

## St Timothy Lutheran Church Centering Prayer Group

August 7, 2011

### What is Spirituality?

*A capacity that all people possess; how humans relate to the unseen world or deity. There are several aspects to spirituality, based on a variety of factors including religion, culture, family tradition and personal experience: 'indwelling' spirituality is speaks to those human beings who believe that God dwells within us. Spiritual 'embodiment' is the perception that God is present as the 'other.' For Christian spirituality, actions must follow beliefs, modeling Christ. (Bradley Holt, *Thirsty for God*)*

Components of Spirituality include worship, ascetical practices (fasting, physical denial), prayer and mystic 'communion' with God. "Mysticism" literally means "mystery" and the term "mystic" is used by many faiths to describe a person who seeks direct, personal contact, guidance and direction from God, through silent meditation, the receipt of visions or other means.

To be a "mystic" does not mean that one is not a person of faith, and to practice "mysticism" does not automatically mean that a person is "evil," although traditionally in history, because mystical experiences are personal and cannot often be easily described to non-participants, mystics are often treated with suspicion, rejection and during the Inquisition, imprisoned, tortured and murdered.

Elements of mysticism can be traced back to many ancient faiths, and there were many Jewish mystics (Kabbalah), Muslim (Sufi) mystics, Buddhist and Hindi mystics and Oriental mystics, all of whom sought a peaceful, personal, deep connection to the god they worshiped. In our Western culture, we perhaps are most familiar with the infamous practices of mystical cults known as the Picts, Celts and Druids of the British Isles.

Christian mystics include Benedict of Nursia (6<sup>th</sup> century) who developed the Rule of St. Benedict that many monastic communities follow to guide their daily life and worship; Hildegard von Bingen (12<sup>th</sup> century), Teresa of Avila (15<sup>th</sup> century), John of the Cross (15<sup>th</sup> century) and St. Francis of Assisi (12<sup>th</sup> century).

During the Christian Protestant Reformation, mysticism was rejected, which is ironic because the Reformation arose as a result of a desire for direct, personal relationship with God. Conformity to order and structure as defined by the Reformers was intended to prevent clerical and congregational abuses, however it led to the eradication of mystic practices, including contemplative prayer.

Martin Luther, however, valued contemplative, "mystical" prayer, as he wrote, "Warm the heart and render praying enjoyable, filled with desire, that is the purpose."

Luther described his own prayer practice and admitted he often was filled with mystical distraction, even by the words of the Lord's Prayer. When distracted, Luther said,

*"I leave behind all set prayers, because one should then leave the words aside and offer room to those thoughts, listening in stillness and for all the world not put up obstructions. For then the Holy Spirit itself is preaching and one word from that sermon is better than a thousand of our prayers."*

Since the Christian Liturgical Movement in the 1970s, many Christian faiths have rediscovered the value of mystic communion with God, and contemplative prayer is one method we can employ to engage in this deep, personal connection to our Creator.

If spoken prayer is one way of entering a conversation with God, establishing a connection, spoken or unspoken, to offer praise, intercessions and thanksgiving, then centering (it 'centers' us within God's presence) or contemplative (we contemplate God's presence) prayer is another method we can employ, to listen to God's voice.

The key thing to remember is that in any type of prayer, we are seeking God's presence. In contemplative or centering prayer, **we demonstrate our intention to be still and know God our Creator and Redeemer.**

There is no right or wrong way to participate in centering prayer, and there is often no tangible "result" that can be measured, but rather a peace that descends upon one's heart, resting in the knowledge that one has communed with God in silence, opening one's heart and soul to dwell with God in peace, joy and gratitude.

### **What is Centering or Contemplative Prayer?**

In discursive (spoken) prayer, mind and imagination and other faculties are actively employed in an effort to understand our relationship with God. In contemplative prayer, this activity is curtailed, so that contemplation has been described as "a gaze of faith", "a silent love".

John of the Cross described the difference between discursive meditation and contemplation by saying: *"The difference between these two conditions of the soul is like the difference between working, and enjoyment of the fruit of our work; between receiving a gift, and profiting by it; between the toil of travelling and the rest of our journey's end"*.

