

I was at a meeting of presbytery this week. For those of you who are hearing that word for the first time, presbytery is the next layer of governance in the United Church where congregations have their ultimate accountability. Yes, congregations are accountable. It's a meeting of people like Ray Boucher, appointed by their congregations, to make decisions about collective congregational life in a geographic area. For those who have experience a more ecclesial model of church, this is the United Church version of the bishop. Minister's have their ultimate accountability with Presbytery as well. It's the court of the United Church where the relationship between the minister and the congregation is held together. That's why in Christina's covenanting service, we make promises between Christina, the congregation and the presbytery.

Presbytery is also the place where ministers have their membership in the church. It's our congregation. When we gather for meetings, we also gather for worship, for connection and relationship-building and sometimes we come for pastoral care. Often, however, especially when clergy are deeply uncertain of the future of the church, and hold that uncertainty in silence, we're like the Pharisees about whom Jesus was noticing in the text Stan read for us. Sometimes, especially when we're most afraid or uncertain, when clergy get together, we swagger and boast about how wonderful things are in our congregations. We talk about how many children we have in the Sunday School, how many teens in the youth groups, how many new people arrived in worship, what new programs we're offering....yadda, yadda, yadda. It's like two little boys standing on a fallen log, trying to see which one of them ... well you get my drift.

I'm sure clergy are not alone. I bet in any profession, when there is uncertainty and doubt about the market, the patient list, the student enrollment, the production schedule; when you gather in groups, I bet there is no small amount of puffed up boasting, each trying to outshine the other with stories of miraculous feats of leadership and maneuvering.

Jesus is noticing this in the Pharisees too. The point of reference is how the Pharisees show off, dressed in their finery, giving alms to the poor. They seem to swagger and boast about it. He's also noticing those outside the synagogues, those who are not Jewish, with their own ways of doing things, in this case, prayer, standing on the corners, heaping phrase upon phrase, like they're in some sort of "look at me" competition.

He says: “do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. And when you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.”

I wonder if everyone Jesus sees is afraid too...in light of the Roman oppression of the first century. I wonder if they're doing things because they have no clue what else to do and they're equally worried and frightened. Just a wondering, there is no biblical evidence although I would understand how it could be so.

In this passage, regardless of the context, maybe because of it, Jesus invites his followers to pray to the Father in secret...and the rewards will be known. Praying in secret is exactly what happens in something like centering prayer. When we're scared, when we're uncertain, when we don't have a clue what will happen next, I know this to be true. Those who are practiced, those who have a deep spiritual life which might include something like centering prayer, are less anxious, more open to a myriad of possibilities, more comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty.

I loved what happened here at Friday Night Live this week. I've mentioned this to you before, but Friday Night Live is an opportunity for people to gather together, around the same theological idea we explore on Sundays. They just do it in a way that doesn't bind them to a particular religious form. Friday Night Live explored the idea of praying in a quiet place. It was funny actually, because the quiet place became the bathroom or the beach. People were actually honest about where their quiet places are, and what they pray for in secret. The whole evening explored prayer without form, meditation, quiet contemplation...and the closing song simply said...you have to keep trying, keep practicing.

There is a reason to pray in secret...and in silence. In her book *Illuminata, a Return to Prayer* Mariane Williamson writes: “the purpose of daily prayer is the cultivation of the sense of the sacred. Sacred energy renews us.” There is another reason that begins with my belief that God is revealed in every life. If you agree, then my question is how do you know the piece of God that lives within you, and would you recognize it if you saw it? The goal of centering prayer, something we're going to practice again in a few minutes, is to pay attention, to become full present to the hologram, the fragment, of God that resides and rests in each of us.

So many things define us in the world...minister, teacher, dentist, plywood marketing engineer, accountant, consultant, nurse, mother, uncle, daughter, widow, friend, tax payer, mentor. Each of those roles, those definers, those predicates, carry a tremendous responsibility and burden.

When we get good at the practice of centering prayer, all those disappear and we become one, fully, with the one we know as God, living in the embodiment that is us. We get in touch with the identity of ourselves that transcends any of those markers, those definitions. We rest in the fullness of our uniqueness. This is our spiritual identity and knowing it, in our experience, gives us way more tools to deal with the pressures of being all those other things we're called to be.

And I have a hunch when we connect to the deep interior, we will discover an unprecedented hope, not unlike those of the first century. Praying in silence, in secret, particularly in community, helps us to be grounded and resilient, whatever may come. So we're going to do that. Instead of talking about prayer, we're simply going to pray...what a novel idea. We're going to enter another experience of centering prayer...right now.

I want to say two things before I take you through the process again. First, there is no one right way and there is no one outcome for everyone. Each of you will have your own experience, as unique as you are. There are patterns that happen – people report all sorts of experiences – unable to concentrate, thoughts seem to pour in, even though you might will them to stop. Asking the question “am I getting this right” only leads to more thinking, which bounces us all over the place. Don't worry, that's normal; the goal, like we discovered on Friday night, is to keep practicing.

The second thing I want to say is to invite you all to think about the Centering Prayer workshop that will happen here in October. I'm introducing the idea, but the workshop will be very helpful in giving us a deeper understanding of the practice as well as a chance for us to continuing practicing in community. So check it out on the website and in the printed program brochure in the narthex. I've also posted the website my paper about why I think Centering Prayer belongs in worship. Have a look, there are also more hard copies in the narthex.

Now let's follow Jesus' advice and pray in secret. Here is the process again.

Prayer of Invocation

- breathe gently, normally, as comfortable as possible

- “Holy Mystery, meet me here.” “Holy God, gather with me.”

Sit in silence

- it has been said that silence is God's first language

When the monkey mind takes over

- a release word...every time you experience your mind wandering...say

- the release word quietly to yourself...mine is the Greek word for Lord –

- Kyrie

Drop out...

- it's like those moments when you are driving and you end up being

- completely lost in a moment, conscious but lost, and you end up realizing

- you have no idea what just happened to those 10 km you just drove.