

A QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL RENEWAL



DO NOT WORRY ABOUT ANYTHING, BUT IN EVERYTHING BY PRAYER AND SUPPLICATION WITH THANKSGIVING LET YOUR REQUESTS BE MADE KNOWN TO GOD. – PHILIPPIANS 4:6

Scripture:

Psalm 130

1. Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
2. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!
3. If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?
4. But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.
5. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;
6. my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.
7. O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.
8. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.



A QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

There is a positive experience that is happening throughout the Christian tradition and it is simply named Spiritual Renewal. It embraces what many called Piety (in the olden days) - namely SPIRITUAL PRACTICES that brought us closer to God. Recently I shared the following with some of my colleagues here at the Church of the Roses stating that my seminary training somehow side stepped the issue or even the content of what it meant by spirituality.

I can still see Ted Crouch nodding his head and offering comments on this subject - we were classmates and graduated in 1959. I am elated that the quest for spiritual renewal is on the rise through study groups, prayer fellowships, the use of labyrinths (permanent or temporary) in which you walk, pray, meditate including extended times of silence. I am thankful that SFTS has been a champion in leading the movement for the last twenty or so years and that our own Associate Pastor, Kate Clayton has a diploma in Spiritual Direction.

Diana Butler Bass teaches at Virginia Theological Seminary and has written a book entitled "How the Neighborhood Church Is

Transforming the Faith. She makes the following observation: "Spiritual renewal starts not with church programs but with moments of silence and contemplation." Remember the words our choir sang: "Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready my God, Thy will to see. Open my eyes, ears, heart, Illumine me (Enlighten me), Spirit Divine."

Sid Caesar, an old comedian remarked, "The Invention of the Remote Control changed the timing of the world. No longer would we practice patience." (Zenith 1950) What, for example, could prod us to practice silence and contemplation? There are literally hundreds of ways to begin the process; however, I am going to reduce it to six brief concepts.

1. LISTEN TO GOD

You may be experiencing the sense of being alone, cut off from the Holy Spirit of God, and your faith is beginning to grow dim. This is the plight of our character in Psalm 130, one of six penitential psalms, as he cries out his sins. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!"

The need for his forgiveness is strong. Possibly he sees himself as being taken advantage of for his old sins, as Disraeli mentioned. Some scholars believe that he sees himself as being plunged into

the spiritual abyss of an alien world. He wants an answer to his distress, "more than they who wait for the morning," and then repeats the cry "more than they who wait for the morning." I wonder how many folk have had the restless experience of thinking "Oh I wish the morning would come." Can we not relate to waiting for an answer to prayer?

Mother Teresa was once asked: "When you pray to God, what takes place?"

"Nothing! He listens."

"But what does he say to you?"

"Nothing! I listen."

When is the last time you took a time out of thirty seconds or a minute to listen to God?

Remember the Children's time concerning the gold stole and its symbolism ofGod's presence? God's Holy Spirit is with each one of us now!

Right now without any warning I want you to try a short moment of silence. Blot everything out of your mind except God's presence! "Listen!" My word of "Amen" will conclude the silence. (Just relax... Close your eyes if you wish - - - Begin!) "Amen!" That brief time could be a moment of spiritual renewal. Who knows, except you and the Lord?

2. AWARENESS OF WHAT WE REPRESENT

"David Novak, a Jewish Theologian, recalls walking in a southern town one morning on his way to a synagogue where he was going to lead Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement - cleansing) services. The night before there was heavy rain, and the gutters along the side of the road were full of mud. As he approached an older black woman, she stepped into the mud to let him pass. Novak thought to himself that he was the one who should have stepped into the muddy gutter, for the Talmud says, 'BEFORE THE OLD YOU SHALL STAND.' Novak continues. "So, on the holiest day of the Jewish year, when I was supposed to feel that I was being cleansed from God, I felt profoundly dirty, not for what I had done, but for what I represented to the woman, who had so debased herself because of my very presence before her." That is a heavy burden to bear.

This kind of experience could be the beginning of Spiritual Renewal.

3. CONFESSION OF SIN

Christians, Jews and Muslims hold or believe in confession of sin; only the form or the act of contrition may be different. Calvin in particular emphasized that the need for a confessor is essential and he recommended the pastor or an elder of the church. Once the confession was made the pastor or elder would convey to the penitent the Assurance of Pardon. The forgiveness of sin by another of the faith in a private context is a powerful experience. Naturally this can or should take place at corporate worship as well. Calvin held to the belief that Jesus Christ, who is eternal, is able to forgive us if we come with a heart of sincerity. This could be a starting point for some who seek Spiritual Renewal.

4. SILENCE

Now, I would like you to listen and read along the verses in your bulletin, as we play the Sound of Silence by Simon and Garfunkel.

The Sounds of Silence Written by Paul Simon

Hello darkness, my old friend,
I've come to talk with you again,
Because a vision softly creeping,
Left its seeds while I was sleeping,
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence.

In restless dreams I walked alone
Narrow streets of cobblestone,
Neath the halo of a street lamp,
I turned my collar to the cold and damp
When my eyes were stabbed by the flash of
A neon light
That split the night
And touched the sound of silence.

