

Sunday, July 26, 2015
Guest: Shirsten Lundblad

Introduction to the Scripture

This morning we have two readings from scripture. To continue with our exploration of the psalms that we have been enjoying these past number of weeks, our Old Testament reading will be Psalm 46.

This psalm includes a word that appears 71 times in the psalms and three times in the book of the Hebrew prophet Habbakuk: the word “Selah.” It is thought to be a liturgical direction, which may have indicated an instrumental interlude in the singing of the psalm. Other definitions for Selah are an invitation to “stop and listen,” to “pause and think of that.” Selah appears three times in Psalm 46, and I have asked Ed to follow that directive and pause for a couple of breaths after he reads the word, Selah, giving us an opportunity to reflect on the words of the reading.

When Jane reads the reading from Mark, I invite you to contemplate the image that is on the front of your bulletin, Rembrandt’s “The Storm on the sea of Galilee.” This is a painting that used to live at the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum in Boston, until it was stolen in 1990. When I was in college, I frequented the Gardner museum and spent many hours pondering the beauty and the meaning of this painting. Rembrandt’s use of light is so engaging in the telling of the story, not only in illuminating the fierce wildness of the sea and wind, and the disciples’ frantic struggles to keep the boat from capsizing, but also in illuminating the calm peaceful countenance and presence of Jesus. This story of Jesus calming the storm appears in three of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but it is only in Mark’s account that Jesus is reported to have said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!”

In all three Gospels this is a story not only about the authority of Jesus, that he is able to affect even the forces of the natural world, but it is also a teaching about faith.

Sermon, July 26, 2015 “Peace, Be still.”

There are two themes which I would like to lift up for our reflections today: the first is the idea of rest, and the second the theme of stillness, as an invitation to contemplative practice.

We have so many stories in the Gospels of Jesus’ activities: his teachings, and his miracles. Here is a story where we are told that Jesus went to sleep. Even the Son of God needed rest. And the fact that he could sleep so soundly, and relax so deeply, trusting himself in God’s care, even the tempest did not disturb his rest. It was the disciples in their distress and fear who woke him up from his sleep.

Can we relax like that, placing our trust in God, letting go of control, and finding rest?

Wayne Muller, a friend of mine from seminary, has written quite eloquently about our need for the sabbath, of “finding rest, renewal, and delight in our busy lives,” and his most recent book is about “a life of being, having, and doing enough.” In a recent article about the Sabbath, Wayne has written:

“In the traditional Jewish Sabbath there are thirty-nine prohibitions, activities forbidden for Jews to perform when they are faithfully observing Shabbas. Each of the prohibitions (Sowing, Plowing, Reaping, Threshing, etc.) is a form of labor, or work. These thirty-nine activities share, in being defined as “work,” a common trait. Each activity involves taking something as it is (the earth, a field of wheat) and turning it into something else (plowing the earth into fertile rows for planting; reaping the field by removing the wheat from the place where it had been growing). So when the Hebrew Bible says, “Six days shall you labor, but on the seventh day, you shall rest,” it creates two distinct forms of Time, with two very different ways of living within each kind of Time. In ordinary time, we work for our bread, for our family, for our children, our home, our fields. In Sabbath time, we see things as they are — but we do nothing to change, improve, or turn those things into something different.

Without Shabbas, the world would forever be a place relentlessly in need of repair, of change, of laborious days and nights without end. It would be a place where all our seeing would land upon a world saturated with things, and tasks, and everything wrong, or unfinished, not yet made right. Incomplete. In Sabbath time, while nothing in the world is changed, on this day, nothing is incomplete. We see things as they are, and marvel at their magnificence, and give thanks.

This doesn’t mean that there isn’t much work to be done in the world. It means that we can best serve each other, and God, when we carve out regular time to be still, to “be still and know that I am God.” Stephen Mitchell’s adaptation of the Hebrew interprets Psalm 46 as saying, “Be still and know that I am within you.”

When we remember Jesus quieting the storm, calming the wind and the sea, when we recall the image of Jesus’ illuminated face, a countenance that speaks calm, peacefulness; when we remember, in other words, when we can embody the stillness of Christ’s illuminated presence that shines so brightly in the heart of each one of us, we are inviting the Sabbath into our daily life.

In a recent TED talk, which was made into a little book, Pico Iyer speaks about the Art of Stillness. Pico Iyer is a travel writer who discovered later in life that sitting still and going nowhere can offer the greatest adventure that “makes sense of everywhere else.” He speaks of our modern dilemma, that though research has shown that Americans are working fewer hours than we did in the 60’s, we feel like we are working more. Through our technology and media we are inundated with information, and with news from all corners of the world. As Iyer puts it, “More and more of us feel like emergency room physicians, permanently on call, required to heal ourselves but unable to find the prescription for all the clutter on our desk.”

