

## Ash Wednesday

9 March 2011

Ashes of regret

Oil of renewal

At the beginning of this service we prayed as we mixed oil and ashes ‘we pray that love will hold all of us — our deepest thoughts and feelings — and that all that we are can be welcomed into this community. May love hold and heal and shape us into something new’. It is love which holds us, nothing else.

This service, like the oil and ashes is a bit of a mixture. It holds in tension the oil of renewal with the ashes of regret. There is a dual focus — on hope and confession — getting it all out there with God — clearing the decks so to speak. It is not about self flagellation, no, as Isaiah says:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen, to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter, when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (Isaiah 58: 6-7)

It’s not a private thing this religion, this spiritual practice. It’s about the way we live our lives. In InterPlay we say ‘get on, get off, get over it’.

We confess our sins, our action and inaction that has harmed ourselves and others, we put it out there. We are forgiven — because we are loved much... we confess and then we get on with it, confident that we are still and always loved.

I’ve been reading an article by Jane Vennard entitled *Spiritual Practice, a way of life* (Eremos No 114 p 5). She writes:

Believing that the purpose of spiritual practice is to draw more deeply into relationship with God, to wake us up to the wonder of the presence in our lives, and to help us grow in compassion toward others and ourselves, I started asking students for their experiences. What are the things you do in your life that deepen your relationship with the Holy? What helps you pay attention to the sacred in the everyday?

Although they usually begin by describing more traditional practices, many people started to look with new eyes at the way ordinary activities could be spiritual practices. They begin to share, ‘Making music, watching the sunset, gardening’, one said, ‘talking with a friend, baking bread, reading poetry and memoirs’ another offered. ‘What about my many bicycle rides, playing with my grandchildren, building bird houses? Could those be spiritual practices?’ someone asked.

They became aware that they did not need some ‘experts’ teach them how to practice. They realised they already had that wisdom within them and that they were much more engaged in spiritual practice than they had first thought. Does this resonate with you?

At this point in the conversation she says someone would usually bring up the question of whether anything and everything we do could become a spiritual practice. My response is that anything can become a spiritual practice, but everything is not automatically a practice. To turn any activity into a spiritual practice we would need both intention and attention.

Father Thomas Keating, a Benedictine monk and teacher of centring prayer, says that faithfulness in prayer (spiritual practice) is the willingness to always start over. This gentle statement re-

minds us we will sometimes forget or be distracted. We will not always stay with our intention. But those realities do not make us unfaithful. Our faithfulness is expressed when we recognise we have forgotten and we return to our original *intention*; when we become aware of our distractions and return our *attention* to the presence of God.

We become aware of the infinite number of ways to practice that are available to us through intention and attention, we may begin to question the necessity of more formal spiritual practices. Are they important? Are they helpful? Do they lead us into a way of life or do they separate the sacred from the daily?

Language from the Buddhist tradition can help us here for Buddhists often speak of practice *on the cushion* and *off the cushion*. *On the cushion* practise is the formal meditation time set aside regularly for solitary or communal practice of mindfulness. Different methods of meditation may be used, but this discipline of time apart is at the centre of Buddhist practice. However, the real purpose of meditation practice is to take what is learned on the cushion into everyday life. The Buddhists see every moment off the cushion as an opportunity to practise.

For spiritual practices in other traditions to become a way of life we also need time *on the cushion* and *off the cushion*. We can engage in time apart in more formal spiritual practices to help us attend to the presence of God, not as an end in itself, but as a means to wake up to the Holy Presence in every moment. If weekly worship is a spiritual practice for you, are you able to take that worshipful heart into your week seeing everyday tasks with new eyes? If you learn to read scripture in the reflective, prayerful way of Lectio Divina, are you able to read and respond to other things with the same prayerful heart? If you spend some time each day in a form of contemplative prayer, are you able to practice the stillness you discover there in the midst of busyness and the sometimes hectic pace of your everyday activities? Transferring our insights and awareness from one realm to the other helps transform the spiritual practices into a way of life.

