

Session K: Spending Time With God

Prayer: *Dear Lord, Help us love you and spend times in our lives with you. Change our ways of life so that we may become disciples who live with you. Help us live our lives in an ever-greater awareness of you. Make our hearts and minds ready to receive you and to be filled with your love, comfort and strength. Help us listen carefully and give you time and attention. Turn our focus from our own concerns to yours, and strengthen our faith. Help us turn away from distorted worldviews to focus on your reality and your presence in our lives. Restore and refresh us when we turn to you. Help us abide in you. Amen.*

Reading: A Fairy Tale

Once upon a time there lived a king who loved a poor maiden. The king was all powerful in his land and no one would dare to prevent his marriage to whomever he pleased, despite differences in class. But the maiden did not know the king or suspect his love for her.

The king's love became a peculiar sort of tragedy. Because he desired the maiden and her true love and understanding, he could not approach his beloved as the king. For if he were to appear to the maiden as a king, she would be awed by the differences between them. She could worship and admire him for his power and status, but she could not forget that he was the king and that she was but a humble maiden. As a true lover, the king desired not to be glorified by the maiden but to glorify her. He desired her true understanding and equality in love and he knew true love could come only through his beloved's freedom, courage and self-confidence. These all important attributes of love would not blossom in the unequal relationship of king and subject. The differences between the king and the maiden would prevent either from being confident, understanding or happy in their love.

The king considered the possibility of elevating the maiden to his equal through secret gifts, transfiguring her to the joys of being a princess. But he quickly realized the folly of this approach. If the maiden accepted her good fortune, their love would be only a delusion created by the king. And, if the maiden were not completely deluded, in her heart she would suspect the deception and thereby recognize the differences between herself and the king. In either case, the elevation would be catastrophic if it changed the character of the maiden. For the king loved her for herself! "It was harder for him to be her benefactor than to lose her," for he knew that "love does not alter the beloved, it alters itself."

The king grieved. How could he help his beloved to understand him as he wished to be understood, as a lover rather than a king? "For this is the unfathomable nature of love, that it desires equality with the beloved, not in jest merely, but in earnest and truth." If their union could not be effected through the maiden's elevation to the king, it must be attempted through the king's "descent" to the maiden. The king realized he must "appear in the likeness of the humblest." He must therefore appear as a servant, as one humble enough to serve others. So he clothed himself in a beggar's cloak and went out to meet the maiden.

And how does the story end? It depends upon whether the maiden chooses to love the man who approaches her as a servant.¹

What is this story an image of? What did you hear?

The Miracle is this: For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son. For God so loved the world that God descended to human beings, in the human form of these beloved creatures, so that God might preserve the dignity and freedom of God's people. And, if a beloved human being chooses to love God, their union is based on true understanding engendered by true love. The accomplishment of this story is of utmost importance to each of us because the story is about human beings' reconciliation with God through God's love.²

The analogy is imperfect. Kierkegaard pointed out that God's servant form is "no mere outer garment, like the king's beggar cloak." Jesus is fully human and must suffer all human experience, even death. God's love is more genuine than the king's because God has fully assumed equal status with God's beloved. The analogy to God's love otherwise is true.

God sends Jesus to let us know that he wants to spend time with us. In a way, this is difficult for us to accept. We think of God as judging us, but Jesus shows us that God loves us. Living the faith of Jesus means participating in his ongoing life in the world and letting his presence in our lives transform us. In this sense, Jesus is the Messiah, the leader who is savior or deliverer. He is the bread of life, not as manna which sustains physical lives but in terms of offering a relationship with God which sustains spiritual lives (John 6:35). What Jesus offers is more than himself: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-47). The life which Jesus offers is the love of God.

The real question is whether and how we accept the relationship with God that we're offered.

