

**Sermon Preached July 19, 2015  
Year B, Proper 11  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts  
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight,  
Oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Two men meet on the street.

One asks the other: "Hi, how are you?"

The other one replies: "I'm fine, thanks."

The first asks, "And how's your son? Is he still unemployed?"

"Yes, he is. But he is meditating now."

"Meditating? What's that?"

"I don't know. But it's better than sitting around and doing nothing!"<sup>1</sup>

This past week I attended a conference led by my favorite contemporary theologian and mystic, Richard Rohr. Among other things he is the founder of the "Center for Action and Contemplation." As articulated in their website, "The CAC is dedicated to facilitating a universal awakening by providing educational materials, events, and curriculum that bear witness to the Christian tradition of contemplative practice and compassionate action." As you can tell from their name, they seek an integration of action and contemplation.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.swamij.com/jokes.htm>

Meditation and contemplation are ancient Christian practices, which fell out of favor during the Reformation. During the past 60 years or so, however, they have been reclaimed with the work of Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington, and continuing with the work of Cynthia Bourgeault, James Finley, Richard Rohr, and others. Meditation is simply prayer without words. It is not talking about God, or talking to God, rather, meditation is active experiencing of God. In the sixth century it was called by Gregory the Great, “resting in God.” Too much of modern Christianity has become a cerebral endeavor. While lovely and miraculous as our brains are, thinking about something is not the same as experiencing it. For instance, I can read all kinds of books and travel brochures about India, I can watch movies that take place in India, I can talk to people who have been to India, but I cannot really know India until I go there and experience it myself directly.

This experience of God happens because contemplative prayer allows us to empty our minds and brains to make room for God. It gets rid of the chatter, allowing us to be attentive to the Divine. In silence, meditation opens us up and, with regular practice, transforms and sustains us.

There is a story about “A martial arts student [who] was meeting with his master and teacher at a table, having tea. The student said to his master, ‘I’ve learned all you have to teach me about defending myself. I now want to learn about the ways of God.’ The master took the teakettle and starting pouring the student’s cup full of tea. Soon the cup was full and began to spill over onto the saucer. But the master continued to pour the tea until it spilled over the saucer and then onto the floor. The student finally said, ‘Stop, stop, the tea is spilling over. The cup

can't take any more.' The master then looked at the student and said, 'You are so full of yourself that there is no room in your life for God. It is not possible for you to learn the ways of God until you learn to empty yourself.'"<sup>2</sup> This is the gift of contemplative prayer.

In today's gospel the disciples have been sent out on a missionary journey and have just returned to Jesus to tell him all they have done. They were so busy that "they had no leisure even to eat." So Jesus says to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Jesus knows that important as ministry is, Sabbath time is necessary if one is not to get burned out. And while it is not said in this passage, throughout scripture Jesus also goes away to deserted places to pray. Time alone with God is critically necessary for Jesus and the disciples to sustain them in their ministry.

So we know that through contemplative prayer we can experience God, but does such meditation have any practical, real-world value? Absolutely! For instance, Rohr often speaks of the "two-halves of life." He says the first half is important and necessary, and you cannot get to the second half of life without it. But this first half of life is focused on creating identity and ego, and during this time our spirituality and all aspects of life are dualistic in nature. Fr. Richard notes, "Psychologist Carl Jung said that the two major tasks in life are building your ego structure in the first half and getting beyond the building to the purpose of life in the second," Father Richard says, "It is transformation that gets you from the first to the second half .... The normal paths of transformation are great love and great suffering — [a realization that] there is something more than [simply] you [loving] yourself."

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/are-you-empty-enough-todd-hudnall-sermon-on-evangelism-the-lost-43035.asp>, 7/17/2015

“In a normal day, you can get through with dualistic thinking,” he goes on, “but then comes love, death, suffering, a notion of God, a notion of infinity, sex, and you need a different processor.”<sup>3</sup> These things provoke us to move to the second non-dual half of life, as a way to make sense of these things. This then opens us up to a more expansive understanding and experience of God.

Rohr summarizes that there are three ways to move from the first half to the second half of life. One is great love, the second is great suffering, and the third is contemplative prayer.

He then explains them in detail saying, “When you are inside of great love and great suffering, you have a much stronger possibility of surrendering your ego controls and opening up to the whole field of life. Frankly, because you do not have much choice now, you are being led. Great love makes you willing to risk everything, holding nothing back. .... The ecstasy of this union makes you let down your barriers and see things inside of a new kind of wholeness and happiness for a while. . . No wonder people run toward love.”

In contrast, “Great suffering opens you in a different way. Here, things happen against your will – which is what makes it suffering. And over time, you can learn to give up your defended state, again because you have no choice. The situation is what it is, although we will invariably go through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, resignation, and (hopefully) on to acceptance. The suffering might feel wrong, terminal, absurd, unjust, impossible, physically painful, or just outside of your comfort zone. So you see why we must have a proper attitude

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<sup>3</sup> <http://catholicphilly.com/2013/02/us-world-news/national-catholic-news/struggling-moves-people-to-higher-level-of-spirituality-says-priest/>

toward suffering, because many things every day leave us out of control – even if just a long stoplight.”<sup>4</sup>

So our poor little brains are confronted with things that cannot be understood with dualistic, black and white thinking, pushing us into transformation. This transformation, whether through love, suffering, or meditation, results in greater humility, increased compassion, and therefore an awareness and opening to the “other.” To those who are different from us. We start to see the world with new eyes. We learn to see the world as Christ sees it. And in doing so, we cannot help but love and be in solidarity with all others, even those on the margins. And that compassion calls us out to DO something about suffering in others. It pushes us to action.

One of our speakers at the conference was Timothy Shriver, son of Eunice Shriver, and current Chairman of the Special Olympics. He gave a very moving and inspirational talk about his work with the Special Olympics and people with disabilities. He said that “the gift of ‘the other’ is to heal you, as you heal them. We learn we cannot divide the world into “us” and “them”- that is dualistic thinking. Rather, it is all “us.” In God we are all one.”<sup>5</sup>

Rohr spoke to this when explaining the incarnation and what it means that God, the spiritual, entered into the material world in the person of Jesus. He notes, “Full incarnation-- taking incarnation to its conclusion: [means that] there is no such thing as profane; there is no such thing as secular. It is one sacred universe, beloved of God.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Rohr, The Naked Now.

<sup>5</sup> Personal notes from Speech on July 11, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/CenterforActionandContemplation>

In today's lesson, after Jesus tell his disciples to rest, he discovers that the crowds of people who are seeking his message and healing are following him. As he sees their suffering, we are told Jesus has great compassion for them. So he stops, he teaches, and he heals. In this one passage today we see both contemplation and action.

In essence, contemplation and action are two sides of the same coin. Contemplation compels us to action, and action is sustained by contemplation. Unlike our opening joke, meditation is not sitting around doing nothing. Rather meditation is both the catalyst and the nourishment for radical and compassionate engagement with the world. With hearts broken open to the grace and mercy of God, we see with new eyes and are transformed.

Amen.

**Helpful websites:**

Center for Action and Contemplation with Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM: [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org)

The Contemplative Society with the Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault:

<http://www.contemplative.org/>

Contemplative Outreach with Fr. Thomas Keating: <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/>