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October 27, 2019
Practicing Faith: Prayer/Tuning In Exodus 3:1-12 “Into Me See”

Today we continue in our fall series of Practicing Faith of looking at 7 different spiritual disciplines. On the first Sunday Pastor Terry inspired us to consider ways we fast and feast as we embrace the calling to make room for God in our lives. He likened the spiritual disciplines to making a cup of tea, and immersing the tea bag again and again in the hot water to bring out the depth and richness of flavor. Terry said that these disciplines are ones we do again and again for we don't just dip the tea bag once into the hot water, but instead it is process over time.

Last week Pastor Neil shared about the gift of spiritual companions and walking together with others on this journey of faith. We were challenged to find a spiritual companion to share out of the depth of our lives and hearts and souls. To share about our relationship with God and to allow another to help us see and know where God is at work within us.

Today then we move to the third spiritual discipline of prayer. I reflected this week on the numerous sermons and teachings I have received on the topic of prayer. I of course do not remember all of them but I do recall that some of them came with a prescribed formula. It might be as simple as the five finger prayer, where each finger represented a different area to pray for. Or it might have been along the lines of the promise of the “Prayer of Jabez.” Or, perhaps it was an extended teaching on the Lord's Prayer. As I reflected though I realized that the commonality between the various sermons and teachings was some sort of structure, or formula. They didn't necessarily go so far as to ensure that if you followed the prescribed steps then your prayers *will* surely be answered! That sounds a little like finding a lamp and rubbing it and out pops a genie to grant you three wishes. I don't think that is how prayer works, nor do I think that it is the purpose of prayer.

Now, I'm not going to tell you today that we shouldn't use prescribed formulas or structures. For example, I and others have found significant meaning in using the "Anabaptist Prayer Book" which is a very structured and repetitive way of praying. I also engage in the same prayer practices on a daily basis. Every day I employ the same ways of connecting with God.

And that my friends, is what is the essence of prayer. As Ruth Haley Barton describes it, "Simply put, prayer is all the ways in which we communicate and commune with God. The fundamental purpose of prayer is to deepen our intimacy with God."ⁱ In all of the sermons and teachings on prayer I don't recall ever having been given such a straightforward answer on what is prayer and the purpose of prayer. Prayer – *all* the ways we communicate and commune with God with the purpose of deepening our *intimacy* with God. Powerful. Provocative. Passionate. Petrifying.

Do you find prayer a scary endeavor? Maybe yes. Maybe no. If someone were to ask me, Cindy do you find intimacy with God a scary endeavor? Absolutely. Why? Well, what is intimacy? I am sure that there could be some quite eloquent definitions that we could stew over together. However, this morning I want to offer just one definition. A simple one. Intimacy = into me see. Is that not what is at the heart of intimacy? Allowing another to see into you? To peel back the layers and allow your true self to be revealed? It is a place of vulnerability. It is a place where pretenses and lies cannot thrive or be maintained. It is a place where we yield control of the image we strive to project of ourselves. We remove layer of layer of masks we wear. Intimacy = into me see.

We struggle with intimacy with other humans. There has to be great trust in a relationship for intimacy to occur. Now a quick time out - I'm not speaking of sexual intimacy, although that is one form of intimacy where trust is also needed. Instead I am broadly talking about intimacy

and the gift of allowing another to see your true self which demonstrates the high trust in that relationship.

Back to finding prayer such a scary experience... I think that for some of us we would much rather read or talk about prayer than actually engaging in prayer. Why? Because prayer does deepen our intimacy with God and it means we are saying to God "Into me see." Ugh. It means that the pretenses and masks and false selves are stripped away and God can see our true self. While that thought should be liberating, many of us are not comforted by that thought. We survive in a culture of scarcity and not enough. And so we fear what if when God sees me, God sees how I see myself, or how I think others see me? Really, I need to be that naked before the Almighty God? I'm thinking extra layers of clothes and maintaining some pretenses might be a good thing! But no, God desires to see our true selves, and to meet us right where we are at. God wants us to get comfortable, make ourselves at home, take off our shoes, and be ourselves. No more and no less. God wants to be in an intimate relationship with us.