Spending Time with God

A spiritual life is a life of choosing to be aware of God's presence and, from that awareness, of beginning to manifest God's presence in the world. We each need to listen for activities that might personally help us to spend time with God, and decide whether we feel called to add some of these activities to our lives to strengthen our relationships with God. At the same time, perhaps we can shed some attitudes or activities that keep us out of relationship with God. The result of our own more passionate spirituality will be a healthier church.

The subject of our retreat is spending time with God. That means that we hope to focus on our personal relationships with God, with being more aware of the presence of God in our

¹ The parable of the king and the maiden first appeared in Soren Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments in 1844. The quoted words are Kierkegaard's. I doubt he would complain that I have misappropriated his parable by rewriting it. He wrote his book under a pseudonym and ironically responded to critics who might accuse him of plagiarizing a child's fairy tale, admitting that he did not steal the poem "from any individual, nor from the race, but from God." He wrote: "Forgive me, I pray, the strange delusion that I was the author of this poem. It was a delusion, and the poem is so different from every human poem as not to be a poem at all, but the *Miracle*."

² The meaning of this parable is more fully considered in James J. Gettel, God's Love, Human Freedom and Christian Faith (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002).

lives and of making our lives more responsive to God. This is an opportunity for each of us to ask where we find God in our lives, where we're neglecting God in our lives and what else we can do to be closer to God. It's an opportunity to evaluate our spiritual paths and where they might be going.

Spiritual passion and energy comes from nurturing ever-closer relationships with God. People in healthy congregations understand that they are on a spiritual path and take time to focus on their personal and communal relationships with God. They concentrate on being more aware of the presence of God in their lives and on making their lives more responsive to God.

The main question for each of us to ask is how we each can better spend time with God. First, let's consider other basic questions:

Who Needs to Spend Time With God?

Each of us needs to spend time with God for our lives to be centered in the right place, for us to live out of a relationship with God. No one can do this for us and we can't do it based on someone else's formula.

We are responsible for strengthening our personal relationships with God just as we're responsible for strengthening our relationships with other people. If we don't do it, no one does. Jesus and others can help us have a better relationship with God; but they can't do it for us.

Why Spend Time With God?

God's presence will shape our lives and take us down paths we do not fully know or understand. But only on these paths will we find the true meanings and purposes of our existence. Only on these paths will we find out who we really are intended to be. We need to spend time with God first because God wants to spend time with us, second because we need to have God present in our lives, and third because having God present in our lives improves our ability to love others.

It's hard for us to believe that God is a person who loves us and wants to have a personal relationship with us. Reflect again on the Parable of the King and the Maiden. Christianity above all religions shows us that God doesn't just want us to live by ourselves, to test us and see how we do; God wants to have a personal relationship with each of us.

Passionate spirituality begins with awareness that God is a person who loves us and wants to have a personal relationship with us. For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son (John 3:16). Jesus is not just a sacrifice for us. His resurrection means that Jesus lives now! Jesus is with us day by day (Matthew 28:20) and "is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). This is why we invite people to come and see and come to know Jesus. If we accept Jesus into our lives, Jesus comes to be present with us today and helps us to have closer relationships with God and one another.

What Happens to Us When We Spend Time With God?

We each need to personally reflect on what happens to us when we spend time with God. Think of a time when you felt close to God and what that meant to you, how you felt, what that experience did to you. Where have you experienced God in your life today, or during the past week, or at other times?

The experience of God's presence is the ultimate assurance that God loves us and that we have security independent from and apart from the physical world we know we cannot control, where we find evil, and from which we feel alienated. The universe is not uncaring or arbitrary. We have hope, notwithstanding our inability to control the world around us. And this hope, and our faith, spring from God's love for us. The answer God gives to each person is "I am loved." To the extent people are attuned to that love, as through prayer, they can find peace even in a chaotic world. The important thing is to live in God's presence.

Our lives are transformed by God's presence. But God does not force his presence on us. Remember the parable of the king and the maiden. C.S. Lewis said, "God can never ravish, he can only woo." We choose whether to accept his love. We choose whether God is part of our lives or not.

