Sunday School Book checklist—did you read your Bible this week, did you give an offering to the church, did you pray every day? The checklist was slightly broader but included some rigid translations of categories, particularly around “Quiet Time.” This was discussed distinctly as a daily ritual, preferably to be experienced in a daily spot (maybe a favorite chair looking through window onto a vista), journal in one hand, Bible in the other. Imaginary bonus points to the one who awoke before the family and made that time a priority each and every morning.

Rules like that have always pressed my guilt buttons but also riled up my contrarian streak. Quiet, meditative practices may look like that for some people, but certainly not for all. And the point of this conversation today is not to guide us into one version of

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<sup>1</sup> John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God*, p. 82

spiritual practice but into SOME version of spiritual practice that is shaped for unique self and that renews your soul-force for Christ-like action in the world.

We're reading Richard Rohr's *The Divine Dance* this Summer, and in the second week we read, "Perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses of institutional religion is that we've given people the impression that the pope could know for us, or the experts could know for us, or the Bible could know for us—that we could have second-hand knowledge of holy things, and could be really invested in the sacred because someone else told us it was true. God ended up being an outer 'thing' and largely remained *out there*, extraneous to the experience of the soul, the heart, and even the transformed mind. Yet God has no grandchildren, only children."<sup>2</sup>

A spiritual practice is the way or ways (because it very well may not look one way) of accessing the sacred in your body, in your mind, in your heart. In my decades-long work of leaving behind the old language I was given for experiencing God, I'm glad to leave behind the old Quiet Time language with its rigid boundaries and heavy baggage in favor of "practice" as we find in the Eastern religious traditions. Yogis practice mind+body+spirit connection. Buddhist monks practice meditation of stillness, silence, and getting at something that sounds a whole lot like the self-emptying Christ of Philippians 2. It is practice because we are doing these things over and over again like a gymnast prepares for the olympics—sometimes flying through the air only to crash on the ground, but eventually she flies and flips and sticks the landing, firmly on two feet then shooting her hands far out into the air. We practice because we haven't arrived, haven't completed, haven't figured it all out.

J.P. Newell describes the work of spiritual practice as "reclaiming the relationship between stillness and action, or between solitude and relationship," and this practice will draw us "back into relationship with the wisdom of nature's rhythms."<sup>3</sup> The work is not just about a finish line goal on a timeline out there but is simultaneously drawing us toward a completion and toward a beginning. Unless we are farming the land like Wendell Berry or Joel Salatin, our culture and life's tasks remove us from a natural rhythm of earth and seasons. Goodness knows technology has gifted us both with friendships and connections across time zones and continents, but also work days that never quite end and vacations that always have one foot back in the office. If we are not practicing some kind of regular, consistent withdrawal from this machine, our minds are never at rest, we forget what boredom feels like in our bodies, and we even lose touch with the negative emotions we distract ourselves from experiencing.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance*, p. 53

<sup>3</sup> Newell, p. 60

Without contemplation, our actions are not informed. Without action, our contemplation skews toward narcissism. Both need each other to be experienced rightly.

This is why Richard Rohr's work is so important. He doesn't give us *The Divine Dance* or any of his other great works for the sole purpose of contemplation. He certainly doesn't give it to us to add to our constant input of information. The center he created in New Mexico is called the Center for Action and Contemplation. They exist to be "a center for experiential education, rooted in the Gospels, encouraging the transformation of human consciousness through contemplation, and equipping people to be instruments of peaceful change in the world." The center is founded around eight core principles, two of which are: "We need a contemplative mind in order to do compassionate action." and "We do not think ourselves into a new way of living, but we live ourselves into a new way of thinking."<sup>4</sup> While this language may not be new to most of you, I suspect there are some who hear the descriptions of practice and contemplation as too broad or perhaps as being separate from what the church in the U.S. has taught us about prayer.

But this work is both new and ancient, not just drawing us as individuals forward in our life's work and backward to our life's cosmic beginnings but doing that same work in us as a people. I think that's why I'm drawn to the way yoga practices are both individual and group and Buddhist and Hindu meditation practices happen sitting alone but also sitting together. We are being drawn forward into what will be, backward to what has always been, but also together as a people. There's movement and rhythm in practice, and we are often too busy and too distracted to participate fully in that kind of flow.

