

It doesn't matter where I go, whenever people find out my vocation typically, two things happen. First there is an almost instant change in how people talk to me and to one another. Within an instant of finding out I'm a preacher, people stop swearing. I remember sitting with parents when we first listened to the George Carlin stand-up comedy routine about the seven words you can never say on television. If we took some time, I'm sure we could come up with a similar list that people stop saying when they're around the preacher.

When people find out I'm a preacher they also seem to have an inherent list of things they stop talking about, as if they're in the company of a 12 year old. I've been in circles of conversation when the topics of sex, or the virtues of single malt scotch, or the latest stock market numbers have stopped, virtually mid-sentence by the phrase "I shouldn't be saying this in front of you, you're a man of the cloth." My pat response is usually, "I was a person long before I was a minister," which is really my way of saying, be real with me.

The other thing that happens when people find out that my life centers around the practice of following Jesus; they give me their list or reasons why they have stopped coming to church, if they have. Or they wonder why anyone is involved in any form of organized religion, when religious bigotry of all stripes has been a deep source of division and pain in the world. They end their elevator speech with, "I'm a spiritual person but not religious; I don't need to go to church to be a good person."

What I wonder always is what kind of experience they may have had that placed them firmly on the outside of the church doors. What did they encounter when they ventured into the realm of organized religion? Recently, after I invited a facebook friend to follow up on his friend's suggestion that he check out the church where I preach, he said to me, "thanks for the invite, but me and the church don't see eye to eye." Do you wonder what I wonder in such a response. I wonder if the problem is that in his initial connection with something organized, he encountered the church, he didn't have a life-changing encounter with God.

That is the problem with the mainline church experiencing a decline in membership, according to the marketing research. People don't want to come to churches to encounter the rules and the dogma about God.

They don't want me to stand here and give them information about God. According to the research people, hungry for spiritual food come looking for an experience of God. They don't want information about grace and forgiveness, they want an experience of grace and forgiveness.

And for each of us that will be a different moment in each and every experience of worship. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century humorist Finley Peter Dunne coined the phrase "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" when he was talking about the role of the newspaper at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It's often been said that an encounter with God, is the very same experience.

I think the letter to the Romans is Paul's best writing. It's clear, it's unequivocal, and it's the distillation of his theology. And in the text Ray read for us this morning, he has turned his attention away from his railing against the treatment of Israel, and focuses on the life of faith around which the people in the church of Rome have gathered. The church of Rome to which Paul was writing was most likely not one big place. Rather it was most likely a collection of house churches, with people gathered in small numbers. There is some evidence that these people even lived together, giving up their individual assets for the common good of their household.

So this text is not about a group of people focusing on a common goal, for a particular outcome, Paul is talking about how our lives are shaped in response to the gospel. The Christian practice is not one of adherence to a set of beliefs set down by the Law. Entry into Christian community is not your name written on the roll in the membership of a particular kind of club. The Christian path is one of relationship – with ourselves, with one another, with God; a relationship that shapes our lives. Our entire way of being is shifted, is re-oriented, not by the prevailing attitudes of a particular set of social and cultural behaviours, but by our choice to be in relationship with the incarnation. The Christian path is relationship based, not rule based.

Embarking on that relationship then, is not an encounter with the church, which is simply a human institution, although we often mistake it to be something more. Embarking on this relationship is an encounter with all that is. Primarily, following the Jewish carpenter from Nazareth is really an encounter with ourselves in relationship with all that is.

And Paul suggests that that relationship begins with a renewing of our minds, continually. It means curiosity instead of judgment. It means a constant process

of figuring out who we are in relationship to the world, in a constant process of figuring out what is good, acceptable and perfect. In the Greek, the word he uses for perfect is a word that can be also be translated as mature. The renewing of our minds, discerning who we are in relationship to the world, is a process of maturing. Paul continues to call us to a mature faith.

And so my question in practical terms for us, as we enter this Season of Prayer, is what does it mean for maturing Christians to renew their minds, for the purpose of ongoing transformation? According to Paul, the outcome of renewing our minds will show up in a deeper appreciation of our own belovedness in the knowledge of our spiritual gifts. The outcome will also show up in how we treat one another – loving one another, outdoing each other in showing honour, welcoming the stranger...etc.

But how do we do this? When we are deeply fearful of change, how would we renew our minds for transformation, in an encounter with God, to be in the world but not of it? Paul is encouraging us to be counter cultural here. Lots of you will have an idea about this...and if we were tweeting this morning, I might ask you to list the ways in which we might renew our minds for the transformation of ourselves and I daresay for the transformation of the world.

For this morning, and for the coming weeks, I want to suggest that the practice of the ancient mystics is a way of renewing our minds. In the fourth century the Desert Fathers were the first Christian monks, living in solitude in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. In contrast to the formalized and official theology of the "founding fathers" of the Church, they were ordinary Christians who chose to renounce the world and live lives of celibacy, fasting, vigil, prayer, and poverty in direct and simple response to the gospel.

By the sixth century, these Benedictine Monks developed a practice of meditation that brought them in direct contact with the Divine that lives within. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this form of meditation has been shaped and developed by folks like Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, Olivier Clementi and Cynthia Bourgeault in a practice called centering prayer. We often think that the practice of meditation in all its forms, comes to us from the eastern traditions. And perhaps that is so. But Christians have been practicing prayer without words for centuries.

I was introduced to Centering Prayer at a course taught by Cynthia Bourgeault, an Anglican Priest, at Vancouver School of Theology. At that time, I was particularly interested in how and why the practice should be part of the regular

worship life of Christian community. If you'd like to read the paper I wrote in support of that question, it will be posted on line this week. And for those without computers, or access to our website, I've made a couple of copies which are on the tables in the narthex. I plan to explore Centering Prayer more fully in the weeks to come, but for now I want to stop talking about it, and invite you into an experience of renewing our minds in an encounter with the Divine.

This is the time for me to stop talking about an encounter with God and open up the possibility for you to have an encounter with the Divine imprint of God that lives uniquely within you.

It's a simple process.....

Prayer of Invocation

- breathe gently, normally, as comfortable as possible

"Holy Mystery, meet me here." "Holy God, gather with me."

Sit in silence

- it has been said that silence is God's first language

When the monkey mind takes over

- a release word...every time you experience your mind wandering...say the release word quietly to yourself...mine is the Greek word for Lord –  
Kyrie

Drop out...like falling asleep, only completely conscious.

We will experience Centering Prayer in the context of worship through this season of Prayer. In the coming weeks, my hope is that we will hear from each other, afterwards, what we experience.