Sunday, August 12, 2018

Pentecost 12-B

SUMMER SERMON SERIES: Spiritual Practices

*Connecting with the Sacred through Creation and Movement*

For many of us, our first spiritual practice was memorizing and reciting the Lord’s Prayer as children. This Biblical prayer honors God, asks for what we need, request forgiveness, and asks for protection. No wonder it is often the beginning of our Christian formation. This prayer and many others may be a source of deep meaning and comfort for us. However, we may find that our ability to connect with God is fluid. By which I mean prayer practices that once seemed profound and powerful may no longer provide the same sense of connection to the Holy.

Over the course of a lifetime, spoken prayers may serve to deepen our relationship to God; at other times contemplative prayer, with no words at all, may be the most meaningful. God isn’t static, and our relationship to the Creator changes as we change throughout our lives. Because of this, it’s important to develop and use a **“spiritual tool box”**, a number of flexible and creative ways so that we can place ourselves before the Divine Presence.

The Celts were masters of this art. The Celtic people arrived in Ireland around 400 years BC. They brought with them openness to the inspiration and wisdom of nature. Because they were not tied to one sacred text, they had the freedom to discover and honor the sacred everywhere and in everything. For them, there was no difference between sacred and secular.

This is reflected in the many prayers in the Celtic tradition for the simple, routine tasks such as feeding chickens, cooking, washing dishes, mending fences, or plowing fields.

God is just as present when we are in downtown Chicago as when we stand on the beach gazing at the horizon. What changes is how present WE are to God. Some landscapes and places lend themselves to an experience of the Holy.

The Celts had a strong sense of place, and knew the importance of land and of our sense of rootedness and connection to it.

They spoke of **Thin Places** of holy ground. Of spaces in the natural world where the cares of the world recede and our connection to creation and Creator strengthen. They are marked by a sense of the eternal close at hand – on the verge of breaking into the physical world. Some of these places are well known and often visited: Stonehenge in England, the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, the Holy Island of Iona in Scotland. Or they may be referred to as sacred sites, holy sites. They include the natural wonders such as the Grand Canyon and Victoria Falls in Southern Africa.

But they also exist much closer to your home. They may include Monument Canyon in Colorado National Monument, the top of Craig Crest on Grand Mesa. Still closer to your home…they may be a small private prayer space in your own yard or garden. It is your awareness of God’s presence in creation that hallows the landscape you are in.

A writer known as the Irish Augustine insisted that God brought creation into being so God “might reveal through created things all the vast goodness and power and benevolence which beforehand, He possessed within Himself alone.”

The **labyrinth** was also part of the Celtic spirituality and exists in many cultures worldwide. It dates back perhaps 5,000 years. In Native American culture it is identical to the Medicine Wheel. The Celts described the labyrinth as “The never ending circle”. It is also used in the mystical tradition of Kabbalah in Judaism.

All labyrinths have one thing in common, one path that winds in a circuitous way to the center. It is not a maze. There are no tricks or dead ends.

Generally there are 3 stages to the walking meditation used in a labyrinth:

Releasing (whatever is of concern) on the way in,

Receiving (the goodness of God) in the center,

Returning to the world when you reverse directions.

There is no right or wrong way to use the labyrinth. It can be a path of prayer, a walking meditation, or simply a way to quiet the mind and calm the soul.

The practice of walking the labyrinth integrates the body with the mind, and the mind with the spirit. You can find labyrinths at churches, in parks, retreat centers, schools, prisons, or on hospital grounds. The one I am most familiar with is located in Kanab, Utah, on a sandstone ridge at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary.

Until I began preparing this material I was not aware that labyrinths can also be used while seated. The “Finger Labyrinth” is a small hand held medallion or plate sized ceramic disk with a raised pattern that can be traced with the finger. I also found a paper finger labyrinth with a short guide for its use. I’ve printed the design and instructions and they will be available down stairs after the service.

Prayer beads are another suggestion for your **Spiritual Tool Box**. Most religious traditions have a form of these. The number of beads and the pattern of their assembly vary in each tradition. You will find them in Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and the Baha’i Faith. They are used to mark the repetitions of prayers, chants or devotions.

You are likely familiar with the term Rosary which means Rose Garden in Latin. These are the prayer beads used in the Catholic Church.