I have found two spiritual practices to be foundational to spiritual practice becoming a way of life: the disciplines of silence and of caring for the body. Both can be experienced in the more formal model of practice (setting aside time for a particular activity) as well as the more informal model of practice (paying attention throughout our day). The first discipline might be expected, but I imagine the second may come as a surprise. Let's begin with the more familiar — silence.

In our noisy culture silence is difficult to find. For this reason we may set aside daily periods of time to practice different forms of silent prayer. Sometimes the desire for longer experiences of silence leads us to quiet days of recollection or week-long silent retreats. These practices of seeking silence allows us to quiet the external noise so we are able to hear what is going on in our minds and hearts. And if we are able to slip beneath our inner concerns and mental chatter we may discover a place of simply being in the presence of God.

As we return to our everyday world, the challenge is to continue to practice silence in the midst of the noise. We cannot quiet the external world, but we can practice the silence and inner stillness we may have discovered in prayer or on retreat. One way I practice silence in my daily life is to be aware of the many times I fill up unexpected silence with my own noise. I may find myself in my car waiting while a friend does an errand. Do I turn on the radio, start making lists, tap my foot in impatience, or simply slip into the silence gratefully? When we pay attention, there are moments of silence all around us. The practice is to notice them, receive them, and give thanks.

Another way to practice silence is in our interactions with others. When in silence alone we learn to listen to ourselves and to God. Can we bring that same listening heart to others? How often do

we ask someone how he or she is doing and then not listen for the answer? In a discussion do we tend to formulate our next statement instead of listening to the others? Do we jump into the conversation before we have heard what is being said? We can practice silence by listening deeply and pausing before we respond.

I heard a wonderful story about a man who was weary of the unproductive and often contentious nature of the meetings at his work. He found himself thinking, ‘No one listens to anyone else, they are just pushing their own agenda.’ He realised that he was as guilty of this as everyone else, so he decided to practice deep listening at the next meeting. Since he was listening and not jumping in with his agenda, he remained silent during the whole meeting — silent and present. At the end of the meeting two different people thanked him for his contribution to the discussion though he hadn’t said a word.

Just as the practice of silence can be integrated into our life, caring for our bodies can be another one of our foundation spiritual practices. Too often we ignore our bodies or treat them as servants created to do assigned tasks, and pay attention only when our bodies are in trouble. If we injure ourselves or get sick we often feel like our bodies have betrayed us. At those times we may seek help for the healing, but when all is well we tend to return to our old pattern of taking our bodies for granted.

What might happen if we recognise the wisdom of St Paul when he wrote that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19)? Maybe we could begin to treat our bodies as friends. We might set aside time for special attention to our bodies needs such as regular medical check-ups, exercise, rest and massage. From those more formal practices we can expand our awareness to a sense of awe and wonder and express our gratefulness for all that our bodies do for us.

Think of all the people your hands have touched and the many things they have made: prayer shawls, toys, healthy meals, drawings. Remember the many places your feet have walked over city streets, beaches, mountain trails — taking you to new places and into new experience. What of God’s creation have you heard and seen and tasted? When we pay attention we can see the glory of God spread before us to be experienced through our bodies. How can we not be grateful?

When our bodies become our true friends we recognised that they are to be cherished and cared for. We neither ignore them nor worship them. We simply tend to them. We do not judge them or try to change them. Rather we accept and honour them for what they do so faithfully. As a friend of mine replied years ago when I asked him if he liked his body; ‘Well it’s the only one I’ve got.’

Integrating formal and informal spiritual practices keep us awake and aware of the presence of God throughout our days. In both realms we will forget and we will remember. We set intentions, slide away, and the Holy will grab our attention. As we faithfully follow this rhythm of engaging spiritual practices we will slowly be aware that our practices are becoming Practice and that we are graciously being shown a new way of life.

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