

Prayer: the Human Element

The Element of Confrontation

Luke 10:38-42

October 1, 2006

Theme:

Thesis:

Objective:

Main Points:

1. **The Story:** Near the middle of the Gospel of Luke there is a delightful little story that teaches us how to pray. Before we dive into the story notice that it comes right after a very famous story told by Jesus about a Good Samaritan. In that story a man gets beat up and left bleeding by the side of the road. No one wants to help him except a racially despised Samaritan man. Then Jesus told us that we should “go and do likewise” in the sense that we should respond to human needs with the mercy of God.
2. Then the next story begins with like this: “As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.” We know from John 11 that Martha and her (most likely) younger sister Mary lived in the town of Bethany. Luke tells us that Martha “opened her home to him” – i.e. Jesus – but of course when she opened her home to Jesus she also opened her home to his gang of smelly, sweaty, hungry disciples. But not to worry: Martha, the cheerful and efficient hostess, the maestro of hospitality, the get-it-done woman of excellence, makes a list and starts preparing a feast for the small mob. While she’s actually doing something, we’re told that her younger sister Mary is wasting her time sitting “at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said” (see verse 39). Just a quick cultural observation: the phrase to “sit at the feet” of someone is used by the author Luke in both of his books (he wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts) as a code phrase for discipleship. It meant that you were a learner, a follower of someone. Now in Luke’s day it would have been virtually unheard of for a woman to sit at the feet of anyone. Women weren’t disciples and learners of anyone. Jesus not only allowed it; he positively encouraged it. Anyway, as Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, listening, hanging on every word, paying attention, Martha grows increasingly annoyed. And its no wonder because in verse 39 we read that “she was distracted by all the preparations (or literally “much serving”) she had to be made.” Sure, she’s a proficient multi-tasker but now she’s getting yanked in twelve different directions. So she snaps at Jesus and says, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work.” And then she commands Jesus, “Tell her to help me!” Now at this point you should feel sorry for Martha. After all, she’s doing all the work. She’s busy, productive and efficient. Mary is wasting time with Jesus. I expect Jesus to say, “Hey, Martha’s right. Mary get off your duff and help your sister.” Instead, he gently and tenderly tells Martha, “Martha, Martha,

- you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”
3. What is the “one thing” that Mary has chosen, the “one thing” that is better and that will not be taken away from her? From the story the “one thing” is sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening to his words. Or we could state the one thing in one word: prayer. Mary is praying, but it’s a particular kind of prayer that throughout the history of Christian spirituality has been called contemplation or contemplative prayer. Last week I said the prayer is like playing volleyball in the sense that sometimes we have to spike it back to God. Slam your prayers back at God because God can take it. But contemplative prayer seems like just sitting down and letting the ball bounce off your head. It seems weak, inefficient and unproductive. This morning I want to explore the essence of contemplative prayer. What is it? Why should we practice it? How do we practice it? What happens when we practice contemplative prayer? Since this topic is so vast and perhaps new to many of you, I’ve also put a reading list up on the resource table upstairs.
 4. What is contemplative prayer? Let me tell what it is not. It isn’t escapism. It doesn’t imply a permanent withdrawal from the cries and the needs of the world – or even our need to be productive and efficient. The 20th century writer Thomas Merton once blasted phony contemplatives who flee into the “false sweetness of narcissistic seclusion.”¹ He blasted this “cult of sitting still” as sham, “a trifling with grace and a flight from God.”² Instead true Christ-centered contemplatives seem to leave the world only so they can “listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depths.”³ So you can release the distorted idea that contemplative prayer is reserved for a select group of spiritually elite people who have the time to abandon their daily schedules. Jesus was not blasting Martha for her desire to serve and make a meal. As we’ll see, he confronted her on her distraction and her anxiety.
 5. It’s a way to wake up to Christ who is already here with us. For instance, at the end of Luke’s Gospel there is a story of two men that are walking along with a stranger. The stranger is actually Jesus, but they don’t recognize him. Finally, after spending the whole day talking to them, they invite Jesus to dinner. As soon as Jesus sits down with the meal and breaks the bread they suddenly realize that it’s Jesus. They woke up to his presence. They became aware. They recognized him. Contemplative prayer means that Christ is always present to us but sometimes we aren’t present to him. Contemplative prayer is the means to wake up and recognize that Jesus is with us.
 6. So what is it then? Let me give you some classic definitions of Christ-centered contemplative prayer. It is an “intimate sharing between friends ... taking time to frequently be alone with (God) who we know loves us.”⁴ Someone else has defined it as “a loving attentiveness to God.” Contemplative prayer “is not so much a way to find God as a way of resting in God ... who loves us, who is near

¹ Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience*, page 111.

² Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, page 89.

³ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, page ---.

⁴ Teresa of Avila, *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, page 44.

- to us, who comes to us to draw near to him.⁵” Someone else has defined it as and “experiential knowledge” that leads to “a direct contact with someone.⁶” It involves paying attention to and waking up to God’s presence in our lives. It means a “deep and intimate knowledge of God by a union of love.⁷” According to the Christian view of reality, when we accept Jesus into our lives, when we trust him and cry out to him, He is always with us – “I will never leave you or forsake you.” That is a fact. But sometimes we’re not aware of or awake to his presence in our lives, especially when, like Martha, we get distracted and our hearts grow anxious and troubled.
7. Mary demonstrates contemplative prayer. It means paying attention to Jesus. It means listening to his words with everything you have within you. It means tuning out distractions and focusing on one thing. It means a face-to-face encounter with the real thing. In the Old Testament there is a Hebrew word for *da’ath* which means an intimate, face-to-face, up close and personal knowledge of something or someone which involves your whole person. The New Testament uses the word *gnosis* to convey the same idea of experiential knowledge. It doesn’t just mean getting information about something; it involves contact, dwelling in the presence of something or someone. These two words are key: experience and intimacy. Thomas Merton once said, “There are so many Christians who have practically no idea of the immense love of God for them, and of the power of that love to do them good ... There are thousands of Christians walking about the face of the earth bearing in their bodies the infinite God of whom they know practically nothing.⁸”
 8. You see, the essence of the Christian life is union with Christ. See Galatians 2:20 and Ephesians 3:19 and John 14:17; 23; 15:4-5; 11. But unfortunately most of us don’t experience this union on a regular basis. Christ is present to us but we are not present to him.
 9. Illustration: going to the North Shore or Rohlheiser story. This is experiential knowledge. As a biblical example turn with me to Psalm 36:5 → “Your love, O Lord reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.” That is the intellectual truth of God’s character. God is loving and faithful. That is the foundation for contemplative prayer – it doesn’t bypass our minds, but it isn’t *just* an intellectual concept. It’s a personal encounter; it’s experiential knowledge; it’s actually being with Jesus – and that’s what we find in verses 7-8. “How priceless is your unfailing love! Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights.” Contemplation involves not just thinking thoughts about God or doing things for God; it involves valuing God, taking refuge in God, feasting on God’s goodness, tasting it, and drinking from God’s river of delight. God isn’t just an intellectual concept. God is alive and wants to be known – personally and passionately. God wants to be experienced. God exists to be

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, page ----.

⁶ Ronald Rohlheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*, page ---.

⁷ Thomas Merton, *What is Contemplation?*, page 11.

⁸ Thomas Merton, *What is Contemplation?*, pages 7 and 17.

