

## Thoughts on Contemplative Prayer

Contemplative prayer has a long tradition in all of the major religious traditions. Contemplative prayer takes many forms, but the goal is more than quiet and relaxation. Being in a state of spiritual contemplation may guide you to a sense of God's presence in you, a deep realization of God's love for you and a willingness on your part to open yourself fully to the truth of your unity with the Holy One. Contemplation doesn't mean what our world thinks it means: It doesn't mean thinking things through.

Contemplation is an experience of loving presence, and it comes as pure gift, given when and as God chooses. In its original meaning, contemplation is always a gift, not something you can beckon or manufacture. It can come during activity (see *Tree of Contemplative Practices*), at any time, and it can be cultivated in solitude. It's a conscious willingness to fully enter into life *just as it is*. Recognition of and living into a loving presence, which is God. Our time in contemplative prayer at Trinity is simple, but it may not be easy at first. It is just being, sitting in awareness, neither rehashing the past nor worrying about the future. Stopping long enough to listen. Resting in God, *in whom we live and move and have our being*. Abiding. Cherishing the present moment.

Realizing you are known by God and loved as you are is an opening to soften your heart to the world and take this experience out into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit and loving and acting in the world as the body of Christ to bring about a just, peaceful and loving Kingdom.

Don't be worried about trying to define it. Or about doing it right. Seek only honesty and truth. Come to your best sense of your desire for God, and just be there as you are. Allow as much openness as you can and try to give yourself to what seems most authentic. What is *easiest* for you is usually the best. If you feel drawn to it, and desire to spend time with God, you are in the right place, Thomas Merton said. You have already done all that is necessary. There is no further entrance requirement.

For many people over the centuries, regular periods of silence play a crucial role in the spiritual life. It needs to be cultivated and honored because silence is not valued in our society--it's counter cultural. Notice how much you may resist doing this. This not a technique or a gimmick, but it is a practice to be developed. Some may choose a sacred word to focus at first, or the Jesus prayer. *Jesus, Peace, Love, or Here I am Lord, Abide*.

The mind will chatter. All minds do. Thoughts and feelings will creep in. Some suggestions from the ancients:

- instead of pushing away chatter, return again and again, gently, with a prayer word, or
- some use their breathe to bring them back—breathe in the breath of God
- gently release the distraction—it is in the “coming back” to the breath or word that we develop the contemplative muscle
- or, if it keeps coming back, turn and gaze at it, see it for what it is: fear, regret, or worry, and tuck it away to think and write about later.
- the practice of bringing back the attention over and over creates an interior momentum that can reveal a stillness over time. Much of the inner noise is deeply ingrained and it leads us down a false path that suggests we are our thoughts and feelings.
- Stop chasing the thoughts; don't get caught up in the commentary. Jesus in the desert refused to get caught up in the commentary on the chatter—the judgment
- Try not to analyze what is happening. Don't be disappointed if you think *nothing* is happening. The fruits of contemplative prayer are to be found in the life you live when you get up and go out into the world. Will you enter more deeply into the troubles of the world, love others, and be gentle with yourself?

### A Beginning:

You might want to use these notes on settling in: If you do this at home you may want to use a meditation timer (free app) so you don't keep checking the time. These are only suggestions.

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- Physically settle into your chair. Try to sit straight, aligning head over heart with hands relaxed resting on your lap or open, in a gesture of openness to the Spirit. Close your eyes softly. Plant your feet on the ground.
- You may decide to dedicate this time to some need in your family or in our world.
- Scan over your body and relax intentionally: head level, shoulders relaxed and down and feet grounded, rooted in the floor. Close your lips, drop your jaw. Open your eyes and close them again gently. Furrow and release your brow. Keep on relaxing every part of your body with intention.
- Start by breathing in and out intentionally slowly and very deeply—*Breathe on me breathe of God*. God is the breath in and out of you, sustaining life.
- Now settle to natural breathing and be aware of what is around you, expand your attention within. It may be to think about trusting your mind and heart to the mind of Christ, being willing for God's great love to care for yours.
- Then, so far as it is possible, just rest in this simple open presence
- When we come to the end of this time, end it gently, as if this awareness and openness carries over to what comes next.

**John of the Cross** (Carmelite Monk of 16<sup>th</sup> century)—a cultivation of awareness

*Preserve a loving attentiveness to God with no desire to feel or understand any particular thing concerning him. The opening up from within of the ground of awareness.*

**C.S. Lewis** *We live, in fact, in a world starved for solitude, silence, and private: and therefore starved for meditation and true friendship.*

**Teresa of Avila** *It is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time to be alone with God who we know loves us. We are not trying to be quiet, nor are we trying to have no thoughts. By trying not to think, we hopelessly stimulate the imagination. We simply, gently, without judgment, tenderly bring our attention back when we realize it's been stolen.*

**Cynthia Bourgeault** *Release and return to God: this gesture is the default response to reality. People have to work to take this out into the world. But you can't take it out in the world unless you have it inside you.*

**Basil Pennington** *Unfortunately, in seeing ourselves, as we truly are, not all that we see is beautiful and attractive. This is undoubtedly part of the reason we flee silence. We do not want to be confronted with our hypocrisy, our phoniness. We see how false and fragile is the false self we project. We have to go through this painful experience to come to our true self. It is a harrowing journey, a death to self – the false self – and no one wants to die. But it is the only path to life, to freedom, to peace, to true love. And it begins with silence. We cannot give ourselves in love if we do not know and possess ourselves. This is the great value of silence. It is the pathway to all we truly want.*

**Richard Rohr** *We do not find our own center; it finds us. Our own mind will not be able to figure it out.*

**Meister Eckhart** *God is closer to me than I am to myself.*

**St. Augustine**, on prayer and the significance of Christ's resurrection and ascension: "Christ has gone from our sight so that we should return to our heart and find him there".

**Gerald May** *A lot of people have trouble with contemplative prayer because it's really an act of love and demands vulnerability. This kind of prayer is where we most directly face the truth of ourselves and the world. It's risky business. But we're not flying solo here. Jesus reminds us to come to him as a child. So the simpler the better.*

It is not self-observation and it's not self-indulgent but rather *prayer is falling into the hands of a loving God*, St. Paul says. Stand diligently at the gate of the heart. Perceive the love of God fully and consciously in our heart. To realize that God is within you is the "pearl of great price".