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Contemplative Prayer

By Lori Glenn

Our spiritual journeys began long before we were born. They were governed by the choices and decisions made by parents and grandparents, by family friends and society, the government and our religious traditions. Our lives, even before we were born, were interconnected because we are part of an ever-weaving tapestry. Decisions we make, friendships we embrace and our own unique personalities continue to form the paths we travel. Above all, God, as Creator of the Universe, Lord of History and our Companion, guides and watches over our spiritual journeys.

I first became cognizant that I was on this journey three summers ago while taking a class with Lynn Anderson. One of our assigned texts was Henri Nouwen's *The Way of the Heart*, a short book devoted to desert spirituality. Nouwen's book opened a place in my heart I had not known existed. I felt God's calling to investigate spirituality and to go deeper into this unexplored place in my heart. No definition of spirituality can encapsulate the fullness of its meanings. However, my basic understanding of spirituality is that it is **one's life lived in response to the presence of God**.

Part of my exploration of spirituality included participating in a contemplative prayer group, One Heart, for three months. Contemplative prayer is about "being still before the Lord." In a society that values going and doing, being still in God's presence has become a difficult discipline to practice. We

constantly make goals for ourselves, trying to accomplish and achieve, believing that our accomplishments give us our identities. But through all of our activities, we find ourselves living outside our true selves. The more we do, the more we become disassociated with our inner beings, our centers - the place in our hearts. Our "doing" selves are compulsive, anxious and must know and understand, grasping the things of life (i.e. family, friends, power, money, material possessions, religion, entertainment). Our centers become fragmented with life's compulsive busyness.

In contemplation, also known as meditation, I make the decision to center my life on God. Contemplation is a time to explore my relationship with God and to begin to live out of the deepest part of my nature. When I practice contemplative prayer, I simply AM. My needs, wants and graspings are released. My being nature, the ontological part of me, becomes re-integrated with my self to form my whole self, my real self. In contemplative prayer, the mind (the rational part of the self) descends into the heart (the seat of the will). The discipline of contemplation reminds me of the fact that God is already in my heart. His presence is simply waiting for me to stop and commune. God is Being. It is in and through his being that he creates. When I am aware of my being and my life as lived in the presence of God, my doing is not simply activity, but creativity done in the

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very image of God.

Contemplation is soul work. Most of the time we live on the surface of life, never venturing into deeper waters. In contemplation, we dive beneath the surface and what comes back up with us may be a surprise and shock. When I first began the discipline of contemplative prayer, I experienced negative emotions. I could not understand why I felt these emotions - life was going well. But after consulting other members of the group, I discovered that these negative feelings were normal. The unexplored territory beneath the surface had absorbed all the emotions I could not express if I wanted to live successfully in this world. As I dived beneath the surface, those stored negative emotions were released and clamored to be acknowledged. C. G. Jung would describe these emotions as part of the "shadow side" of our lives. The shadow side is the part of us we often try to hide even from ourselves. Thomas Moore's recent book, *Care of the Soul*, is an excellent work that deals with the reintegration of both the light and shadow sides.

There are many methods of contemplative prayer. One Heart's format consisted of a visualization, a walking meditation and either the Jesus' Prayer or centering prayer. In the visualization, the leader began by relaying images to us. For example, we might be looking up at the stars and feeling God's vastness, or we might be in a garden from the leader's childhood, or we might be in ancient Palestine listening to an itinerant preacher who suddenly turned and looked our way. Once we had been led into the

visualization, the leader stopped speaking, and we continued it silently in our hearts. God's presence and power could be felt in the stars, his peace in the garden and his love in the eyes of the preacher. The leader brought us back to the present by quietly ringing a bell.

Silently, we arose and followed the person in front of us around the circumference of the room. Our movements were slow and precise. The idea was to feel the movement of our feet and legs and feel connected to the person in front of us - to feel his/her heart center. I think the idea was to slow our movements down, stop our striving and get into a rhythm. We often are more in tune with the fast-paced rhythm of the world than we are with the slow steady pace of God's heartbeat. Just as Creation has a natural rhythm, so do we. Contemplative prayer puts us in touch with our natural rhythm.

The Jesus' prayer was the hardest of the contemplative prayers for me to practice. In the Jesus' prayer, one repeats "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a sinner" reminiscent of the Publican's prayer in one of Jesus' parables. As the words are repeated, one can perhaps identify with the sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet, or with the Publican, or with any other "sinner" whose life Jesus touched. The Jesus' prayer helps one remain humble before God through recognition of one's own sinful life.

In the centering prayer, the goal is to completely quiet the clamoring mind so that the heart is totally focused on God's presence. In the heart, one is to remain still before God. The mind will often toss out random thoughts during this time - a song or conversation, memories of people and events that one hasn't thought of in years. To avoid the distractions of the mind and to remain focused on God, the prayer will choose a word such as "Yahweh" or "peace." Then when unwanted thoughts occur or attention begins to wander, he or she will repeat the word until God's presence is again the focus. The tough part is not to grab onto the unwanted thoughts, but to let them roll by as if they were clouds.

Most of the time meditations are not about high, exhilarating feelings. They are normal. They are a centering. They sometimes don't do anything because we are too distracted. Like any growing relationship, most of the time contemplative prayer is normal, everyday stuff. Once in a while, it is connection, and we realize we could not stand those high, exhilarating feelings too often. God's presence is deeply felt. The look of love in Jesus' eyes is completely overwhelming. There is a feeling of incredible stillness and quiet that can only be described as "unearthly."

I realize many of us have been raised in an Enlightenment-based, rational movement. There-

fore, some of what I have written may sound foreign or incomprehensible. Some of it may sound frightening. I hope so. The God we serve is a foreign, incomprehensible and frightening God. Also, as Morton Kelsey points out in his book, *The Other Side of Silence, A Guide to Christian Meditation*, the spiritual world has its good forces and its evil forces. John told his readers to test the spirits, and in meditation we must be careful to discern between good and evil. If there is an incredible awareness of love, the spirit is true because evil cannot genuinely love.

Another difficulty we as Americans and members of the Church of Christ may have regarding contemplative prayer is that in meditation, we are

not producing or accomplishing anything. We can meditate for years and never "feel" God's presence. Or we may not see any major changes happening in our lives, such as becoming a more loving person (although, changes may be happening without our awareness). But contemplative prayer is not about feelings or becoming a better person or accomplishing anything. It is a time and place where we come to know God on a more intimate level, where we experience his love and his care for us personally. Relationship with God - being near him - is the essence of our spiritual journeys. And contemplative prayer is a time to say with the psalmist, "but as for me, it is good to be near God."

*The first duty of every soul is to
find not its freedom but its master
... And even when we desire it
there are few who are familiar with
their inner selves as to be able to
distinguish with any certainty the
shepherd's voice amid the gusts
and sighings of their own fitful
selves.*

-PT Forsyth

Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind