SUMMER SERMON SERIES: Spiritual Practices

*From the Monastery and Christian Spiritual Masters* (#1 of 4)

You have likely heard of Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Spanish mystic and religious reformer. One of the images she used in teaching the spiritual life to her young nuns was water.

She said, “You may draw water from a well which is, for us, a lot of work.” No doubt. Water is heavy. Few of us have had to routinely hoist it up a well, but we can imagine how difficult that must be. This level of effort is how Teresa likens prayer for the beginner.

Then she considers drawing water from a stream. It’s still heavy but it flows easily into your bucket. This is the prayer of one more practiced and mature in the spiritual life.

Then there is standing in the rain. Water falls on you; drenches you; fills your bucket. There is an abundance of water This is the prayer of one who enjoys union with God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Today we begin a four-week sermon series on spiritual practices. It’s like summer camp for adults! We’ll hear from a different clergy member each week, speaking on a different topic each Sunday.

Spiritual practices, like anything else that’s “good” for us, cannot be imposed. We are free to adopt whatever disciplines appeal to us and our unique temperaments, and to practice them at whatever level of intensity suits us.

But saying that spiritual practices are good for us is a little tricky. It puts us – our betterment; our benefit – center stage. What spiritual practices are about in the Christian context isn’t us but God; about enriching our life in God. They are about erasing that line where you end and God begins.

John the Baptizer said of Jesus: “I must decrease so that he may increase.”[[2]](#footnote-2) That’s probably the one ultimate summation of why we engage in spiritual practices. This month of August will provide you with a range of ways to increase the presence of God within and smooth out the boundaries between you and God.

We’ll return to Teresa of Avila in a moment, but first let’s go back even further in time, to the late 12th century, to Hildegard of Bingen. Bingen is in Germany.

Hildegard was a polymath – someone who has deep expertise in a wide range of fields. Hers included medicine, science, linguistics – she created her own language. She was a playwright and musician. Her music survives to this day. In fact, we have a CD of her music that we use in our Centering Prayer group. She served as the abbess of a convent. And she had visions throughout her lifetime.

Hildegard recorded her visions in a series of books. In one, she quotes God as saying, “People must never forget to call upon me *alone*, God in three persons.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The emphasis here – radical in its time – is on the word *alone*: call upon me privately, God is saying. People of Hildegard’s time had come to believe that God was not available to the average person who was unworthy and could only encounter the Holy One in corporate, or communal, prayer and worship. Private prayer was for monks.

But didn’t Jesus say, “Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret”?[[4]](#footnote-4) Yes, he did. But this was in the context of critiquing those who liked to pray in public to flaunt their piety. Hildegard adds another layer of meaning to this: when you pray privately, it isn’t just an act of humble modesty; it is a powerful time of intimacy between you and God.

Hildegard invites us into this deep realm with God. Besides private prayer, she wants us to connect with God as Creator. She says that “Creation is brilliant with divine life and reveals the God who cannot be seen.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Her theology of Creation sounds like it was written in our lifetimes. She says there is a “greenness” or life power that is the spark of God’s life and love brimming in all Creation. Jesus is the “green” wood from which all greening has flooded the earth and humankind.

Hildegard extols music as a benefit to the spiritual life. She writes: “A musical performance softens hard hearts, leads in the [inclination for] reconciliation, and summons the Holy Spirit.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

That’s why we sit quietly and listen to the postlude every Sunday. In most churches, that’s the time people are jumping up and talking or yelling, all while these beautiful musical pieces are being played. What a loss! And what a dark insight to the way most of us live. The music of the universe is constantly playing around us but we don’t even hear it in the self-absorbed preoccupations of our own lives. What a loss!

Spiritual practices give us capacity to take in God’s gifts of beauty and God’s reality of transcendence. I tend to view the spiritual life in growth metaphors: growing an ever larger capacity to “contain” God. Teresa of Avila used a different metaphor. For her the spiritual life was like moving through the rooms of a mansion. Her masterpiece is called *The Interior Castle.*

Teresa’s castle has a number of rooms leading from the outside, in. Each room is a resting place for enjoying God. “There is no need to hurry or worry on the journey to the center because God will lead each person in whatever way is appropriate.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This is a journey inward to loving communion with God. Teresa is a mystic, like Hildegard of Bingen, Mystics are the ones who speak without apology about God as love and lover.

Richard Foster is not a mystic but stands in the long line of spiritual masters. This year marks the 40th anniversary of his classic, *Celebration of Discipline*. I recommend it highly. I am embarrassed to admit that I read the book when it came out. Forty years ago. Where have all the summers gone? I am not embarrassed to admit that it has stayed with me all these decades, one chapter in particular.

The book has three headings, each with four parts. The first heading is called the Inward Disciplines. It includes: meditation, prayer, fasting and study. The second heading is the Outward Disciplines that include simplicity, solitude, submission and service. The last heading, the Corporate Disciplines, features confession, worship, guidance and celebration.

The chapter that has stayed with me is the one on simplicity. We hear a lot today decrying the noise, complexity and consumerism of our times. That’s not really where Foster lands. For him, simplicity is an inside job. For him, simplicity is freedom from anxiety.

He extols the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or drink; what you will wear. Is not life more than food and drink and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” This luminous passage ends with: “But seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you.”

Foster says the discipline of simplicity hinges on seeking first the kingdom of God. That’s the key. Then, everything else falls into place. When it does, we realize that all we have is gift. This is the first step to simplicity. The next step is to realize that all we have will be cared for by God. God can take care of our stuff. We can trust God. The final step – once we have come to realize that all we have is gift, and is under God’s care – is to realize that all we have can be made available to others. This is the inward reality of simplicity. It is freedom from anxiety.[[8]](#footnote-8)

He lists a number of outward signs or practices of simplicity. Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status. Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you, like soda pop, tea and coffee, any media you cannot live without. He listed radio, TV and magazines 40 years ago. Today it would be smart phones. We’ll have to take that one under advisement.

Develop a habit of giving things away. Learn to enjoy things without owning them. Avoid “buy now; pay later.” Use plain, honest speech – this was one that Jesus promoted. Jesus said, “Let your yes be yes and your no be no.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Say what you mean. Often fear of what others might think steers us away from simple, honest words.

You would have thought that after 40 years of practicing simplicity, I would have nailed it. No. I still struggle. But there is one thing that I do rather well. It is the Sabbath.

Observing one day off is part of practicing simplicity because it reduces anxiety. Believe it or not, this requires an act of Herculean discipline for many people. Taking one day off is a spiritual practice and I urge you to consider adding it to your life.

You do not have to sit in your living room and stare at the ceiling all day. But what you must do – not just for your spiritual health but for your physical, mental and emotional health – is to decompress. Especially in this overloaded, over-stimulated world we now inhabit. For this to be effective, it must become routine. One day off each week. Doesn’t have to be Sunday or even Saturday. My Sabbath is Monday.

I try very hard not to make appointments that day, not even social engagements. Obligations and commitments are things that take your attention. Sabbath is when you free your attention from all the “must do’s” in order to focus on those things that give you life and energy. I cook. I garden. I weight-train or swim. Sometimes I *do* sit in the living room, in my jammies, reading, doing crossword puzzles or watching movies, mostly art films. They never come to town and nobody wants to see them with me anyway.

If you took a snapshot of me on my Sabbath and assumed it represented my whole life, you would think I am a lazy slob. That’s OK: I own that. But! That utter decompression; total unwinding fuels me for the whole week. Not just with energy, but with excitement. And when I don’t get a Sabbath, I feel it. My work feels it. I am just not as crisp and crunchy as I want to be.

I don’t know if your spiritual disciplines help you become crisp and crunchy. I believe observing spiritual disciplines or practices do enrich one’s life. Because they enrich one’s life in God. Whether you call it growing in God or moving inward from the outer circles of your Interior Castle, spiritual practices are about having happy union with God.

I hope some of these ideas will be helpful to you. Stay tuned! There’s more to come next week when our deacon will talk about crafting spiritual practices in Creation and in the movement of our bodies.

1. Sr. Margaret Dorgan, DCM, “St. Teresa of Avila and Water” http://www.carmelitesofeldridge.org/St.TeresaofAvilaandWater.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John 3:30 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Shawn Madigan, ed., *Mystics, Visionaries and Prophets,* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1998), p.101. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew 6:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, Madigan, p.95. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, Madigan, p.103. Madigan has Hildegard saying “humor of” instead of “inclination for.” I have interpreted this word according to Merriam-Webster as “disposition, bent, or state of mind.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, Madigan, p.249. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline,* (Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1978), p.77. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Matthew 5:37 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)