- tasted and savored just like this apple exists to be tasted. God wants to be tasted. And God wants us to experience and taste and delight in him. (You can think about the apple; analyze the apple; believe in the apple. And you can also experience the apple, eat the apple, taste the apple and delight in the apple. Mary is sitting with Jesus. She is experiencing Jesus. She is finding delight in Jesus. She's soaking in the flavor of Jesus.)
10. Martha is a decent person and Jesus isn't angry with her. She's working hard and that's not the issue. But Martha is uncentered and non-contemplative. She doesn't have a contemplative bone in her body. She has one speed: full speed ahead and she can't switch gears. She can't shift into neutral or reverse or even 1st gear. She lives a life of distraction. The word for distraction in this story means to be pulled apart, fragmented and thrown off balance. Think of your washing machine when the clothes become uncentered and it begins to shake and wobble. Actually, we really only have two choices in our prayer life: we will either live lives of contemplation or we will live lives of distraction. Do you want to know if you're living a life of distraction? Based on Martha in this story, here are the five signs that your life is more about distraction than contemplation: (1) Distracted people are judgmental – "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work?" Distracted people are always angry about someone else. Someone else is immoral or lazy or inefficient or unproductive or stupid or ruining the country. (2) Distracted people are impatient – like Martha, they're always in a hurry to get things done. "Let's go" and "Hurry up" become the underlying theme of their relationships. As someone has said, "Speed is toxic to love." (3) Distracted people are controlling – they want things their way. Notice that Martha even tries to control and boss around Jesus – "Tell her to help me!" (4) Distracted people are anxious – that's what Jesus said about Martha, "You are anxious and troubled." The Greek word for anxious means to be entangled by concerns. They have a grip on me; I'm enslaved to my worries. The Greek word for troubled is in the middle voice which means, "You are putting yourself in an uproar." You're uptight and bent out of shape, but it's an inside job – you're doing it to yourself. And (5) Distracted people are compulsive – they don't have time to back up from a situation and reflect; they're always just reacting, they are getting hooked and dragged along by forces like anger and lust and greed. This is where all our addictions show up. We have to shop or blast people or have sexual escapades or work or whatever.
11. The opposite of distraction is contemplation. And contemplation always begins with paying attention or waking up. You have to intentionally set aside distractions and focus in. (Tim Allen story). In the history of Christian spirituality the word for this process of paying attention is recollection. Think of it this way: all day long your thoughts are like a jar of marbles that have scattered on the floor. They start wandering all over the place. Or think of it as a glass of water that constantly gets shaken and stirred and distracted throughout the day. the dirt swirls everywhere. When we enter prayer we begin to recollect ourselves. In the words of the prodigal son "we come to our sense." The old Quaker phrase is "centering down." In the Catholic Benedictine tradition it means to "dwell

- within one self.” In the words of the Psalm it means to “be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).⁹
12. Also, in the history of Christian spirituality the assumption has been that you usually need something to recollect yourself: it’s called silence. Do you remember silence? “For God alone my soul waits in silence” the psalmist said (Psalm 62:1). My soul waits in silence. We tend to think that silence is easy or that it’s “golden.” It’s not. Silence is painful. Because as soon as you’re silent, you realize all this stuff that’s swirling around inside of you. SO you begin to say, “I didn’t realize I was so angry, anxious, lustful, impatient, mean and compulsive.”
 13. The whole point of recollection and silence is not just to use them as relaxation techniques or to lower our blood pressure or to get in touch with our inner child. For a follower of Jesus the point of recollection and silence is so that we can experience the presence of Jesus and listen to him. “This is my beloved Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5). We listen to his word. That’s why contemplation begins and feeds on the Bible. It involves knowing, studying, savoring, resting in and experiencing the reality of the Bible. For instance, take a simple verse like “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” You can and you should read this verse in the context of the entire Psalm 23. You can and you should study the background of Hebrew poetry and the classifications of types of psalms. But none of that means that the Lord is really your shepherd at this moment in your life. So you recollect your heart. You center down. You let stuff swirl around inside your heart until it starts to settle. You bring this passage into a silent place – you turn the television off and shut down the computer and turn off your cell phone. If you’re in business, you can go into your car or your office and shut the door (this is very practical). And you read the verse over and over. You allow it to sink from your head to your heart. Then you realize that Jesus himself, the Great Shepherd, the Great lover of your soul, is speaking these words to you. So you listen – I mean, you really listen. You start to confess that the Lord is not your shepherd and that you want lots of things. You want this and you want that. Your hungry little heart never gets enough. But you start to rest in Christ. You let go. And then you pray, “Thank you that you are my shepherd.” Do you see that this cannot be done with rational mind alone? It involves an experiential component, a face-to-face, heart-to-heart encounter with Christ.
 14. What are the two main barriers to contemplative prayer? Pragmatism = it comes from the Greek word pragma which meant business but also implied efficiency, productivity and practicality. Pragmatism is a philosophy of life that asserts, “If it works, it’s probably true.” The essence of life is what works. You can see how this elevates achievement and productivity. You’re worthwhile if you achieve, if you’re productive and efficient. If you’re not productive and efficient, you’re worthless. You can see pragmatism deeply entrenched in our government, our

⁹ Recollection is no easy task. Thomas Merton understates the case when he warns us that “The world in which we live today presents a tantalizing problem to anyone who wants to acquire habits of recollection.” Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, page 78.

