
WINTER FEAST FOR THE SOUL
a sermon given by the Rev. Rosemary Lloyd
Sunday, January 11, 2009
at the First Church in Boston

Could we possibly start off a new year—2009—without some reference to resolutions? I didn't think so...

Two of my "let's try this again" thoughts each new year are: get in better shape and deepen my spiritual practice. So, once again, I'm committing to go to the gym at least three times a week. I use the context of a gym because I know I need to be in an environment that will support my doing the hard, sweaty work of building cardiovascular and muscle strength and endurance. And declaring my commitment to others—in this case to you, will—I hope—help keep me accountable to my resolution.

It's pretty much the same for me when it comes to spiritual practice. I have every good intention of getting down on my kneeling bench twice a day to settle into the stillness of prayer and meditation, listening to my breath, my heartbeat, listening for the still, quiet voice within....But sometimes my good intentions are just that...

So I look for structures for fulfilling my intentions. For ways of supporting myself to do the things I long to do. I was delighted, then, to read about Winter Feast for the Soul.

The idea for Winter Feast was born when a woman in Idaho, Valerie Skonie, read a three-line poem by 13th Century mystic Jelaluddin Rumi:

“What nine months does for the embryo

Forty early mornings

Will do for your growing awareness.”

Forty days....that's how long Noah spent on the Ark before the waters receded, Moses spent on Mt. Sinai communing with God, Jesus spent fasting in the desert wilderness, and the Buddha sat under the Bohdi tree before attaining enlightenment. After 40 days, these prophets emerged from their spiritual journeys changed and they, in turn, changed the world. It's a mystically charged period of time if we look at it that way.

When I read about Winter Feast, though, I wasn't holding such high aspirations for myself, personally. But it did appeal to me as context for renewing and strengthening my spiritual practice at the start of the new year. It reminded me that I don't have to go away into the desert or on retreat for 40-days to recommit to a spiritual practice. I can use this 40-day period as a framework in which to fulfill my resolution. *And* since there is a world-wide invitation to people of all faiths to participate, I could invite others to join me—thereby building a stronger environment for all of us in which to do the on-going, sometimes difficult work of spiritual practice.

As so, a sermon title is born, an intention renewed, and an invitation extended: You are warmly invited to consider how spiritual practice can make a difference in your life and in the world...After today's service, if you are interested in learning more about how you can use Winter Feast as a framework for beginning or strengthening your

spiritual practice, please remain in the sanctuary after the postlude and Zen teacher Josh Bartok will be here with me to answer your questions about spiritual practice.

Let me see if I can anticipate some of them. Just what is spiritual practice? Most broadly, it is activity associated with cultivating spirituality. And I'll be more specific in a moment. But first, let's look at what is spirituality.

There are many ways to answer that question. I recently came across a book called *It's a Meaningful Life; It Just Takes Practice* by Bo Lozoff. The author and his wife Sita founded the Prison-Ashram Project with Ram Das in 1973. This powerful ministry extends interfaith spiritual friendship and guidance to people in prison. Through their efforts, thousands of prisoners have been introduced to the spiritual practice of meditation. And their lives and life inside some prisons are being changed .

Lozoff distills his thinking about spirituality into two interrelated categories. He writes that most religions revolve around two principles of spirituality--one internal, the other external. He calls them Communion and Community.

Internally, each of us, "in silence and solitude, can touch and eventually merge into the Divine Essence deep within us." This is the principle of "Communion."

"Religions may differ on their names or ideas for what it is that we commune with," Lozoff notes, but through "diligence and earnestness," we can commune, we can connect with that Essence.

Through diligence and earnestness we attend to the practice of communion.

Communion has another special characteristic: it cannot be fully learned by reading about it. Communion is experience. Experience--or we might call it awareness--that comes through the heart consciousness in spiritual practice.

Spiritual practice takes a variety of forms. There is running practice. And walking. Dancing practice and singing. Food and sex and drugs have been employed in the exercise of spiritual practice.

But within all practice, even ones that appear to be in motion, spiritual practice is—at its core—an exercise in stillness. "Be still and know that I am God," wrote the Psalmist (42). Not be crazy busy and know that I am God. Or fret yourself into an anxiety attack and know that I am God. No. Be STILL and know that I am God.

How does one go about being still in our charged, overwrought, electronic, chaotic world? We start by setting aside time. Five minutes if that's what you can manage today. Ten tomorrow. Working your way up to 20 or 30 minutes once or even twice a day. In the morning is good. So is just before going to bed. Your aim is to be intentional about setting aside time when you understand that your chief occupation will be being still. And noticing your breath. Letting ordinary thoughts recede. Emptying the mind.

Wait.

Empty the mind?

Ever try that?!

I love the exchange Tim read for us from Elizabeth Gilbert's book *Eat, Pray, Love*:

"All I seem to do is argue with myself when I try to meditate," says Gilbert. Her wise Texan friend explains: "That's just your ego, trying to make sure it stays in charge. This is what your ego does. It keeps you feeling separate...tries to convince you that you're flawed and broken and alone instead of whole...Don't listen to it."