Newell also puts it like this, "We know that if we do not give ourselves over to the darkness and dreaming of nighttime, entering its intimate invitation to sleep and rest, we will be only half-awake to the demands and creativity of the day. Yet at other levels we forget the natural patterns that we are part of. Or we pretend that we can be deeply engaged and productive while pushing ourselves and others in ways that are antithetical to the essential rhythms of earth's cycles and seasons."<sup>5</sup>

Goodness gracious, this is where I am. One goal of spiritual practice is to become aware of true self and false self. Sometimes I talk about the shadow self because not only is it false, it is lurking. Of the many facets of my shadow self, my penchant toward

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<sup>4</sup> Learn more about the CAC here: <https://cac.org/about-cac/missionvision/>

<sup>5</sup> Newell, p. 60

perfectionism is a crusher. When I fall out of practice (and we all do! please remember we are talking about a way, a path, a journey, a process. We do not ARRIVE at mastery-level practice. Even Jesus himself became so utterly exhausted by his work that he passed out in a boat during a wild storm as the disciples panicked around him. We are in good company you and I, when we recognize we've fallen out of practice and then resume again.)

When I fall out of practice, I stop taking time off from my work. It is standard that full-time clergy of various traditions take a week day off from work because of the weekend and evening nature of our work. Unfortunately, it's entirely too common for us to do just a few little things on that day. And it's also entirely too common for us to just do one or two more things on that other day of rest, too. I think this is true, in part, because we have over-spiritualized the role. Pastors are "called" to churches, after all, this is vocation. But aren't we all? Paid or unpaid, we're all called and shaped for something. We're all invited into vocation—the intersection of one's deep gladness and the world's deep hunger. Spiritual practice is equipping us for doing our work at that intersection whether we are paid for working in a church full-time or paid for working as a teacher in the classroom or even if we're not being paid by anyone at all! For me, I start to get myself in trouble when I'm saying yes to every guest in my office and every appointment invitation that passes my way. And that leads to writing my sermon on Friday and Saturday. And if I know I'm going to be writing anyway, well, I may as well say yes to that quick little hour-long appointment at the church.

On the one hand, all of that sounds like someone devoted to her work and her congregation. Pastors did this for years and years, right? Three services a week and a building campaign all while wearing suits! This is the work of CEOs and corporate ladder climbers, right? We celebrate hard work and selflessness, and oh! how that feeds my ego to be needed! and busy! and working so hard! Maybe it makes for hard working ladder climbers, but it doesn't make for friends who are much fun or for peacemakers who need to do their work in ways that allows them to be effective and received and heard. Clearly, not taking a day of rest for weeks on end is bad for anyone's soul-force. Additionally, in my particular line of work, I believe that feeding my perfectionism and ego by having a hand in every single project that goes on at the church ultimately makes the church weaker. Because the church is not mine. And the church is not me. I'm here for a time as a guide, a teacher, maybe a wild John-the-Baptizer kind of prophet shouting out in the wilderness, and also a learner and a supporter and a witness to what God and Spirit are doing through all of us together on this Way of Jesus.

But here's the thing about ego that pastors, in particular, need to remember: this isn't mine. This isn't my church. And it wasn't Steven's church. And it wasn't Avery's church. At seasons along the way, this congregation has welcomed various guide-teacher-prophet-witnesses for the truth of that season. But at every step, it is the people of this place who make up the church, and I am but one part of who you are.

So when I forget that and fight my life-long battle with DOING ALL THE THINGS WITH EXCELLENCE, not only do you end up with a tired, grumpy pastor who isn't at her best, we end up with a weakened congregation who isn't empowered to be the people of God and to do the work of God as that people. Contemplation and action are connected. We are equipped for great work when we honor that connection. We are depriving not just ourselves but each other when we fall out of practice. Practice draws us forward into what will be, backward to what has always been, but also together as a people.

