

“Life of Prayer”

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

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Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

When Jim was a telephone operator, a customer talked overtime on a long-distance call from a pay telephone booth. Even with the operator’s friendly reminders, he refused to deposit his overtime coins. Instead, he slammed down the phone, irate and verbally abusive. A few seconds later, he was back on the line, somewhat calmer, “Operator, please let me out of the phone booth! I’ll pay, I’ll pay, just let me out!” The customer mistakenly thought the operator had control of the phone booth’s doors and had locked him in! He gladly paid the overtime charge and with Jim’s advice gave the booth door a hefty kick to free himself.

The season of Lent began with our Ash Wednesday service this week. We received ashes on our foreheads for a spiritual preparation of this holy season. In Jesus’ time and before, ash symbolized repentance, brokenness, and a hope to return to the Lord. Lent begins a spiritual humbling to reflect on ourselves and to restore our relationship with God. Lent includes the next six weeks which is a forty-day special journey before Easter (we usually do not count Sundays because of Sabbath) for a time of self-examination, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

This year, we have Lenten small group studies and every Thursday we will gather for soup supper with Taize style prayer here at the church. I hope that we can have a personal and a meaningful time to come closer to God and to receive God’s comfort and peace. I was pretty impressed by the numbers of our Lenten small group studies. Over forty-five people signed up for small group studies for their spiritual growth in Christ. This shows us our need for building a relationship with God and belonging to a community of faith, especially our spiritual hunger to be with God. This holy season is given to us as a great opportunity to revisit ourselves, and check in with our spiritual lives. I want to assure you as a reminder: Do not think of God this way, “God loves me *because* of all I do for him” nor “God loves me despite my shortcomings.” God loves you *for who you are*. This is a love we want to return during these Holy weeks. When we lay down our burdens before God, God accepts us as we are as His precious children.

Our theme for Lent this year is “Solitude in the Wilderness, Journey as Wanderings, and Jesus Christ as our Guide.” I personally like images of wilderness and wanderings. Our small group text book explains these meanings to us: Wilderness was a place where Jesus went into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. Not at the end, but right after baptism. The forty-day season of Lent is traditionally based on his forty days in the wilderness. The number forty has an important biblical meaning: The Hebrews wandered in the wilderness for forty years with Moses. Another ‘forty’ is that in the scriptures, Jesus’ resurrection appearances extended over forty days. The other one, Wanderings, is that Lent invites us to make a pilgrimage. If we’re open to the Spirit it’s not a prescheduled trip but an open-ended journey – a process instead of a destination.

Jesus warned his disciples saying: Do not practice your piety for the purpose of getting recognition from others; do not pray like the hypocrites; do not fast in order to be seen and recognized by others. Many people in Jesus’ days and in our days want to show off their spiritual practices to others. Prayers are good spiritual disciplines, but Jesus taught us not to do these to be seen or to look pious to others. Jesus requires of us integrity and authenticity in faith, not a way to flaunt our piety to others, when we do these practices.

I have another story to share with you: Tim stopped at a convenience store to pick up some milk and a loaf of bread on his way home after the Ash Wednesday service last year. The store was owned by a young Indian fellow. He gave Tim a strange look when he came to check out. In fact, this young Indian man gave Tim what seemed to be a rather disgusted look. It wasn’t until Tim was driving down the street that he realized a young Indian man thought Tim was somehow mocking Indian women (including his wife) who wear the red bindi (a red dot, largely a feature of Indian cosmetics) on their foreheads. He wanted to go back and explain to the man that he wasn’t making fun at all. “You see,” he imagined he would say, “This is the mark of ashes on my forehead which signifies...” Meanwhile, the words of Jesus come to his mind. *“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”* How could he go back and tell the young man behind the counter what he was *really* doing with ashes on his forehead in light of Jesus’ warning? Not only would he be telling the guy he was not really a bad guy who was mocking his wife -- but a good guy who was doing a pious thing. As a matter of fact, Jesus goes so far as to say -- when you pray, you should, *“...go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret...”*

The most important thing in both piety and prayer life is not how it can be seen or recognized by others. If you pray for reward from people to think you are pious, you may gain something from people, but you may not gain anything from God. Jesus told us, when we pray, to go into our room and shut out the rest of the world. We are not to pray to a public God, who is present in the marketplace and meetinghouse. The Father sees in secret; we are to pray to God in secret. Jesus wants us to find our own relationship through our spiritual practices. St. Augustine reminds us that our goal of piety is to gain 'peace' in God, "*Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in God.*"

I invite all of you to come to the wilderness. Bring your backpack putting your worries, burdens, anxiety and fears in your backpack and join Jesus Christ. He is our compass and guide. He will show us a right direction if we trust him. As Marilyn Brown in our Lenten studies book reminds us that Lent is a season to unmask before God and self; and as trust builds, to unmask before others. Our hearts cannot receive healing while we drain our energy to preserve a mask that we pretend hides our passion. When we bring ourselves with honesty and integrity to our table talks with God and lay aside our self-deluding masks, we open ourselves to God's transformation of our hearts. When we return to God with all our heart, God fills our spiritual void and our perspective changes. Let's journey together.