

“SACRED WANDERING”

Psalm 63: 1-8 April 15th, 2018

When I arrived at the St. Benedict Retreat House last Sunday afternoon, this welcome was outside my room along with a bottle of water, a map and a sea-shell. It read: “The scallop shell is an ancient symbol of Pilgrimage. May you wonder as you wander through these days, and may your sacred wandering become a pilgrimage.”

This morning I would like to wander a little bit with you as I share about my last week at the retreat. It was a Five Day Academy for Spiritual Formation and it is held in places throughout the world sponsored by Upper Room. I have been to several over the last few years and it feeds my soul. I get to the point where I am thirsty for the community worship of the groups but most especially for the times of silence, solitude and refection. As the first verse of our last hymn on Psalm 63 says “You are my God, I long for you from early in the morning. My whole being desires you like a dry, worn, waterless land. My soul thirsts for you.”

Each Academy follows the same schedule each time no matter where it is held. It is based on the Benedictine format of worship, reflection, solitude and the Great Silence. Each week there are two instructors, one on theology and one on Spiritual growth. This time we heard from Lloyd Allen on the History of Christian Spirituality and Mary Earle on Celtic Spirituality. They both possess impressive credentials and were filled with great information and engaging presentations. Each day we would hear an hour long lecture from both of them followed by an hour of silence to reflect and journal on their presentations. Then we would come back together in community to discuss our reflections with each other.

During the week there are three worship services in the chapel every day

with the Eucharist celebrated at one of them. Following evening prayers we observe the Great Silence where we do not speak until the next morning at Chapel. Our silence is broken by a sung greeting “O God open our lips, and we shall declare your Praise.” The chorus of voices as we sing the hymns, prayers, and responses fills my heart with joy. The hymn that we sang of Psalm 63 is my favorite from the Upper Room Worship Book and this week we sang it every morning! On Wednesday evening the worship service is one of healing where we can individually meet with two participants and be prayed over. The participants at these retreats are both clergy and laity but mostly Protestant.

Every evening we are separated into small groups for Listening Circles. To appreciate the power and the opportunities that deep listening holds for us, these words from Patricia Loring who is part of the Quaker Community helped. She wrote: By listening I mean the widest kind of prayerful, discerning attentiveness to the One who is within us, evidenced through others and discernible in the experiences of our life.

Quaker practices shape and express our listening for the Mystery at the heart of the universe and of each of us; and our unity in love in our personal lives and its ethical relationships with the world.

It is a powerful discipline for a listener to try to listen without agenda, without the compulsion to help, abandoning the need or the desire to appear knowledgeable, wise or comforting. There may be no more telling difficult spiritual practice than the effort to receive hospitably what is being said by someone else, without editing, correction or unsolicited advice. Yet it is this open listening, that makes room for the Spirit of God to be present in the midst of the interaction, illuminating and guiding what is taking place. With grace, the Holy Presence is

born into the space that we make by giving over our own agendas: God with us, a third presence in our encounter.

Our guidelines for the Academy covenant groups were:

1. Speak only for yourself about beliefs, feelings and responses.
2. Respect and receive what others offer, even if you disagree.
3. Listening is more important than talking.
4. Avoid cross talk, interrupting, speaking for others, or trying to “fix” another person’s problems.
5. Honor the different ways God works in individuals.
6. Do not be afraid of silence. Use it to listen to the Spirit in your midst.
7. Maintain confidentiality. What is shared in the group stays in the group.
8. Recognize that all group members have permission to pass, sharing only when they are ready.

We tried our best to follow these guidelines but they weren’t always the easiest! As clergy or laity with compassionate, caring hearts, we found it quite difficult not to want to “fix” the problems, to comfort or offer unsolicited advise. We kept calling each other out when we would slip into that but it was going against our nature. The Upper Room guidelines were meant to help prevent these covenant groups from slipping into therapy groups because that was not their purpose and could cause unimaginable problems down the road. We gave feedback to each other on the events of the day and where we had been moved, surprised, found a sense of wonder, etc.