Life appears to be moving faster and faster without any chance of catching up. We finish a project, and 5 more fill its place. Where information was once considered a luxury, now it has become a source of overwhelm, and we welcome times of spaciousness and quiet.

I see the calendars of my friends and clients who are retired, and often they are filled to the brim with appointments and activities. It makes me think that it is no coincidence that the word

retired has the word “tired” in it, in fact, if we add the prefix “re” to the word, it means that we are getting tired over and over again.

When I teach my yoga classes and during the relaxation segment speak the words, “there is nowhere you have to go, nothing you have to do,” I can literally feel the energy in the room settle down, smooth out, and sense a collective inaudible sigh of relief.

Sylvia Boorstein, an American Buddhist, who teaches meditation, and has written several books on mindfulness meditation, has one book that is a guide on creating your own mindfulness retreat. It is a very accessible book on cultivating the practice of being, rather than doing. I especially like the book’s title and find it to be a good reminder: “Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There.”

We can’t make the world slow down; we can only slow ourselves down.

My grandmother had a plaque on her kitchen wall that pictured a drawing of frantic woman and the quote from Alice in Wonderland: “The hurrier I go, the behinder I get.” Gustav Mahler had a quote regarding music, that “if you think you are boring your audience, go slower, not faster.” In fact the world does become more interesting, and more colorful and vibrant when we can slow down and smell the roses. During the recovery periods from two major surgeries, where I was laid up for a number of weeks and did not even have the energy to read more than one of the books I had stacked up around me, I spent a lot of time being quiet, and I had to move very slowly. I have great memories from that time, of watching the light shine through the petals of flowers in the garden, and seeing things that I would have otherwise missed in the natural world had I been in a hurry.

When we get going too fast, doing too many things at once, most of us are not really present where we are.

There is a great quote from James Joyce which goes like this: “Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body.” How many of us can relate to this?

In my work as a massage therapist I often see bruises or scrapes on people, and upon inquiry learn that they are the result of the person moving too fast, of doing too many things at once, or thinking about one thing while doing another, and thus, not really being present.

Stillness can become a *practice* of presence. As we cultivate a contemplative practice, we are pre-sensing our lives. In some of my readings on memory and dementia/alzheimers, I have learned that multi-tasking is actually a way of not being present with anything. The more we can be present with whatever we are doing, even the most mundane activities, like paying bills, or washing the dishes, and the more we become mindful of the experience of our senses in the midst of those activities, the more memories are being created; in other words, the more we will remember that experience.

The older we get, the more we realize how short and precious is this life. We don’t want to miss any of it or waste a minute. So it behooves us to learn to cultivate presence.

I often have heard people say, “I can’t meditate. My mind is too busy. I can’t get rid of thoughts.” People who meditate have discovered that the practice of stillness does not stop the

thinking mind, does not stop the thoughts from arising. It is the mind's nature to produce thoughts. But we needn't follow them, or be hooked by them, or endlessly chase after thoughts of the past or plans for the future. Or worries. We can let go of the story line. I often like to think of the metaphor of sitting by a flowing stream. My thoughts are like the leaves or waves on the stream; sitting in stillness I can train my mind to not get invested or to follow those leaves floating by, those thoughts that are arising, endlessly, constantly. I can simply rest my attention on the stream itself and even with time allow my attention to recall the stillness beneath all the activity. Some meditation teachers use the metaphor of the ocean and the waves. We can get fixated on the ever changing, moving waves, or we can rest our minds on the vastness of the ocean.

Many of us find it challenging to carve out time for a contemplative practice, myself included. This is where our modern smart phones can actually be quite smart: we can set the timer for whatever block of time we wish to give ourselves to the practice, 5 minutes, 20 minutes, whatever, and then sit down and rest in the quiet, simply consenting to a presence, to a love that is unconditional. See that time as a gift that you are giving yourself, a gift of spaciousness, a gift of awakening, an opportunity to relax into life, into Divine Presence, into unconditional love.

We can then find numerous times throughout the day that are contemplative practice opportunities. These moments are called, by most people, "waiting," but I am telling you a great secret: waiting is a gift. We have opportunities to wait all of the time: at traffic lights, at the doctor's office, in the supermarket, at the bank, waiting in line, waiting in chairs, in airports, lying awake in the middle of the night waiting to fall back asleep. We can feel bored, or anxious, or restless, or irritated, or we can utilize the time as a great opportunity to drop into stillness. To breathe in, Peace, and breathe out, be still. Not necessarily closing our eyes, but yes, quieting our mind, synchronizing the breath with our awareness, relaxing into presence. Try it as an experiment, practicing stillness while you wait. I have discovered in this that I have many opportunities throughout every day for "quiet time."