A much more recent variation is the Anglican Prayer Beads developed by the Episcopal Church of the U.S. in the 1980’s. They consist of 33 beads divided into groups. There are 4 groups consisting of 7 beads with additional separate and larger beads. The number 33 signifies the number of years that Christ lived on the Earth, while the number 7 signifies wholeness or completion in faith, the days of creation, and the season of the church year. These are available on-line as are the common prayers used with them. If you haven’t seen these before, we will have a few downstairs at the coffee hour for you to look at.

A somewhat lesser known variation of the Anglican Prayer Beads are the Teri Prayer Beads. These consist of an unknown number of beads strung on an elastic filament and worn around my wrist. I use these while running to recite random prayers and psalms in no particular order. I sometimes use them to pray for individuals one bead at a time. Their presence on my wrist is a reminder for me to pray always.

I am not unique in realizing that prayer and running are natural companions. In his book “The Tao of Running”, Gary Dudney says:

“In whatever philosophical light we may bring to examine running, the universal experience seems to be transcendence. In running, we transcend our usual selves, our workaday egos, and we are freed to explore things that are perhaps more profound.”

In running, the road itself becomes sacred ground, and during the space created by the run, all other cares and occupations are by necessity put aside.

However, before you envision me as a Holy Yoda in running shorts, be advised that many of my prayers while running are not repeatable. Earnest…but not orthodox. Alas – many of my transcendent moments when trail running lead to tripping, falling and bleeding knees, and skinned elbows. Such is the inherently dangerous nature of some spiritual practices.

We use the movement of our bodies frequently during Sunday Service. We stand and sing or pray, we bow to the Altar and we sometimes kneel. We also use the prayer of movement as we make the sign of the cross on our bodies. This is a way to express that we belong to Christ. Some people are surprised to learn that Episcopalians make the Sign of the Cross (typically associated with Catholics), but it is a common if optional practice within the Episcopal Church.

Crossing is an ancient Christian gesture in which we touch our forehead, heart, left shoulder and right shoulder. With this gesture we’re asking God to be “in our heads” (when we touch our foreheads), “in our hearts” (when we touch our hearts), “and in all of me” (when we touch our shoulders). Crossing ourselves reminds us of the sacrifice Jesus made for us. While making the sign of the cross it is common to add an expression of faith in the Trinity: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirt. Amen.”

The “little” sign of the cross is the marking of a small cross, using the thumb, to the forehead, mouth, and heart. This sign I used at the reading of the Gospel during the liturgy. This signifies that you believe the gospel in your mind, will proclaim it with your mouth, love it with your whole heart. Or a slightly different definition: God be in my mind, on my lips, and in my heart.

The final spiritual practice I’d like to mention is **star gazing**. Perhaps you have never considered star gazing as a form of prayer. Anything that creates in us a sense of wonder at the magnitude and glory of creation is definitely a form of prayer.

As the Book of Common Prayer reminds us in the Eucharistic Prayer C:

“At your command all things came to be. The vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses and this fragile earth our island home.”

Simply looking at the night sky and contemplating the billions of stars and planets sprinkled like diamonds in a vast velvety darkness will shift our perception and change our perspective. It is a way to lift ourselves beyond the daily work and chores of life to the deep reality that we are a very tiny part of a very big universe.

We are suspended in space, on a small blue planet at the edge of an unremarkable galaxy in a small backwater of the universe. Around us billions and billions of other galaxies move to a rhythm as old as time itself.

You don’t need to know anything about astronomy to use this form of prayer, however that may deepen your sense of wonder.

For example: The Perseid meteor shower happens every August as the Earth plows into debris left behind from Comet Swift-Tuttle, the peak viewing time for this event is tonight and tomorrow night. Assuming we have clear skies, you should be able to see about 60 meteors per hour. Some meteors will appear lower in the sky as soon as it’s fully dark out – around 9:30 local times. But the best time to watch the shower is in the pre-dawn hours between 3-5 a.m., when the moon has set and the constellation of Perseus is high in the sky. There is always a change you will see a brilliant fireball bright enough to cast a shadow.

In the words of Amos I invite you to use the night sky to:

“Seek him who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night; who calls for the water of the sea and pours them out upon the surface of the earth: the Lord is his name:.

Amen.