How does this happen? We slow down. We look around. We take off our shoes. We ask God to join us in our daily, ordinary lives. This is what we see happening in our text for today. If you have your Bibles I invite you turn with me to Exodus chapter 3. Here we find Moses tending his father-in-law's sheep out in the wilderness. Prior to this we would have found Moses in Egypt. There he witnessed the abuse of the Hebrews by the hand of an Egyptian. And after verifying that no one was around, Moses killed the Egyptian which caused him to flee to Midian for his life. While in Midian he met a shepherd who had 7 daughters and ended up marrying one of them, Zipporah.

Now in chapter 3 we find Moses settled into his new, normal, ordinary life. Moses is doing his normal role of tending the flock of sheep in the wilderness. One way to translate verse

one is that Moses leads his flock well into the wilderness, or even beyond the wilderness. Now a word on the wilderness. I recently attended the “Evolving Faith Conference” in Denver. There one of the speakers was Barbara Brown Taylor, my favorite author, and she happened to preach on the topic of wilderness. In her sermon she said that for it to be a real wilderness there has to be something present that can kill you. There has to be a risk present. She told the story of a group of boys scouts who went camping out in the wilderness. And after returning she heard all about their time in the “wilderness” to which she asked the leader, “At any point were the lives of the boys in danger?” The leader laughed, and said, “Of course not!” To which Barbara answered, “Well you weren’t in the wilderness then. In a real wilderness there has to be something that can kill you.” Barbara goes on to say that when talking about the wilderness in the Bible we aren’t talking about taking a stroll in a National Park with Park Rangers to protect you and keep you safe on the well-defined paths!

Let’s pause for just a minute. What does your wilderness look like? I’m not thinking that we are in a physical wilderness, and yet I believe that we can resonate with the image of being in the wilderness as a place that is disorientating, fearful, and holds a danger to our lives or our faith. In her sermon at Evolving Faith Barbara Brown Taylor provided a long list of possibilities of wilderness settings, including being in the oncology unit. That’s the wilderness. Or she offered other wilderness journeys such as aging, living with an addiction, seeing young children being forced to learn about gun violence, the dying church, maintaining our faith and dependence upon God in these divisive political times, sitting in the doctor’s office with a new diagnosis, or at the bank wrestling with finances, or standing at the graveside. My wilderness might not look like your wilderness, and yet it is in the wilderness where we like Moses meet God.

So here in Exodus we find Moses in the wilderness, with his sheep, doing his normal ordinary tasks when he looks and sees a bush on fire but it was not burning up. So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.” So Moses ventures closer to the bush and then God called to him from the bush – “Moses! Moses!” Moses responds, Hinanei – which means “behold me.” Into me see. And dear brother Moses needs to be instructed on how to function when in the presence of Holy God. This act reminds me of Lacy Stoltzfus and Gretchen Bateman’s sermon when Eli needed to instruct young Samuel on how to be in the presence of the Holy God.

Well here in verse 5 God instructs Moses to take off his sandals for he is standing on Holy Ground. Really, God? Remember, Moses is in the wilderness. Actually even beyond the wilderness. This is holy ground? The wilderness? The starkness? The barren landscape? In the midst of potential danger? This is holy ground?

Friends, if God deems that piece of ground as holy ground, then I say with confidence that where you stand, where you work, where you learn, where you play, where you love, where you grow, where you bake, where you garden, where you thrive, where you cry, where you rejoice is also holy ground. So, we better take off our shoes.

God tells Moses to take off his sandals because he is standing on holy ground. “The gesture is an ancient practice when entering a holy place of divine presence. It is a gesture that honors the holiness of this ground, this mountain and this God. Removing shoes (is) a show of reverence.”ⁱⁱ But, what if removing our shoes means something else too? What if God told Moses to remove his sandals because he wants Moses to remove pretenses, and falsehoods? What if God told Moses to remove his sandals because God wanted to strip away the culture’s influence on Moses?