There is no clear-cut boundary between Christian meditation and Christian contemplation, and they sometimes overlap. Meditation serves as a foundation on which the contemplative life stands, the practice by which someone begins the state of contemplation.

According to **Father Thomas Keating**, Catholic priest and author of *Open Heart, Open Mind*, Centering or **Contemplative Prayer** is:

*... prayer in which we experience God's presence within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than consciousness itself. This method of prayer is both a relationship with God and a discipline to foster that relationship. Centering Prayer is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer. Rather, it adds depth of meaning to all prayer and facilitates the movement from more active modes of prayer — verbal, mental or affective prayer — into a receptive prayer of resting in God. Centering Prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God and as a movement beyond conversation with Christ to communion with Him. The source of Centering Prayer, as in all methods leading to contemplative prayer, is the Indwelling Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The focus of Centering Prayer is the deepening of our relationship with the living Christ. The effects of Centering Prayer are ecclesial, as the prayer tends to build communities of faith and bond the members together in mutual friendship and love.*

## The Sacred Word in Centering Prayer

Thomas Keating suggests the use of a sacred word as a helpful tool for the practice of centering prayer. Select a word that is significant or meaningful to you: spirit, trust, love, faith, etc. As you silently center yourself during the prayer practice, repeat the sacred word silently to yourself every time your thoughts stray. Keating suggests that the practice of centering prayer is similar to being seated at a riverbank, watching the river flow by.

Our thoughts can sidetrack us as we watch the water... "what should I cook for dinner?" "My leg is falling asleep" "How long have I been sitting here?" And Keating says that every time one of these thoughts enters our 'stream,' we should picture it like a little leaf, floating on the river, and allow it to simply float on by. We can do this by repeating our sacred word, to re-center us in God's presence.

Many people say that when they begin the centering prayer practice, they repeat their sacred word thousands of times in 20 minutes! But as you continue the discipline of centering prayer, you may find that you need to say your sacred word less, and less, as you become comfortable with the silence, and even crave it.

### ***Lectio Divina*: Preparing our Hearts for Centering Prayer**

Since ancient times, Christians have engaged in the practice of *lectio divina*, Latin for "divine reading." Persons residing in monastic communities incorporate daily *lectio divina* from sources including the Psalms, the common lectionary (scripture verses for the church calendrical year) or by personal choice, using scripture that "speaks" to a particular setting or occasion.

In *lectio divina*, St. Benedict encourages us to "hear with the ear of our hearts" as the scripture passage is read three times:

During the first reading, we engage in:

- **Lectio** – we listen for God's voice and message in the reading of scripture
- **Meditatio** – we hear a word that speaks to us personally, and we meditate on it

During the second reading, we engage in:

- **Oratio** – we repeat this word silently, over and over, allowing God to lift our burdens and transform us through this 'prayer'

During the third reading, we engage in:

- **Contemplatio** – comforted in God's presence, we rest in Him in gratitude

**St. Timothy Centering Prayer practice** will consist each week of:

- Entering the sanctuary in total silence
- Opening prayer
- *Lectio divina*
- 20 minutes of contemplative prayer (total silence)
- Celebration of Eucharist, a devotional, prayers or Labyrinth walk
- Benediction and Silent Dismissal

## **Silence & Other Stuff!**

This centering prayer group is specifically dedicated to the pursuit of silent meditation, to “be still and know our God.”

We ask that each participant fully respect this environment of silence by confining your conversations to the narthex, in low voices. Once you enter the sanctuary, you have entered the temple of God, and our centering prayer circle of silence.

Silence is intentional, however God also intended for us to worship in community and enjoy fellowship with one another. As our group grows in number and mutual love, we may find it appropriate to meet for a quick bite before or after our prayer time, to socialize and support one another in community.

Please provide your email address as that is how we will communicate with group members.

Any and all in our community are welcome to participate in our centering prayer group, and we hope you will share an invitation to participate with your friends and loved ones.

Peace!

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