Instead, say all the sages of the world, listen “with the ear of your heart” for the still, small voice within. The voice that is whispering to us all the time, but we are usually too busy with our ego-driven lives and fears and grasping that we cannot hear it. Busy, not still, we miss what is there for us every moment of our lives. “Like what?” asks Elizabeth Gilbert. And her unexpected guide answers, “Like love, Groceries. Like pure divine love.”

Access to divine love and peace for the world—that’s the opportunity we’re being invited to when we take up spiritual practice as our faithful discipline. An opportunity to move from the fast lane to “the vast lane.”¹

But is it true--is it reasonable to suggest that a spiritual practice can generate peace for the world? Can it stop the bombs from falling on children in Gaza? Can it end the killing in Dorchester? Can it cut down on road rage?

In the 6th century B.C.E. Taoist philosopher Lao-Tse wrote:

“If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations;

If there is to be peace in the nations there must be peace in the cities...”

and so on down the chain of relationship to peace between neighbors and in the home. “If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart.” We’ve had a long time to consider the possibility of Lao-Tse’s truth. But I suspect our practice has not been quite perfected...

Spiritual practice is not optional for peace in the heart. It is central.

We hear so many people say, I’m not religious but I am spiritual. This is giving voice to the fact that we are hungering, yearning for a deeper awareness of and connection to our spiritual core--to the center of our lives. We need not have a theistic philosophy or be members of a religious community to sense the truth that life is a spiritual enterprise. Without cultivating our awareness of this, we remain hungry and full of longing for communion. Hungry we become grasping. Grasping we become desperate. Desperate we become violent...and on it goes.

A heart at peace is a heart that knows--in a way the mind cannot--that we are not separate from the source of peace. We have always—always—been connected to that source, but we forget. Spiritual practice is one way that we can remember--and stay connected to the power and peace that allows us to express our spirituality in the world. Remember: Communion and Community.

This is Bo Lozoff again who writes: “The external principle that all religions share is a simple ethic about how we are to regard others: to love and respect all of creation, to be forgiving and compassionate and generous, and to dedicate our lives to the common good rather than merely to personal success.” This is the principle of Community and it serves as the “primary motivation to guide our lives.” (Lozoff, 5-6)

We talk a lot here at First Church about doing the long, difficult work of Justice—of building the Beloved Community. And I know—I know—that in our hearts we all yearn to do the right thing, to make a difference, to change the world. It’s just that there are many obstacles to fulfilling our yearning: we’re busy with jobs and families and health challenges.... we don’t know where to start....we feel stymied about how to help, or even burned out from years of staying the course and seeing little change—and maybe seeing it get worse...

¹ Bo Lozoff in *It’s a Meaningful Life*.

But as we do the long and--I'm not going to delude you--the sometimes difficult work of spiritual practice, we cultivate awareness—an *awakeness* to life that brings us into direct access to a source--to THE SOURCE--of loving energy that can guide us and carry us through the hard nights and heal us. We are renewed and sustained for the work of Community. Work that is not optional but central for spiritual lives. That is how spiritual practice creates peace in the heart and peace in the world.

You know, there was a time when I would have suggested that you take a page from Dr. Herb Benson's popular research on *The Relaxation Response*. In that book, he reduces the characteristics of various spiritual practices that result in "an altered state of consciousness" into two steps:

1. In a quiet environment, in a comfortable position, repeat a word, sound, prayer, phrase or muscular activity.
2. Passively disregard everyday thoughts that come to mind, and return to your repetition. (RR, 125)

And I might have said: take this elegantly simple direction on how to elicit the relaxation response and use it. Make it your practice. You will feel calmer, your blood pressure will go down, you will experience a distinct sense of well-being. And that is a good, healing thing.

I still think it is good. But over time I have personally come to feel that in distilling the spiritual practice model, some vital essence--the essential spirituality--has been evaporated.

Spiritual practice is about more than relaxing for the sake of reducing stress in your life. In fact, there will be times when your practice may not be relaxing at all. Because, in part, practice is about relationship and relationship is complex. And we cannot know before we begin what the relationship will ask of us....

I am mindful this morning of a passage from the oldest gospel in the Christian bible, a text in Mark about the time when Jesus was 30 and he went out from Galilee to the River Jordan where the prophet John was baptizing people in the water. "And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (Mark 1.: 4-11)

My reading of that text today suggests to me that this was Jesus' enlightenment moment. His moment of Communion. The moment when he understood that he was not separate or alone. He recognized the indwelling Spirit of Life and Love and he was strengthened and healed. He knew who he was and whose he was. He went into the wilderness to fast. And he wrestled with his demons. After 40 days, he entered his public ministry, proclaiming the Beloved Community.

Spiritual practice is about feeling the presence of something beyond yourself, and feeling a union with that presence.

It is about dissolving the illusions of the world that would have you believe you are separate and alone.

It is communing with and resting in Divine Love.

Spiritual practice is not about peak experiences or fire works or levitation. It's about letting go of expectations and how life "should" be, and seeing life as it is and -- *still*-- knowing that healing is available for your spirit, and that you can be the bearer of radical healing into the world.

Forty days.

In the dark of winter, let us retreat into a period of intentional spiritual practice. Let us nurture our spirituality. Let us experience communion. Let us awaken to the world and its cry for healing. For the sake of community. For the sake of peace. For the sake of the whole and holy world. AMEN.