- schools and our churches. It shows itself in a deep impatience with anything that is not immediately useful and practical. Of course the principle of pragmatism – what’s good is what works – can also get reversed to say, “People are only as good as the work they do.” Of course this leaves large groups of people in the dust – the unborn, the severely disabled, the poor, the elderly, the sick. This leads to the logical conclusion that we as a culture would spend more money on developing more efficient rubber for car tires than we would on researching why teenage suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people in the Western world.¹⁰
15. The second problem is a deep restlessness. Jesus told Martha that she’s anxious and troubled. Some of this is entirely normal. It’s like your body temperature: you need a certain level of heat to stay alive, but beyond a certain point you’ve become sick. And today we are very hot and very sick. When restlessness – the sense of being anxious and troubled – reaches a fever pitch reaches, “Our lives become consumed with the idea that unless we somehow experience everything, travel everywhere, see everything, and are a large part of everyone’s experience, then our own lives are small and meaningless. We become impatient with every hunger, every ache and every non-consummated area within our lives, and we become convinced that unless every pleasure we yearn for is tasted, we will be unhappy ... We are convinced that all lack, all tension, all unfulfilled yearning is tragic. Thus, it becomes tragic to be alone; to be unmarried; to be not completely fulfilled romantically or sexually, to not be good-looking; or to be unhealthy or aged.¹¹”
16. There is a balance between contemplation and action. There is an inflow of Jesus words and an outflow of our service for Jesus. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that this little story on contemplative prayer follows from the story of the Good Samaritan. Again, just as the Samaritan picked up and helped and rescued a bleeding, wounded man, so Jesus told us, “Go and do likewise.” That gets us excited. Wow, I get to be a hero. I get to rescue people and serve God and be important. So we rush headlong into the needs and the projects and the urgent cries all around us, but the needs and cries and the bleeding wounds eventually begin to bury us. I’ve been a pastor for 18 years and a follower of Jesus for over 30 years and one of the saddest scenarios I’ve ever seen is this: sincere men and women who love Jesus and who want to serve Him, but they don’t have any inflow. They are a mile wide and an inch deep. Like Martha they have one speed: Full speed ahead. They do not contemplate. It’s not efficient or productive or energizing. And they do lots for God, but they don’t always do it as they are connected to Jesus. And inevitably, they burn out or they wash out or they dry up. (See the picture from Scazzero’s book). “The active life in the world *for* God can only flow from a life *with* God.”
17. It has been the contention of some of the most profound thinkers and prayers in the history of the church (i.e. St. John of the Cross) that if we don’t live contemplatively God will draw us into contemplation. Sometimes God will dry up our overly-rational, heady faith until we cry out for something deeper and

¹⁰ This is adapted from Ronald Rohlheiser’s *Shattered Lantern*, pages ____ - ____.

¹¹ Rohlheiser, pages ____-____.

richer and more experiential. God will drag us into contemplative prayer kicking and screaming. But when God starts to drag, just go along with it. God wants you to taste reality. “Do not therefore lament when our prayer is empty of all precise, rational knowledge ... do not be surprised or alarmed when your will no longer finds sweetness of consolation in the things of God and when your imagination is darkened and thrown into disorder. You are out of your depth.”¹²

ILLUSTRATIONS:

