

In my contemplative prayer group this morning, that is meeting between services, we learned about the practice centering prayer. You may be familiar with it, as I've met a number of Episcopalians who have made it their main spiritual practice. In centering prayer, you get comfortable in your seat and quiet in yourself. You settle into your body and your breath. From this orientation, you practice letting go of your thoughts, so that you can move from your thinking mind into your spiritual heart, and rest in God. Every time a thought pulls you away from your center, that place of stillness inside of you where God dwells, or what some would call your true essence, you gently return to a prayer word of your choice to bring you back to presence.

Centering prayer was created on the premise of Jesus's teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, when He says, "When you pray, go to your inner room and pray to your Father in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Or as The Message translation says, "Find a quiet, secluded place. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense God's grace." The beauty of centering prayer is that this quiet, secluded inner room is a place inside of you that you can always access. And the more you practice returning to your inner room, or your spiritual center, the more you can return to it in any and every situation. You're growing your capacity to stay centered in God and anchored in God's silence moment by moment.

In today's epistle reading, we join the apostle Paul, still writing his letter to the church he planted in Philippi, and still in prison right where Mark's sermon left him last week. Paul is in his own kind of inner room within the four walls of his prison cell, and he is immersed in his own kind of silence, found within his forced solitude. Being imprisoned was not part of Paul's life plan when he reached the upper rungs of religious leadership as a Pharisee. Paul was a well-respected member within his community, a model of good character and righteous living. He meticulously studied the law,

and labored to meticulously follow it. Paul was not a lawbreaker.

But as we know, Paul had been literally knocked over by Jesus's good news when he was riding on his horse to Damascus. You may remember the story of his conversion, when he was met by a blinding light, and the very person of Jesus spoke to him, completely reorienting his life and leaving him utterly transformed. Through the radiant light of the risen Lord, Paul was given enlightened understanding of his own beliefs and purpose, and a renewed understanding of his own identity in Christ. In a flash, Paul discovered that there was more to him than being a Pharisee, or a keeper of the law. There was more to him than his role within his community, his education level, or the titles he'd been given. There was even more to him than his beliefs, and his deep convictions. Underneath his exterior was Paul's true essence, that place of silence within him that transcends any earthly identifiers, that interior dwelling that was illuminated when Paul came face to face with the risen Christ.

I wonder if you have ever encountered your true essence? When you take away your job, your title, your degrees, the role you play within your community, when you take away your money, and your assets, or your reputation, and beliefs, your religion, your relationships, your personality, even your name, what is left? What is that place of silence inside of you that transcends all human understanding, that is somehow more real than all of these earthly characteristics? When you quietly enter into your own inner room, you too will come face to face with Christ's light. You will touch and see your own indwelling divinity, and you will know who you really are, perhaps for the first time.

As the poet T. S. Eliot says, "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time. Through the unknown, remembered gate... Not known, because not looked for, but heard, half-heard, in the stillness between two waves of the sea." Have you ever encountered that place of stillness inside of you? I think Paul did. First on the road to

Damascus, and now we see evidence of it while he is in prison through his letter to the Philippians. Today, we are encountering a man who has already let go of his earthly identifiers, and he is centered in God's eternity. We encounter a man who is confident in his identity in Christ, and clear on his purpose, and nothing in his external experience can pull him away from his center, even being in prison, and even his conflicting desires.

In today's reading, Paul talks about being hard-pressed between the desire to continue living out his human experience, doing fruitful work in God's kingdom, sharing the gospel with new communities, and supporting Jesus's followers, and his desire to depart this life to be completely with Christ. At this point, Paul could fall into an existential depression, or he could decide to use his solitude as a time to try to transcend his human existence, perhaps by reaching an altered state of consciousness and staying there, or by asking God to sweep him up into heaven, like the prophets before him.

But ultimately, Paul concludes that it is better to remain in this world, because he has a purpose to fulfill. He has others he is laboring alongside, and there is such joy in a life of faith. Paul acknowledges his longing for that unknown, remembered place that could end all of his exploring, but instead, he returns to his center, allowing him to live as a spiritual being who is grounded in the physicality of Earth, and enabling him to hold the paradoxes of his life of faith.

So, it seems that Paul's conflicting desires aren't really in conflict after all. He can have fullness of life in Christ, in this life and in the next. He can suffer for Christ, while also finding irreplaceable joy in his faith. He can be alone in prison, physically removed from Christ's body while still being spiritually unified to Christ through being of one mind with the church in Philippi, and all of Jesus's followers. And in this, Paul is showing us the gifts of staying centered in God during any and all circumstances. I don't know what Paul would've called his prayer practices. He was clearly divinely led through his writing. But our spiritual practices

give us a way to follow Paul's example in returning to God's presence, so that we can be fully present to our life on earth. Maybe not at first, but through steadfastness, they help us to uncover our true essence, so we can be confident in our identity in Christ, and clear on our purpose, with nothing in our external experience able to pull us away from our divine center.

So may you find or deepen your spiritual practice, and may it lead you into your own inner room, where you can find the peace you are longing for already abiding in your true center. May your practice gently shift your focus from yourself to God again, and again, and again, so that you can begin to sense God's grace pulsing through you and all of creation, making you of one mind with all those who are seeking to become like Christ in the world. And may you return to your inner room often, so the peace you find can spill out into every area of your life, and so that wherever you go, even into the prisons of our earthly existence, you can bring the gift of God's silence, until we are all resting as one in God.