Moses' sandals were more than just covering for his feet. They would also have also told a story of his social status, size of his property, and his significance in the geographical area all based on the type of sandals and what they were made from. The sandals weren't just protecting his feet, they were also telling part of his story and projecting a certain image. And God says, take off your sandals. Remove the layers and let me see into you. Let me see your true self. And Moses responds with courage and in an act of trust takes off his shoes and declares, "Hinanei," behold me, "Into me see."

So this week how do we practice this spiritual discipline of prayer? Do you simply take off your shoes and declare that you are standing on holy ground? Well... yes. It is as simple as that and as complex as that. We slow down. We look around. We take off our shoes. We ask God to join us in our daily, ordinary lives. We recognize that all around us are burning bushes and we stop to see them, and to allow ourselves to be seen.

We could have an entire series on just different ways to pray. Contemplative prayer, prayer of the examen, praying the hours, intercessory prayer, breath prayer, and the list could go on. And feel free to also incorporate any or all of these ways of praying. However, I believe the challenge before us this week is even more basic. It is taking our cup of hot water, and the tea bag of prayer, and repeatedly, throughout the day dipping it into the water declaring that God is here, wherever here is, in the midst of ordinary, in the midst of your wilderness experience, and declaring in prayer we are standing on holy ground.

It means creating space where we take off our shoes and strive to deepen our intimacy with God. And it goes both ways. We invite God to into me see, and we also see into the heart of God. This is liberating. It means to be naked before the one who created us, who redeemed us,

who sustains us, and even though it is hard to comprehend, to be naked before the one who wants to walk alongside of us and be in relationship with us.

One practical way to practice this discipline this week is to create routines for ways you will turn toward God, embrace God's presence, and declare the ground as holy ground. For me I do this as I get out of bed each morning. Before my feet touch the ground I say "Good morning, God. You are here. This is holy ground." Now, did I decide to begin my day this way and automatically start doing it? Of course not. I had to post visible reminders of my desire to begin my day this way until it became a routine. Post it notes are great visible reminders, or messages on your bathroom mirror, or on your coffee maker!

Every day as I put on my running shoes I see my feet that have traveled many miles and are preparing to travel many more. And I say "Thank you, God. You are here as I run on holy ground." And every night I strive to spend 10-15 minutes praying the prayer of the examen when I look back over my day and ask the Spirit to help me see when I encountered God, when I experienced joy, what was draining, and where did I stand by the burning bush. It is here that I work to remove my layers of masks and pretenses and invite God to see me, all of me, and to hold me in God's loving embrace – imperfections and all.

Some days though I find myself deep in the wilderness where those prayer practices feel too removed or difficult. This picture shows one of my wilderness journeys. I sit in a chair at Goshen Hospital for 4 hours every 8 weeks to receive an infusion of medication due to having Crohn's. This chair ironically represents both my wilderness and my experience with the burning bush. On days I sit in this chair, and for a couple weeks after each infusion, the wilderness experience is real. It is disorienting, fearful, full of grief, and I come once again face to face with the threat on my very life and faith. In those days I can simply sit in the chair of wilderness. Take

off my shoes. And declare with great although fragile hope – God you are here and in ways I cannot even begin to understand or grasp, I trust, I must trust, that this too is holy ground.

God is always active and present in our lives and in our world. Our practices of prayer are like tuning into a frequency that creates an awareness of God’s presence all around us. It takes the little, ordinary moments of life, and experiences in the wilderness, to help keep us centered that God is with us and God desires intimacy.

This week may you not only see the burning bushes, but with excitement and eagerness may you reach down and take off your shoes and dance on the holy ground on which you find yourself. Dance with God, and dance while God is singing over you. And if today you are in your wilderness, may you simply take off your shoes, declare in prayer with great and yet fragile hope, God you are here, and I trust, I must trust, that even this is holy ground.

With trust we ask you God to deepen our intimacy – God, into me see. May it be so.

Amen.

ⁱ Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (IVP Books: Downers Grove, Illinois), 64.

ⁱⁱ Dennis Olson, “Commentary on Exodus 3:1-15,” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=135