1. Prometheus – our bent towards activism, we live in Promethean age – “unmindful of limits, setting goals unrelated to the actual conditions of humanity, and possessing the technical means to change the conditions under which we live”
2. Nietzsche – a madman lights a lantern ... God is dead ... unbelief is within the circle of believers ... God is absent from the ordinary lives of believers
3. Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* – the example of a totally non-contemplative life.
4. Mother of a small child – show pictures of water, sit in the water – “... instead of sitting and thinking and feeling about God we must sit in God ... Contemplation is sitting in reality. Normally it does not feel like prayer.”
5. St. Seraphim of Sarov.
6. Lake Superior – swimming in the water. Contemplation involves a lifestyle of not just thinking about God or doing things for God. It is a life of being with God, sitting with Jesus, receiving from Jesus until we overflow with His grace and truth. When I was fifteen years old, for instance, my family planned a trip to the North Shore of Lake Superior. Mid-way up the shore there is a little town called Schroeder, Minnesota, a rustic town with a string of cabins near the Cross River. After winding its way through the Superior National Forest, the Cross River ends with a furious waterfall and then finishes its course by merging with Lake Superior. Before our family vacation, we studied pictures of the Cross River and the awesome waterfall. We looked at post cards and listened to stories. But when we finally took the trip, I’ll never forget the experience of actually sitting in the Cross River. On a hot July afternoon the fierce waterfalls pummeled my body, spraying into my face, cooling my sunburned shoulders. That is a picture of contemplation. A true contemplative doesn’t just look at pictures of God and acquire information about God; she yearns to experience God first-hand, to be sprayed by the waterfall of God’s grace and truth and holiness. The psalmist commanded us to “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). Contemplation is tasting God. Jesus told us to “Come and drink” (John 7:37). Contemplation is drinking Jesus. Jesus also told us to “abide in Him” (John 15:4-5). Contemplation is abiding in Jesus, drawing life from Him.
7. Thomas Merton’s prayer is a model for all those on the contemplative quest: *My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not know the road ahead of me ... Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following you does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please does in fact please you. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know if I do this, you will lead me by the right road. Therefore, I will trust*

¹² Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?*, page 59.

*you always though I seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me.*¹³

8. Deep in the Russian forest a tall, slender man with brilliant white hair stands on a rock, lifting his arms towards heaven and praying. Over and over again he utters the name of Jesus, imploring Christ's mercy on his own soul and all mankind. Then, after hours of prayer, he retreats to his simple hermitage for the night. Animals will lovingly flock around his cabin, but otherwise he is alone in the dark silence of the woods. Of his 71 years on this earth, nearly 30 of them will be spent in a hermit's hut. The Russian church reverently calls him St. Seraphim of Sarov. He was a holy fool for Christ. *** His birth name was Prokhor Moshnin, born in 1759, the youngest of three children. Tall and strong, gifted as a carpenter and filled with a passion for life, at the age of 18 Prokhor seemingly "wasted" his life by choosing to become a monk. He was renamed Seraphim, or "fiery one," after the fierce angels around God's throne (Isaiah 6:2). Inspired by the Bible and the desert fathers, he moved into the woods to live as a hermit, devoting himself to Scripture, prayer, repentance and spiritual combat. *** In this "farther hermitage," as he called it, his life exuded a Christ-like compassion and gentleness. Eyewitnesses reported animals, even a lumbering black bear, eating out of Seraphim's hands. On one occasion, he was beaten by three robbers and left for dead. Seraphim forgave them, proclaiming in his writings that when we refuse to forgive "it is as if a rock settles on the heart." *** Seraphim died in 1833, but prior to his death, at the Spirit's prompting, he threw open the door of his hermitage. Visitors came streaming into his secluded cabin. Suddenly the contemplative hermit developed a bustling ministry of counseling, prayer and healing. Couples with troubled marriages came to him and Seraphim barely spoke a word and their marriages were reconciled. He became a spiritual father to thousands, addressing each person as "my joy" and blessing them with "Christ is risen!" "Acquire a peaceful spirit," he challenged his people, "and thousands around you will be saved."
9. Fueled by the stories of St. Seraphim and the desert fathers, I decided to try the hermit lifestyle. About ten years ago, I attempted a 24 hour retreat at *Pacem in Terris* (Latin for "Peace on earth"), a Franciscan retreat center nestled on 220 acres of pristine woods in central Minnesota. "Pacem" was my first choice because their brochure called their small prayer cabins "hermitages" and I would be a "hermit." So for 24 hours, just like the holy fool St. Seraphim of Sarov, I lived like a hermit without running water, a phone, television, computers, mail or even the soft hum of a refrigerator. Only God, me, and the dark silence of the Minnesota woods. *** Ah, the bliss of my hermitage! Much to my surprise, I really liked the hermit lifestyle ... for about 45 minutes. After reading a Psalm, eating some bread and cheese and taking a nap, I still had over 23 hours left. I panicked. What will I do for the next 23 hours? Against the explicit instructions of my spiritual director, I converted my hermitage into a backwoods office. I read books and journals (mostly on prayer, of course), outlined my next sermon series, fretted over the oil leak in my Minivan, and kicked myself for not doing something useful and productive.
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¹³ Thomas Merton, **Thoughts in Solitude**, page 79.