Where and When is God Present in Our Lives?

God is always with us but we do not always act as if we are in relationship with him. God remains present in my life at all times, participating in what happens with and through me if I ask God to. God is continually offering to renew and transform me with God's loving presence and to heal me not just intellectually, but emotionally, spiritually and, sometimes, physically.

But our lives are separated from God. In lives which are distracted and compartmentalized, openness to God is difficult. Our separation is not so much of the flesh, as St. Paul warns, but of our fundamental orientation. We are distracted from God by the exigencies of our lives in space and time. Our minds have a limited aptitude. When we reflect on the past or plan into the future, we limit our attention. We do not find God immediately present and thus, we do not find God at all unless we consciously choose to be aware of God's presence now. We need to recognize that closeness to another person only happens through presence. If we are to meet God, we cannot find God in the past or in the future. We find God present in this instant.

We tend to think of monks as truly spiritual people. And some monks may become spiritual people through the realization that they can not be distracted and be open to God. They may decide to change their orientation in a way that will prevent distractions. This is one reason some spiritual people do not choose to live in the same world everyone else does.

If we are to meet God, we need to focus on God, not on ourselves or our own concerns. It is difficult not to get caught up in the cadence of one's own life and not to lose awareness of God's cadence. Yet when we are lost in our own rhythms, we often feel the need to get back

in tune with something else. We need to give up full control of our experience and let a better experience resonate within us.

Few of us are fortunate enough to structure our lives so as to remain in the presence of God. But we could because God is always present and we could acknowledge God's presence as easily when we make love or when we eat as we do with grace before we eat. When we do, we find that God is pleased to share our joy (or even to help us bear our sorrow) in the most mundane things, and to help us realize God's grace and goodness in our lives.

We are told that we can ask God to be with us. Jesus said in Matthew 7:7-8: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." And he said, "Whatever you ask in my name, will be granted." This requires action on our part. We must open ourselves to God and we will resonate with God. And it helps to be in tune with God's resonance in order to feel it. Spiritual disciplines help tune us to an awareness of God.

How May We Spend Time With God?

As Jesus often pointed out, the walk of faith is more than "doing one's duty," belonging to a particular group, performing a certain rule or ceremony, or following a particular rule, doctrine or moral code. Passionate spirituality requires an ongoing personal relationship with God.

God is always with us but we do not always act as if we are in relationship with God. We are often distracted from God by the day-to-day activities of our lives. As in any personal relationship, we need to spend time together for the relationship to grow. We are tempted to think we will meet God in the future, but we need to make God a part of our lives right now. If we are to live in relationship with God, we need to spend time with God.

We embark on a spiritual path by acknowledging the need we have for God in our lives and acting from that awareness toward a stronger relationship with God. With a longing to know God better and to see God's grace more fully established in our lives, we can ask God to be with us (Matthew 7:7-8). God causes our spiritual growth; but we may plant, feed and water (I Corinthians 3:6) by practicing spiritual disciplines. The act of developing spiritual disciplines is an effort to go deeper with God (Psalm 42:7). It is based on a longing to know him better and to see his grace more fully established in our lives. A farmer cannot make the seeds grow but s/he can prepare the soil and plant the seed. It is God who causes the growth as we help create the conditions for growth by practicing spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual disciplines are the means we use to direct our attention to God. What spiritual disciplines really do is help us spend time with God and let God come into and transform our lives. They are tools for helping us become aware of "eyes opened, hearts burning experiences." Spiritual disciplines help us to focus on our personal relationships with God, with being more aware of the presence of God in our lives and on making our lives more responsive to God. If we are to meet God, we need to attend to our spiritual disciplines. Disciples tend to follow spiritual disciplines to keep their focus on God.

What are Spiritual Disciplines?

