

Contemplation and Discernment. Fpcallegan. 2/17/2013.

Proverbs 2:1-1 My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you,² turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding,³ and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding,⁴ and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure,⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.⁷ He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,⁸ for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.⁹ Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path.¹⁰ For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.¹¹ Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you.

I Kings 3:1-15

Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter. He brought her to the City of David until he finished building his palace and the temple of the LORD, and the wall around Jerusalem.² The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD.³ Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the statutes of his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.

⁴ The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.⁵ At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

⁶ Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

⁷ “Now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties.⁸ Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number.⁹ So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

¹⁰ The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this.¹¹ So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for

yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, ¹² I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. ¹³ Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both riches and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. ¹⁴ And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.” ¹⁵ Then Solomon awoke—and he realized it had been a dream.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, the six week season of preparation before Easter. This year we will be going through Diane Butler Bass' Book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. This book focuses on how neighborhood churches which are not biblical literalists are growing and supporting their communities. Each week during Lent we will be focusing on two different aspects of these growing churches which can strengthen your Spiritual life and change the spiritual life of the congregation. Our format here during these six weeks of Lent is that on Sunday mornings during the Sermon, we will learn about these practices, and then on Wednesday evenings at 6:30 pm, we discuss and practice those disciplines.

Today we begin our study with two practices that you may have heard of, but may know little or nothing about. These two practices are Contemplation and Discernment. The two practices are similar in some ways, but are completely different in their focus. --Contemplation focuses your thoughts and your spirit on God and God's divine presence.

--Discernment focuses your thoughts and your spirit on anything besides God. Discernment could be a focus on yourself and on your vocation, or on a decision that you need to make or on whether something is worthy or right. Discernment takes the things that happens to you during the day and asks the question as to where you could see God working in it.

In our scripture passage today, we have the famous story of Solomon asking God for Wisdom. But we often don't take a detailed look at the passage. The story begins with an explanation of King Solomon's circumstances. Solomon, as the King of the relatively small Kingdom of Israel has made a very strategic alliance with the Pharaoh of the huge regional powerhouse Egypt. And in order to seal the deal, he has married one of the Pharaoh's daughters. Knowing that marriage to a foreign wife has often been a way that Israelites have been drawn away from worship of their one true God, Solomon leaves his new wife and heads for the hills of Gibeon to offer sacrifices to God. However, this is not a usual offering. The number of offerings that Solomon gives is really huge. Instead of offering one or ten or even 100 animals, the King of Israel presents 1000 offerings to God. This is a very great and intentional focus on God. Following this intentional and intense focus on God, Solomon connects with the presence of God in a dream. He experiences a vision in which an actual

conversation with God occurs. The intense religious experience creates an opportunity for God to break into Solomon's experience.

Put this into context for yourself. Could you imagine sitting through 1000 church services or even 1000 sermons? What about spending 1000 hours in prayer? This is an intense focus on God, which is how contemplation begins. Contemplation is an intentional opening of one self to the presence of God and very well documented Christian practice.

Western Christianity has a long tradition with contemplation that sometimes we in Mainline Churches forget about. The contemplation of God often brings about a sense of the presence of God, something that is commonly called a mystical experience. We forget that many of the convents and monasteries organized their day and in fact their entire schedule around opportunities for prayer in order to regularly practice having mystical experiences.

St. Teresa of Avila was a Carmelite Nun who worked to reform Convent life and to promote the inner life of the soul and mystical experiences. Teresa was born into a noble family as Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada, March 28, 1515 at Avila in Castile. When Teresa was 15 years

old, her household was devastated by the death of her mother. Teresa was inconsolable, and her father in desperation sent her to a convent to help her deal with her loss. After spending a year and a half at the convent, Teresa became ill, and her father brought her home to have local doctor treat her. The treatments went poorly. Teresa went into a coma for three days and then was unable to walk for three years. While she was confined to her bed, Teresa spent a great deal of time in daily mental prayer, which led her to have a sense of the presence of God as a mystical experience. She called her prayers, "prayers of quiet" and the "prayer of union." During her prayers, she frequently went into a trancelike state. She said she felt as if though her soul was lifted from her body and was engaging in mystical flights. She described it as her soul becoming awake to God as never before.