Newell guides our attention toward Thomas Merton, the great Trappist monk from Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky and calls him "a great modern Christian prophet of restoring balance through the disciplines of spiritual practice." His work "was not calling us all to a monastic life. He was, however, inviting us all into what he called a 'contemplative orientation' to life. Regardless of our particular vocation, age, stage of life, marital status, and family commitments, we are invited to find balance—between being and doing, between inner awareness and outward engagement—that will lead to a fuller fruiting of our lives and relationships."<sup>6</sup>

And so it is that I am restoring balance this week in my life and soul-force and picking up my practice. Not apologizing for falling out of practice or feeling guilty for having lost my balance yet again, but merely telling the truth and being gentle with myself as one would with a dear friend. In fact, my friend Lisa surprised me last week with an entirely non-essential beach tote bag with bright green and white stripes and a great big pink flamingo on it. "You need to have some summer," she said. And she is right. In about 30 minutes, I will walk away from you, my beloveds, and this sacred space I have come to love so deeply for another sacred space covered in sand alongside the Alabama Gulf Coast. I have already deleted Gmail and Facebook apps from my phone and found myself scrolling through the screens looking for them a handful of times already. Turner and Julia and I packed books and board games and a deck of cards. I have already shared with Nathan my desire to begin and end my day alone on the balcony of our condo with 20 minutes of silence, breathing in and out with the rhythm of the waves. I won't be terribly far away, but I will be a little difficult to track down.

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<sup>6</sup> Newell, p. 60

Remember how that used to be a thing? Someone is away from their home or their office and you can't reach them easily? We need to make that space for ourselves and for each other. Walking in the woods. Sitting alone on the beach. Going off to a monastery for a weekend of silence. Giving a weekend to a yoga and meditation retreat. Whatever practice looks for you, it is to be cultivated and protected. And we must remind each other when that lost look enters our eyes like a good friend recognizing, "You need to have some summer."

Merton's teachings on spiritual practice guide us toward the realization that "Enduring strength will be found not in our ego but in our essence."<sup>7</sup> This self-care, soul-care work matters because we are tending the essence of who we are for the work we are called to do in the world, and all of us and each of us is called to work for peace and justice in our world. It is a luxury, to be sure, and I'm fully mindful of what a privilege it is to step away from one's work for such a time. But that is why contemplation is linked to action, after all. We practice to fuel our days of action peace and justice work (in its very big and very small forms—advocacy and activism on The Hill or kindness and patience with strangers and neighbors). We practice and then work for equity, for rest and care for all, we work to make space for all people experience the fullness of humanity and to honor the image of God within them. Our action, like our contemplation, draws us forward into what will be, backward to the best of what has always been, and together as a people.

What I need from you today is to begin or continue or return to your practice, too.

Maybe you are one who likes to rise at 5 a.m. with a cup of tea, a journal, and a Bible. Read a psalm every morning in the style of *lectio divina*—read it slowly, three times, pausing between each reading, listening for the movement of the Spirit in the space between the words. What phrase or image is drawing you into reflection? Write as you reflect.

Maybe your life has too much noise and too many words already, and you want to cultivate spaces of silence. Download a meditation timer app on your phone or get a kitchen timer at the grocery store, and start with five minutes of sitting. Grab a pillow, set your timer for five minutes, and sit in silence. Cultivate a breath mantra for the inhale and the exhale to silence your mind and draw you into the silence—on the inhale, "Prince of Peace," on the exhale, "Make me a peacemaker." On the inhale, "God of creation," on the exhale, "Create again in me." Whatever is speaking to you now, cultivate a phrase that connects you to stillness, silence, and breath.

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<sup>7</sup> Newell, p. 65

There are walking meditations and guided meditations. There are devotionals and reflections in books and by email. The Center for Action and Contemplation will send you an email every day with words of reflection from remarkable writers. Start somewhere. Continue somewhere. Begin again somewhere.

If we are to know in our lives at all which next action is the right one or how our congregation is called to be a particular, distinct voice and presence in this community, that discernment starts in whatever spiritual practice feeds the soul-force of who you are. We begin as individuals in this level of connectivity and discernment, and then we expand to practice together, and then we follow the overlapping and intersecting calls to action in the world. We are drawn forward and backward and together all at once and over time. Do this for me. And I will do this for you. And we will do this for our neighbors and the world. And I know in my spirit that we will continue to be surprised and amazed by the work God is doing right here in us and through us at the St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church.