When Pico Iyer asked long time Buddhist meditator Matthieu Ricard how he dealt with jet lag, Ricard looked at him with surprise and said, "For me a flight is just a brief retreat in the sky. There's nothing I can do, so it's really quite liberating. There's nowhere else I can be. So I just sit and watch the clouds and the blue sky. Everything is still and everything is moving. It's beautiful."

Here at First Parish we have a number of opportunities to share silence. Not only do we have times of quiet in our Sunday morning service, every Friday morning in the parlor at Pilgrim House from, 8:15 to 9:15, there is a silent meditation time, open for anyone to drop in. Also, there are regular "Quiet Days" offered that are hosted at different people's homes. The next one is coming up in August. There is a potency to sitting together in silence. As Jesus said, "Whenever two or more are gathered, there am I in the midst of you."

Contemplative practice has a long history in our Christian tradition, in the early Christian communities, and the monastic communities, and more recently has been reactivated by the centering prayer movement.

Father Thomas Keating, the founder of Centering Prayer, describes it as “this turning to God that is really the chief act in contemplative prayer, receiving and allowing the Divine love to flow into us.....it is a practical way of cultivating interior silence.”

Cynthia Bourgeault in her book, “Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening” describes prayer as a “listening to God, not even listening for messages, but just being there, quietly gathered in God’s presence.” She defines contemplative prayer as “simply a wordless, trusting opening of self to the divine presence.....it is the simplest form of prayer there is.” She reminds us of the words of the 16th century mystic, John of the Cross, “Silence is God’s first language.”

Because our minds are so attached to thinking, Father Keating sometimes suggests choosing a sacred word, with one or two syllables, "as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. [Then,] sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce your sacred word. . . . When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to your sacred word. "

Many forms of meditative practice incorporate the breath as a point of focus. As we have learned, the words for breath and spirit are the same in Hebrew and in other languages. Our breath is our constant companion and ally in this life; we arrive in this world with our first intake of breath, and we exit with our final exhalation. It is a function that happens automatically, without thinking, but also can be directed with our thought. It is a great tool in meditative practice, and in quieting the mind and relaxing the body. We can breathe in, “Peace,” and breathe out, “be still.” Mindful breathing unites us with all of life, with all those who share the same air, past, present, and future. We are breathing the same air that Jesus breathed, that Buddha breathed, that Mother Teresa breathed, that our childrens’ children will breathe. A student of Father Keating asked him about praying with the breath and said he was breathing in God and breathing out sin. Keating’s response to the man was this: “Breathing in God is good; why don’t you breath out love.” That was an aha moment for the student, and this has been his practice since that moment, one that he finds very simple, meaningful, and life changing: breathing in God, and breathing out Love.

When describing the practice of centering prayer, Jesuit priest Richard Rohr says: “Let go of all expectations or goals during this time. It is not about achieving anything, whether emptying your mind or finding peace or achieving a spiritual experience. There is no way to succeed at Centering Prayer, except to return again and again to love. Allow thoughts to come and go without latching onto them, without judgment. "Ever-so-gently" bring your sacred word, the symbol of your intention, back to mind and return to resting in Presence.”

Though centering prayer is not about achieving anything, I will say that the practice of mindful stillness, of “resting in Presence” has its benefits. As Thomas Keating puts it, “If one completes the journey to one’s own heart, one will find oneself in the heart of everyone else.” Contemplative practice, the art of stillness, naturally cultivates compassion, for ourselves and for others. And studies of long time meditators have also shown, through functional MRI brain scans testing for positive emotions, that people who meditate are happier.

When my sister began dating her husband and he learned that I liked to meditate, he gave me a gift that he made that is a glass orb on a wooden base with the quotation from the Chinese sage Lao Tsu written on the base: “Muddy water, let stand, becomes clear.” The little orb is filled with water and fine sand, and when you shake it up the silt muddies the water, making it impossible to see through, but after a time, an hour or so, the water becomes crystal clear once more. Contemplative practice offers us the possibility of that luminous clarity.

In the words of William Butler Yeats:
We can make our minds so like still water
That beings gather about us that they may see,
It may be, their own images,
And so live for a moment with a clearer,
Perhaps even a fiercer life
Because of our quiet.

Don't ever underestimate the service that we offer to the world by regularly returning to stillness, to the rhythm of rest, to quieting our minds, and being present.

Let us conclude this sermon with a shared practice of silence together for the next few minutes. We can close our eyes or bring them to a soft focus. Relaxing our face. Remembering Jesus quieting the storm, calming the wind and the sea, remembering within the stillness, Christ's illuminated presence that shines so brightly in the heart of each one of us. Taking refuge in God. Letting go of the need for activity, for what is coming next, for what has been. Breathing in Peace, breathing out, “Be still,” breathing in, “Peace,” breathing out, “Be still.” Nowhere to go, and nothing you have to do. Simply, Breathe in God, and breathe out Love. Peace, Be still.