

We are in the Christian season of Lent, the gradual lengthening of days approaching Spring, spiritually a time of preparation for Easter, a time for reflection, repentance and renewal. Our opening hymn says about Jesus: “Forty days and forty nights you were fasting in the wild ...fasting with unceasing prayer...shall we not your sorrows share?”

Our gospel lesson (Mt.6) has Jesus teaching about prayer, how we should go to a quiet place alone. (The picture on front our bulletin might imply that Jesus is walking to a beach). Well, that can be one solitary place to walk or sit quietly by oneself! In our translation this morning Jesus says “Go to your room and shut the door!” I actually did that for many years, when I first started practicing meditation, around age 18. Meditation teachers sometimes talk about not having a full stomach (one can fall asleep), so I would often sit quietly early in the morning, or before supertime. Sharing a dorm suite in college, it was indeed helpful to “shut the door.” One suite mate would often shout out to me: “Hey Buddha, it’s time for dinner!”

People of faith, often do link the words “prayer and meditation.” Jesus did not teach actual meditative techniques that I know of, but it is clear that he did go off alone, in solitude, not only in this 40 days and 40 nights preparing for public ministry, but early mornings he would go to a quiet place. Jesus was known to quote the holy scriptures, so we can assume that he had learned some by heart; perhaps he chanted or sang them in some solitary times. He also went to the synagogue regularly, where he learned scriptures and songs with others.

We had a guest minister lead us in prayers for peace a couple weeks ago, and I found it interesting that not only did we sing and dance for oneness in peace, but Rev. Donnadia Lowry also led us in a brief meditation time. Meditation teachers often start with “guided” meditation... asking us to imagine a scene (Imagine your most peaceful, joyful, or safe place for example). Ultimately we all need to find our own best ways to pray and meditate; we need to make it our own. When I first started meditating (at 18), it was an initiation from the Transcendental Meditation teachers from the East. But I instinctively knew that I had to make it my own, and incorporate the ideas into my own background in Christianity. So I went to a local monastery and asked a lot of questions of a priest, who was out watering the gardens. He reminded me that Christians also meditate, of course, now called “centering prayer.” They also chant. The Taize community in France is one example. I know that I modeled my prayer song, Be Still, after simple chants, songs with fewer words, and more repetition, that can lead into Stillness.

So I’ll conclude this brief section on prayer and meditation by saying that yes, we all have to find our own way of spending time alone with the “Great Spirit!” For some of us it may be more verbal, more about the words. For some, it may be more quiet (like our Quaker friends). For those of us who use “These Days” devotional... the suggestions at the beginning combine Reading with meditation, often called Lectio Divina.... Basically: READ slowly, then MEDITATE... “Read the scripture twice make

it familiar to yourself, watch for a word or a phrase that arrests your attention. Then meditate on this word or a phrase or just sit quietly, breathing deeply and gently.” With meditation, it is not so much reading for knowledge, but reading to move us deeper into how the words speak to us and affect our lives now.

Just a few words about the Old Testament reading, Psalm 51. In case you are not very familiar with this Psalm, it is indeed a psalm or song of David, King David. It is a prayer for forgiveness, asking God’s mercy to help him move forward with a new heart. It is said to be the very prayer that David sang after stealing the beautiful Bathsheba when he saw her bathing on a rooftop. King David took her from her husband, and then sent the husband to the front lines, to a sure death. David sinned in a brutal way, and needed major forgiveness. As well as consequences, all the powerful rulers in the world that have engaged in sexual abuse need to pray Psalm 51!

Yet the New Testament writings remind us that we ALL have fallen short of the glory of God; we all have sinned in one way or another. So we all need to sing the well known Christian song “Change My Heart Oh Lord.” ... or the African American Spiritual, “Not my brother nor my sister, but it’s me O Lord Standin’ in the Need of Prayer!” I have always been amazed that really devout monks and saints speak often about their need for mercy and renewal. Sometimes the closer we get to God, being more loving, more peaceful, more holy, we can realize our flaws even more clearly. We realize even the very subtle or minor ways that we push away or hurt another person.

One of the prayers of Jesus that is very helpful, for the ability to forgive, is his prayer from the cross: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” I often think of this prayer when one party is angry and hurtful, with no sense of apology or remorse. I call the necessary prayer “unilateral forgiveness.” It identifies with what Jesus did on the cross. Very necessary at times, especially if the offending party will not apologize, has died or moved away. But at the music conference I went to, I heard a song that changed the entire meaning for me, The song says: “O God, Forgive US for WE know not what WE do.” There is the humility that acknowledges that WE all fall short of God’s will for us, that WE all sin in one way or another, are complicit with various kinds of sin, and we often don’t even recognize it.

In conclusion, it behooves us to go to quiet places, perhaps read some holy verse, meditate on a few words, or on the sheer quietness of peace and love... and then also be willing to think about ways we could change for the better, as we humbly confess OUR flaws and ask God to put a new heart within US.

Amen.