

Stillness – Equip Sunday

As a church we have recently explored a number of ways that we can deepen our individual faith journeys. One of these, being still and focusing, is a very valuable discipline that can enhance our ability to connect and commune with God. In this segment there will be some teaching around the rationale for pursuing times of stillness, and also opportunity to experience a few of the meditative disciplines Christians have historically used to strengthen their ability to commune with God.

But why stillness? What comes to mind when we think of stillness? What we are talking about here is not necessarily about being physically without movement; though, sitting quietly may help to bring about a sense of stillness. By stillness we are referring to the ability to quieten our mental “chatter” with the purpose of directing our thoughts towards the Lord, and sustaining our attention upon Him.

Our contemporary culture is not conducive to enabling a state of stillness. While we are awake, we are continually being called to some form of activity or entertainment – emails, Facebook, work meetings, chatting with friends, TV, radio, the news, online games, and the like. While humans have always had “things to think about,” our current social climate is incredibly busy. Arguably, no other time in human history has been so “noisy.”

In addition, as mentioned in a sermon a couple of weeks ago (Ego Awareness), the mind is nearly always engaged in some type of thinking (planning, reminiscing, judging, hoping, worrying, and the like). It is very rare for the mind to be quiet.

With all this “noise” – outward and inward – communing with God can become difficult. The “still, small Voice” of the Lord can easily be drowned out by the many distractions that take our attention. Therefore, we can benefit by learning ways in which to reduce the mental chatter, and to quieten our minds to focus on God.

Historically, we have a number of characters from whom we can learn. Jesus was noted for often waking up early, while it was still dark, in order to find a quiet or isolated place to pray (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). Clearly, Jesus felt it was a good idea to connect with the Father before setting off for the busy day of ministry ahead. Now, we may not be “morning” people, but the principle of regularly setting aside time to pray holds true. Next to come in church history are the Desert Fathers. These were people who we might call “monks” who chose to live an ascetic lifestyle in ancient Egypt. They developed a number of disciplines that helped them focus on God. More recently, Dallas Willard addressed the idea of stillness in his book, “The Spirit of the Disciplines.” There is a considerable body of evidence of the discipline of stillness throughout church history.

Psalm 131:-1-2

My heart is not proud, LORD,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
² But I have calmed and quieted myself,
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.

Here are quotes from some Christian figures...

"We cannot find God in noise and agitation.

Nature: trees, flowers, and grass grow in silence. The stars, the moon, and the sun move in silence... In silence we are granted the privilege of listening to His voice.

Silence of our eyes.

Silence of our ears.

Silence of our mouths.

Silence of our minds.

... in the silence of our heart God will speak.." – Mother Theresa

"Keep still and let Him do some work." – Thomas Merton

Experiential exercises: Preamble and instructions

We will now try three brief exercises to help give a taste of the meditative discipline of stillness. These activities are designed to help reduce the mental chatter that will continually try to distract you from focusing on God.

If you have a rather introverted personality, you are likely to find these activities a bit easier to do than your more extroverted friends. Extroverted people are more oriented to things going on outside of them, whereas introverted people are more readily able to connect with what is going on inside of them. However, all of us will struggle with our minds wandering off on to other things – "What's for lunch?" "How long will this go on?" There will be no shortage of things that the mind would rather do than remain focused on one thing; at this time, we are speaking about focusing on the Lord. As a suggestion, when you have noticed that your mind has become distracted onto something else, just gently note this and return your attention back to the activity that you are doing. Don't become disheartened if you find that your mind wanders off a lot! Like any other discipline, regular practice will help.

Activity 1: Creation exploration

Each person is given an object (a piece of carob pod) to explore. Using all five senses, try to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of this piece of Creation before you. Suggested sense order: Look, Touch, Hear, Smell, and finally, Taste.

Activity 2: Listening exercise

Spend around 5-10 minutes to notice the sounds around you. Pay attention to all sounds – those near, far, loud, soft, mechanical, natural, rhythmic, or random.

Activity 3: Following the breath with a prayer word

Spend around 5-10 minutes for this exercise. Allow yourself to become aware of your breathing; maybe the rising and falling of your shoulders or the movement in your abdomen. You may also pair your breath with a "prayer word" such as "Lord," "Father," "Jesus," or whatever word helps you keep your focus on the Lord. The prayer word should anchor your attention when it has wandered off. Again, when you notice that you have become distracted, gently return your attention to the breath or the prayer word.