Examples of spiritual disciplines are confession, discernment, faith sharing, fasting, journaling, meditation, prayer, service, stewardship, study and worship. Other spiritual disciplines are described in the rules of various religious orders (i.e., the orders of St. Benedict, St. Ignatius and St. John the Evangelist). Spiritual disciplines may be practiced individually, with a spiritual guide, in families or small groups, or corporately.

List and describe spiritual disciplines that you participate in or might participate in. Capture the list discussed on newsprint. We might think of personal, family, small group and community spiritual disciplines. Here are some examples to add to the list:

Prayer - Conversing with God involves listening, worshiping, and confessing our sins, as well as interceding for others and can be effectively combined with solitude, silence, and study.

Meditation - Contemplate in silence a scripture, a phrase or a passage from a book (i.e., the Daily Office), with the intent of hearing the voice of God.

Solitude – Listening to God in quietness, closing off the noise of the world.

Study – Inwardly digesting scripture or other wisdom in order to edify, correct, transform and equip ourselves for life and ministry.

Journaling - Writing thoughts, prayers, insights during prayer, meditation and study. Articulating thoughts in written words helps in reflection and in reviewing what we have learned. Many of the Old Testament books are written as a personal journal (Nehemiah, Daniel and Jonah).

Service - Giving of one's time and energy on behalf of others. It is engaging our life to help those in need—the poor, the sick, the elderly, the orphan, the prisoner (Matthew 20:25-28, 25:34-40; James 1:27). Different types of service include pastoral care, outreach/social ministries and relational evangelism.

Tithe/Stewardship - putting our trust in God, turning to God first in appreciation.

Simplicity - An outward lifestyle that places material things in their proper perspective.

Frugality - Abstaining from using money or goods in ways that merely gratify our desires or our hunger for status, glamour, or luxury.

Fasting - Abstaining from food or other specific input (such as TV) for a period of time for the purpose of narrowing our focus and heightening our dependence on God.

Submission - Releasing the need to be in control; vulnerability and a willing submission to the Lord usually involves regular input from mentors. It is a willingness to listen to others and is most effective when it is voluntary (Ephesians 5:21).

Obedience - Doing now what we know God has called us to do whether the task is large or small.

Physical Exercise – Being stewards of the body God has given you to respond to God and others in this world.

Fidelity/Chastity/Celibacy – as appropriate to the relationship God calls you to.

Spiritual Guidance - Receiving mentoring for the spiritual journey from a mature follower of Christ. A spiritual guide provides accountability and insights leading to spiritual growth.

Sabbath Time – Taking time to rest, reflect and refocus.

Family spiritual disciplines – spending time as a family together in our faith journey. The depth of a person's faith later in life depends most significantly on the frequency of talks about faith, family devotions and shared service projects experienced with significant adults. Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church too. Faith is formed through personal, trusted relationships – and often in our own homes. Faith is caught more than it is taught.

Small Group spiritual disciplines – small group participation forms relationships that encourage the process of discipleship, helping each other share and live out faith in everyday life. Small groups are the ideal place for Christians to follow the exhortations given to us in the "one another" passages in scripture.

Faith Sharing - Communicating the hope that lies within us. Sharing your faith story and hearing the stories of others can build a stronger sense of relationship with God and others. When you share your story and hear the stories of others, you begin to draw a connection between how God has acted in Scripture, liturgy and history and how God is acting to draw you into relationship with God.

Developing giftedness (discernment) - Developing an understanding of one's spiritual gifts and using them to build the Kingdom of God.

Eucharist - The sacrament instituted by Jesus to make the resurrection (his risen presence) real in our lives. In John 6:56, Jesus says "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." The Eucharist is a way of accepting Jesus' presence in my life, a presence which brings me into relationship with God. The Eucharist is not just a ritual; it is a means of my accepting Jesus' coming to me, a means of my being with him as he, eaten, consumed sacramentally, gives himself to me. I need to intend to meet Jesus and to share his ongoing life in the world. Jesus asks me to eat and drink of his life, to actively accept him in my life.