When Teresa was twenty one years old, she went against her father's wishes and ran away from home to join the Carmelite convent. Her father acquiesced to her desire to become a nun. Her life as a nun was very significant. In 1562, despite opposition from the church leadership, Teresa founded a very strict Carmelite convent that especially promoted the practice of unceasing prayer. She also became a prolific writer and her books on contemplative prayer and mystical experiences are spiritual

classics. One of the books, *The Interior Castle*, uses the metaphor of a castle to symbolize the interior life and the experience of Contemplative Prayer. Upon entering the castle, one would pass from room to room in order to reach the center of Castle which was a room which held the King of Glory, and which represents spiritual Union with God. The rooms that you would pass through in order to reach the center were, in order: Humility, Practice of Prayer, Meditation, Quiet, Illumination, and Dark Night. The practice of contemplation focuses on the presence of God and in the joy of being in the presence of God.

While Teresa of Avila was spending time writing about and practicing the contemplation of God, Ignatius of Loyola was busy with his lifetime work of creating a process of discernment.

Like Teresa of Avila, Ignatius was born into the nobility in 1491. A man of wealth and presence, he decided upon a military career, and he successfully became a Basque knight. His military career was cut short however, when Ignatius was very seriously wounded in the battle of Pamplona in 1521 fighting against France. As his body recovered, Ignatius read *De Vita Christi* by Ludolph of Saxony and he dedicated his life to Christ. When he could travel again, he went on pilgrimages to shrines.

It was at the Shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat that Ignatius of Loyola experienced a vision of the virgin Mary and Baby Jesus. Following this experience, he went to Manresa and would pray seven hours a day; often isolating himself from others in the silence of a cave. When he was not in prayer, Ignatius spent time helping the sick and the poor. It was during this period of his life that Ignatius developed the basis of his life work known as the *Spiritual Exercises*, and the practice of daily examination of your life. Always methodical and disciplined in all he did, Ignatius organized this ritual of Discernment into Five Steps called Examen:

1) Become aware of God's presence in silence and stillness.

Remember that God is with you in every place in the creation, and that God loves you.

2) Review your day with gratitude. Give thanks to God for what you have received today, and notice what you have given away.

3) Pay attention to your emotional response to the events of your day. Ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help you to look at your actions and motives with complete honesty and patience with yourself. This is not

a time to condemn yourself, but to simply to be honestly open to good growth.

4) Choose one feature or event or emotion from your day and pray about it. Review everything that you did today, and look at your motivations. What were you hoping for? When did you hesitate?

5) And finally, look forward to tomorrow for it will be another day. Look at yourself with compassion and love and reconcile yourself with your need for God and God's love and grace. Confess your shortcomings and experience God's forgiveness. And give thanks for the times in your day that you were able to see and act in God's way of life.

Following his time living as a hermit, Ignatius decided to go to the university and study. For the next seven years, Ignatius devoted himself to learning theology and Latin at some of the most prestigious universities in his day. During his time of study, Ignatius gathered a total of eight followers who shared his beliefs. With only these eight followers, Ignatius was finally given approval by the pope to create a new order of Priests. This order, known as the Jesuits, was dedicated the Glory of Christ using two main tools: 1) Education 2) Self Examination. Over the years, the Jesuits have founded many colleges and universities all around the world,

including Georgetown University and Loyola. Today there are over 19,000 Jesuit priests in the world, all of which have completed between 8 and 14 years of formal education before being ordained into the Jesuit priesthood. And each of those men know and practice the daily ritual of Examen as a discipline of self examination and discernment.

So what does all of this mean for us today? The life of being a Christian is not just knowing Bible facts, and knowing all of the stories about the life of Jesus. The Christian life also involves experiences of God. It is not only the head knowledge of God that is important, Christianity must be sustained by that deep joy of your heart as you rest in God's presence. You are invited to have a real relationship with God through the joy of knowing and experiencing the presence of God through Contemplative prayer and also the examination of your life as a follower of Christ through Daily Prayerful Discernment. This Wednesday, at 6:30 pm, you are invited to not only discuss these two spiritual disciplines, but to also to practice them. We will gather right here in the front of the sanctuary, discuss the way that Diane Butler Bass describes them in her book and then we will work together toward building up your Spiritual life by actually creating an opportunity to try these ancient and well known Spiritual Disciplines. I hope that you will join us. Amen.