And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more.
People talking without speaking,
People hearing without listening,
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence.

Fools said I, you do not know
Silence like a cancer grows.
Hear my words that I might teach you,
Take my arms that I might reach you.
But my words like silent raindrops fell,
And echoed
In the wells of silence.

And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon God they made.
And the sign flashed out its warning,
In the words that it was forming.
And the signs said, the words of the prophets
Are written on the subway walls
And tenement halls.
And whispered in the sounds of silence.

Though the "Sound of Silence" is from the mid-sixties, its content could easily be transferred to the present era. And as much as I enjoy the music, I know that this kind of silence is not what we yearn for and we sometimes wonder if we can ever find human peace again, let alone world peace.

**It is quite possible that we have confused
our theology and mixed up the order,
for we are not the ones who find
the peace of the Holy Spirit,
but that the Holy Spirit finds us!**

It is said that we are to listen to the still small voice within for that voice is calling us to be agents of reconciliation.

I believe that Simon and Garfunkel, in their own creative way, were calling us to rethink and renew what is good and true in life by clearly seeing evil for what it is, a despiser of God. Individual creativity, whether writing or any other form of self expression as an artistic endeavor is a gift of God; exploring your talent in any medium is a valuable endeavor. The attempt is worthy of the challenge. This could be a means that might lead to Spiritual Renewal.

5. PAIN AND SUFFERING

I want to make something very clear in this fifth point concerning pain, and that is others have suffered far more pain and bitterness of life than I could ever dream of: holocausts, loss of limbs, serious surgery and disease that is terminal. My highest level of physical suffering took place when I was pretty well confined to sleeping in a small recliner chair for nearly seven months due to continued sciatic nerve pain in both legs even after back surgery three years earlier. I wondered if I would ever be somewhat mobile without pain. It was not an easy time for Kay. I fell for the easy way of self-pity that leads to even greater despair with

the sense of isolation in mind and spirit. As I recall, I had a change of mind after a rather morbid experience of a drug that I could not handle. I truly became somewhat frightened by the experience. A new drug was used that brought some relief.

It was around this time that I began to take stock of myself and began to re-read the Epistles of Paul, The Rule of St. Benedict and his order of Monks, Feminist theologians, but mainly the book by Howard Rice, a good friend to this congregation, entitled *REFORMED SPIRITUALITY*. (Second Reading) This text deepened my silent meditation. I learned to focus simply on God's love for fairly long periods of time and finally there was a breakthrough to a better place of inner peace. I have a long way to go. I began to take nerve block treatments around this time. With the first one, there was no success; then there was a period of waiting as steroids were being used. Then there was a second block, followed a period of waiting even longer. Finally there was the third block and relief that has now lasted ten months. A time of pain or suffering could be a time of Spiritual Renewal as well.

6. PRAYER

Finally, this is where prayer, the means of Spiritual Renewal, enters our conversation. Unabashedly I wish to quote Howard Rice's insights: "There is a radical difference between prayer as getting God to do our bidding and prayer that is an increased self-awareness that changes us to understand God's will. If the one form of prayer is "universal" and "natural" then the other form of prayer is GOD CENTERING and RELATIONAL. The purpose of the FIRST is to GET something and the purpose of the SECOND is to BECOME something. This is so important in Calvin's mind that his chapter on prayer in the Institutes of the Christian Religion is one of the longest chapters in the entire text."

Howard Rice believes that John Calvin set forth the basis for prayer: (Emphasis)

- That our hearts may be fired with the desire ever to seek the love of God and to serve the God of love.
- That there may enter our hearts no desire and no wish we should be ashamed to make known.
- That we have a common tendency to be more conscious of our troubles than our blessings.
- That if we have obtained what we were seeking

we should be able to pray or meditate on the kindness of God. (How often do I do this?).

- That "No" is and can be an answer to prayer. One of the hardest lessons is the NO of a parent.
- That maybe the hardest condition of all is patience.

In a sense the sermon has now come full circle for we cannot flee the pathway called patience.

(It would be great to have a study group on Reformed Spirituality using Howard Rice's text.)

Before we read the Philippians passage in unison let us remind ourselves of some of the significant parts of the passage - Emphasis on rejoicing, the presence of Christ, qualities of life that are pleasing to God, and to continue the good works that the congregation has demonstrated not only within the parish, but to the community at large in terms of mission. These thoughts are worthy of your time. Let us listen anew as we read in unison - Philippians 4: 4-9.

4. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.
5. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.
6. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

7. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
8. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.
9. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Let us now close in prayer through the use of what is called a bidding or a guiding prayer. I will mention specific ideas for individual thought concluding with the Lord's Prayer. Let us pray: Do you sense the presence of God in your life or the absence? Why is that so? Do you have a special need that you can express to God? Do you need to seek forgiveness from someone? Do you need to seek forgiveness from someone? Let us now pray the Prayer Jesus Christ taught us, The Lord's Prayer....Amen.



**The Rev. H. Norman Roddick
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
March 30, 2008**