Confession - Admitting our needs and failures with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Worship - Giving glory and honor to God as our response to God's initiative in our lives. The enjoyment of God, who He is and what He does. This is to intentionally savor the presence of the Lord. We can do so through song, praise, appreciation, shouting, clapping, quietly saying

thanks, running, crying, dancing and laughing (Psalm 150; Revelation 5:12-13; 6:1-3). At our best, we may worship with our whole lives.

Guidance - Understanding and following the leading of the Lord not just as individuals but as a community of believers.

Celebration - Carefree gaiety and thanksgiving which comes from an understanding or experience of the goodness and faithfulness of God.

Corporate intercession - Joining together as the body of Christ to pray for God's intervention.

Which Spiritual Disciplines Should You Follow?

Each individual and group will find different disciplines helpful for spiritual renewal at different times. None of the tools that help make us aware of God's presence provide ultimate answers for us. The fundamental importance of any discipline is spending time with God.

Each of us needs to spend time with God for our lives to be centered in the right place, for us to live out of a relationship with God. No one can do this for us and we can't do it based on someone else's formula. "How" we do this is a personal and specific question. It is a choice that each of us has. We each need to listen for activities of spending time with God that speak personally to us and see whether we feel called to add some of these activities to our lives to strengthen our relationships with God.

Spiritual disciplines help us to focus on God, not on ourselves or our own concerns. These tools do not provide ultimate answers for us, but they help us become more aware of God.

To accept a spiritual path is to acknowledge the need we have for God in our lives and to act from that awareness toward a stronger relationship with God. Consider your personal spiritual disciplines. Is there one on this list that you might feel called to do more of in this part of your spiritual journey? We need to set goals that provide the means for awareness of God. Entering the kingdom of God does not just happen to us. Jesus says in Luke 13:24, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able." We need to approach God purposefully and our relationship with God depends on our orientation and openness to God.

Action Points:

- Set aside regular times daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly for spiritual renewal. Sabbath time is especially important (see worksheet).
- Study what it means to have a godly character. (See Galatians 5; Matthew 5; 2 Peter 1; etc).
- Nurture your relationship with God by scheduling extended times to meet with him - devotional study, worship, prayer - spiritual disciplines. Develop an understanding of your personal need for spiritual disciplines.

- Determine in which areas you need to grow and develop a specific, personalized plan. Make intentional decisions that reflect God's Lordship. Choose God's priorities in your time schedule. Learn to say "no."
- Ask God for someone who can be a spiritual guide to facilitate your personal renewal and character development. A spiritual guide mentor is a mature follower of Christ who shares knowledge and skills related to greater spirituality and provides accountability and insights leading to growth in the spiritual journey.
- Form a spiritual formation group for encouragement, mutual support and accountability.
- Discover and use the gifts God has given you.
- Cultivate spouse and family relationships.
- Maintain physical health through diet, rest and exercise.
- Start small. Set goals which are easily reachable at first to establish small but consistent wins.

Additional discussion: As church leaders, spiritual disciplines are especially important for you. Leaders develop good habits that will act as guideposts and check points along the way. J. Robert Clinton's research on leadership reveals that characteristics of excellent leaders are directly related to their spiritual disciplines:

- They have perspective. (They have a vision of the future God wants to create through them, which has a sense of being right for the times, promotes faith rather than fear, motivates people to action, requires risk-taking and glorifies God, not people. Their vision provides the over-all general direction for the ministry.)
- They enjoy repeated times of inner renewal and intimate, vibrant, close fellowship with God.
- They exercise spiritual disciplines and develop Christlike character.
- They maintain a learning posture all their lives.
- They have had several important mentors during their lifetime.
- They maintain healthy relationships with family and friends.

How is each of us doing in these areas? How can we support one another?

Resources for Further Study

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