

Prayer: Resisting Self Reliance
Fifth in a Lenten Series on My Body: God's Temple

The Fifth Sunday of Lent ~ March 21, 2010
Rev. Susan J. Morrison
John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

“When you pray, you open yourself to the influence of the Power which has revealed itself as Love. The Power gives you freedom and independence. Once touched by this Power, you are no longer swayed back and forth by the countless opinions, ideas, and feelings which flow through you. You have found a center for your life that gives you a creative distance so that everything you see, hear, and feel can be tested against the source.” Henry Nouwen

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The alarm went off at 5:00 AM. It was our day of departure from Nicaragua and we had to be packed and ready to go by 6:30. I lay there for a few moments drinking in the warm Nicaraguan air, listening to the early morning call of the birds and feeling a sense of regret that the time had come to leave the people and places that I have grown to love. But there was no time to waste. Much needed to be accomplished before 6:30.

The night before there had been a festive farewell dinner for our delegation. Piles of fresh pineapple and watermelon, bowls of beans and rice, a platter of fried plantain chips and an ample portion of chicken had been served to us and to the staff at Casa Amanacer that run the Covenant program between the New England Annual Conference and the protestant churches of Nicaragua. To our delight and surprise, pastors Clorinda and Ernestina had taken the bus from our sister community, Los Flores, to be with us for the festivities. When it was time to bed down, we hauled a couple of mattresses down from the upstairs bunk room and put them in the office for Clorinda and Ernestina.

It seemed like a very short night when that alarm sounded at 5:00 AM. After showering and dressing, I went to the office to awaken Clorinda and Ernestina. We exchanged morning greetings and I went off to the kitchen to make some coffee. A few minutes later, I went back to the office to turn on the computer and check the weather report for the Boston area. You might well remember the storm that never happened! We were all concerned about flying into that storm on our return.

As I entered the office space, I heard a whisper. I stopped. I listened. It was Clorinda's voice and she was praying. Softly, gently, her Spanish words gave thanks to God for the day. She and Ernestina were still lying on their mattresses on the hard floor. First one, then the other, whispered their prayer to God. For me, it was one of those Pentecost moments. Even though I couldn't translate word for word what was being spoken, I knew what they were praying. Tears came to my eyes. Here, on the floor, were these two faithful women, lifting their voices to God at the beginning of a new day. Their prayers extended over a matter of minutes. Into God's hands they committed themselves and the day that was about to unfold.

Devotion. Prayer. Submission. Trust. Faith. How many of us, upon awakening, reach first for our I phones, blackberries, cell phones before we even think about reaching out to God. How many of us plant our feet on the floor, groaning about getting up, without one whispered word of gratitude to our Creator God for yet another day of life?

Devotion. Prayer. Submission. Trust. Faith. If we are to be whole and holy, if our bodies are truly God's temples, then we must make prayer an authentic and real, a deep and profound part of our lives. Recently at the Women's Retreat at Rolling Ridge, our retreat leader, Cynthia Good, led us in an exercise of Praying the Hours. Upon arrival on Friday night through our departure mid afternoon on Saturday, we paused 7 times to talk with God. Each of the Seven Sacred Pauses had a theme. Each of the Seven Sacred Pauses caused us to remember to Whom we belong. Each of the Seven Sacred Pauses reminded us of what it meant to pray constantly, to let life itself be a prayer.

Prayer comes in many, many forms. It can be silent. It can be spoken. It can be danced. It can be read. It can be as short as a breath or as long as it takes to pour your thoughts out to God. In preparation for today's sermon, I read Teresa Blythe's book, *50 Ways to Pray*. My plan was to offer you a number of models for praying.

And then, as always, the Spirit broke in. When I reached the chapter on Prayerful Discernment Processes I read no further, for within the chapter was a clear, simple, yet profound guide for considering important matters. And it was Methodist to boot! Immediately, I remembered the recent inquiry that had presented itself to Holy Trinity. An Assembly of God Brazilian Congregation had inquired about renting space for worship, bible study and prayer. Regretfully, there was no process in place to help us, as a congregation, to share our differing views, to acknowledge conflicting opinions, and to seek God's guidance in a discernment process. As a result, there was no hope for building consensus, people experienced hurt feelings, and we failed to honor parts of our Relational Covenant.