During the Listening circles, the convener might share a reading, a poem or a prayer with applications for us that week. As we were studying Christian Spirituality, Professor Allen mentioned the monastic traditions and the Desert Mothers and Fathers. Later as I was browsing the Bookstore there at the Retreat House, I came upon a book by Joan Chittister titled In God’s Holy Light, Wisdom From the Desert Monastics. I was drawn to it because Joan Chittister is one of my

favorite Christian authors and I have done some reading on the Desert Mothers and Fathers on my own. I asked permission to share one of the meditations with my covenant group called “Be Still and Know God.”

Chittister begins by a quote: One of the fathers said: ”Just as it is impossible to see your face in troubled water, so also the soul, unless it is clear of alien thoughts, is not able to pray to God in contemplation.

She reflects: Just as we go from one event to another, looking for the answers to our questions, wanting more comfort than change, seekers flocked to the desert to learn from the Desert Monastics there. They wanted to know how to pray, how to live closer to God in time while they continued to be responsible for the secular edges of life as well as dedicated to the sacred ones. And they wanted short cuts to all of them-just as we do. Like us, too, they never failed to be surprised at the word of instruction they received there. No great sacrifices were ever expected. No complex rituals were ever required. The monastic answer to the disciples, it seems, always dealt with learning to live well where they were, rather than trying to escape from their life of daily responsibilities.

In today’s case, the answer is a particularly blunt one. “Unless the soul is clear of alien thoughts, it is impossible to pray to God in contemplation.” The Word is unadorned in its definition, clear in its meaning. God is not hiding from us, the words imply. We are hiding from God. Noise, the monks teach us, is the barrier we put between ourselves and the contemplation of God with us.

Today’s instruction, in fact, is all about noise. Noise, the holy one teaches, is what separates us even from ourselves. But it the people of third-century Egypt had a problem, what can possibly be said of our own generation? We even have a problem because the culture of birdsong, the culture of rural quiet,

has become the culture of cacophony. Twenty-four hours a day our world crackles with Rock and Rap and Country and Beat and idle talk and senseless complaint. It's these words that do our thinking for us. Twenty-four hours a day this kind of noise substitutes for what might have become our own insights. Their meaningless presence everywhere—in stores, and offices, on street corners and in cars—distorts our search for the contemplative awareness of God in life. In between, of course, we pray the prayers of our youth, words of comfort and tradition. But, immersed in the recitation of routine, even religious routine, there is little time for listening to what the Word of the universe might be trying to say to us.

The image the teacher uses is a simple one. Sometimes we can lower our heads over quiet waters and see into our own eyes. But when the waters roil, we find the image splintered and distorted. Nothing we see then can be trusted to be real. But more than that, when our souls are filled with noise, contemplation itself suffers. The noise of nothingness, the rattle and clamor or useless agendas, entombs us in ourselves. Then, contemplation itself is endangered. Distraction and ambition, anger and jealousy, pride and pain, fatigue and overload—all these distort the sense of the presence of God for us.

Scripture teaches that “God is not in the whirlwind.” (I Kings:19) And now again, in the third century and in our day and night, the monastics of the desert are clear: To rest in God we must learn to put out of sight and out of mind the whirlwind that threatens to engulf us. We are to allow contemplation to bring us home to the God of Life within us—the Life that exists everywhere else in the universe at the same time. Whatever it is that roars in us and separates us from the calm center of ourselves must go now. There the God who seeks us

all our days waits for us to come wholly present to the Life that transcends the confusion of the present. Then nothing shall harm us, nothing frighten us, everything will give us peace. But only after the center is calm. Only after the noise within has died. Only after we have learned to listen to the God who speaks in the quiet of the centered soul.

As surely as this saying was important to the shift of cultures from the third to sixth centuries, even more so is it necessary to us. We are a people in transition from the local and the national to the global and the secular. No single institution is big enough to save either our individualism or the spiritual lives we must fashion within us, if, in fact, we are to come to know God at all.

For that, only the silence of our own souls will do—the personal connection between God and me.

As I continue to share some of the “spiritual wandering” from Academy I would like to tell you a story that is titled “The Rabbi’s Gift.” You may have heard this in one version or another but this one comes from The Different Drum, Community Making and Peace, by M. Scott Peck. It is a powerful one and worth repeating today.

Read “The Rabbi’s Gift”.

Let us pray together.

New every morning is your love, great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world. Stir up in us desire to serve you, to live peacefully with out neighbors and all your creation, and to devote each day to your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.