As your pastor, I recognized that because we, as a congregation, are in the midst of change and transition, it truly wasn't the right time for us to make this important decision. And so, with my urging, the trustees communicated to the Assembly of God Brazilian congregation that Holy Trinity was currently unable to offer a rental agreement.

And so, we need to put that decision to rest. However, we can seize the opportunity to learn how to do something better. Conflict in church life is inevitable. Unexpressed conflict can be as hurtful as unresolved conflict. Conflict can be life giving as well as dangerous. When it is good, it leads to a better understanding of each other and our core values. If handled well, conflict can be an opportunity to celebrate our differences. But conflict, without ways to resolve it, can be hurtful and harmful. There needs to be an adequate process to manage decision making. The final promise of our Relational Covenant reminds us that we all can "utilize opportunities to transform negative situations and become a constructive instrument in the process of restoring healthy community."

This morning, I would like to introduce you to The Wesleyan Quadrilateral Discernment Process. You will find this on your yellow insert. It's a process that is prayerful. It cannot be hurried but depends on considering many and all perspectives when making a difficult decision. It can be used as a personal instrument or by a whole congregation. This morning we will use it as a community process.

It calls every individual involved in the process to enter it with "holy indifference." Think about that phrase. "Holy indifference." Translated, that means that everyone is willing to enter into a decision making process open minded, willing to hear everyone's point of view. No one takes a position until everyone's opinion has been heard. Honestly, I think that this is the hardest part of the process but it is at the heart of what makes the process work so well.

I'd like us to try out this Wesleyan Quadrilateral Discernment Process for a few minutes this morning. So would you gather in groups of 4 or 5? And remember, if you would rather listen in than participate in the conversation, that is just fine.

Let's take a look at the quadrilateral. You'll see that it is based on four factors that John Wesley believed illuminated Christian life: Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. We will use each of these to help us sort out conflicting ideas in a real life situation that faced a congregation.

Here's the matter that calls for discernment. The United Methodist Church in Westford has had a goal of starting a second contemporary worship service in order to attract younger members. What seemed like a great idea turned out to be very complex. The planning committee recommended that the new service be scheduled for Sunday morning at 11, the traditional service being at 9:30. It was estimated that it would take a half hour to set up all of the equipment for music and big screen projection. Some objected to the plan because it would limit the 9:30 service to only 1 hour in order to leave time for set up for the second service. Others were concerned that the congregation would be divided into 2. What would happen to the important Fellowship Time after the 9:30 service when everyone got to visit with each other? Children and youth and bell choirs practiced at 11. The new service would interfere with practice. You get the gist? What other complicating factors come to mind?

Let's apply the Wesleyan Quadrilateral Discernment Process. We'll use the steps outlined on your insert. Our intention is to prayerfully explore God's will through consulting Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. The exercise begins with a clear understanding of the question or issue to be discerned. In this case it is whether or not the church should introduce a second contemporary worship service at 11 am on Sunday.

We ask God to be present in our conversation. We seek God's direction, not our own position. We agree to enter into this process with "holy indifference." We will offer our opinions but refrain from taking a position during the process.

I will guide you through the quadrilateral.

- *Scripture.* What, if anything, does Scripture have to say about the question? Is there a theme that resonates with Scripture? Can you point to a story that gives you guidance?
- *Tradition.* What does the history of Christianity have to teach about your question? How does the history of your church inform the question?
- *Reason.* What do your intellect and capacity for reason have to offer in this question? What in this matter do you know to be true and not true? List the pros and cons of all the options you have in this question.
- *Experience.* How does your past experience of living out your Christian faith inform this question? Do you know of other people or churches or situations that have wisdom to offer?
- Consider which point of the quadrilateral was most helpful and which point seemed most difficult. Sit in silence as this discernment process sinks in.

Thank you for trying out this process, if only for a few minutes. Can you see the value to looking at each of the four factors? of entering the process with an open mind and "holy indifference"? of listening to opposing opinions? Imagine using his process in your own life when you face an important decision. Imagine using this as a congregation over a period of many weeks before deciding what God's direction is for the church.

I leave this process in your hands because I know that somewhere down the road there will be another important decision that this congregation is asked to make. Using a prayerful process you will make your choices and act on them. And over time, you will know if the decision is "of God" because it will flourish. It will bear "fruit of the Spirit" - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. And that is what Jesus wants for all of his followers.

So be it. Amen and Amen.