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## ***Practicing Communities Abiding in Love***

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 6, 2018*

*John 15:9-17*

I'd like to begin today's talk by asking a few questions. How many of you have ever engaged or tried to engage in any form of silent prayer or meditation, even one time? How many of you have ever tried to have a daily practice of silent prayer or meditation? How many of you currently have a daily practice of silent prayer or meditation? How many of you hate silence? I'm guessing that for some of us, just the thought of silence makes us nervous. Maybe you're more of a get-things-done, solve-problems type of person.

Yesterday I was at the Episcopal House of Prayer in Collegeville, Minnesota, which is an absolutely beautiful retreat center. There is a small round building called the Oratory. Leading to the building is a short brick pathway, which has sayings from scripture, from the Sufi poet Rumi, from the ancient Christian mystical classic text called the Cloud of Unknowing, and from Buddha. You walk in to the lobby, where a candle waits, and a sign invites you to take off your shoes and enter the main space in silence. You open the door, and before you is a round room. In the center there is a gravel pit carefully raked in patterns, with a candle in it, and around the pit are meditation cushions carefully arranged, and against the walls chairs are positioned, all facing the center. It's clearly a space for silent prayer and meditation, even though this is not something that is often talked about or practiced in church or associated with Christianity. But as you probably know in the Western world, at least in the U.S., there has been a vast and sustained explosion in interest in meditation and other forms of contemplative practice over several decades. Even here at St. Stephen's, you may know that the confirmation youths get to visit with leaders from other religions as part of their learning. This year when the Buddhist priest Bussho came to visit them, they

peppered him with fascinated questions about meditation, so much so that when he was leaving he told me that these youths were hungry. What do you think they are hungry for? Many people who would now call themselves “spiritual but not religious” have embraced meditation practice. Why do you think this is?

I don't think we have to look very far. We might imagine that it has something to do with the incredible frantic pace of modern life, constant sensory stimulation and relief from the craving for distraction that manifests in addiction to screens and the like. We need peace and quiet, and that is reason enough to sit for some quiet prayer or meditation. But I'd say it's deeper than that.

I think we are hungry for a spirituality that is actually nourishing and transformative and that makes sense, and many people are finding it in silent prayer or meditation – and many of those same people are leaving church, because they don't seem to be finding that kind of spirituality here in church. Now before you fire me for saying that, let me explain.

For the past 500 years, since the Lutheran Reformation, Protestant Christianity in the West has been characterized by an emphasis on what we believe. Every week we recite the Nicene Creed, in which we say what we the church believe, even though it and our scriptures contain a lot of statements are really hard to reconcile with science – and we rarely talk about how to make sense of these things. Then we pray together through our beautiful liturgy, but sometimes that can feel like reciting words off a page that have no personal connection to our daily lives. We do have the possibility for daily practice through the daily office which is contained in our Book of Common Prayer, but how many of you even knew that? How many of you know that there is something called the daily office in the Book of Common prayer that you could practice if you chose to?

So my own experience, as someone who left the church for twenty years and who engaged in meditation practice during that time, and who met many other people who had also left the church and who were finding great peace in meditation practice, is that people were hungry, not just for belief and talk *about* God, but for an experience of God or the divine that could heal us, and transform us, and reduce our violence,

and make us whole, and it just felt too hard to find that at church. But obviously, because I'm now a priest, something had to have happened to change my mind.

I did experience change and healing and transformation during one Sunday morning service at an Episcopal Church, an experience that had so much power in it that somehow it launched me on a journey to become a priest, which still astonishes me to this day. The truth is that there are pockets of Christianity which have existed since the very beginning that are not so much doctrinal communities, or program communities, as they are practicing communities who are seeking to experience and live in the presence of God. So this vast explosion of interest in meditation and spiritual practice in the West is not only happening outside the church. It is also happening, and has always been happening, inside the church. Just yesterday at the Episcopal House of Prayer the whole conversation was about moving our churches away from being churches that were about programs, and instead being churches that were about practicing and learning together. Engaging in contemplative practices like silent prayer, communal practices of worship and learning and supporting one another, and missional practices of service and social justice and living the nonviolent way of Jesus in daily life.

Having said all that, I'm finally going to get around today's scripture. In today's scripture Jesus says, As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love, as the branches abide in the vine. Then he says that we will abide in his love if we love one another. When Jesus says, "abide in my love," the word abide means stay with God's love, remain with it, dwell in it. Jesus is talking about a continual experience of receiving the love of God, in fact becoming one with Jesus and with one another as the vine and the branches, as the very basis from which we can love one another. Jesus is describing a spirituality that is not so much emphasizing beliefs or programs as it is about the continual intention of staying with the love of God. This helps us see that we inseparably connected with God and with all life, just as a vine grows into a branch and they as one organic life bear fruit. This is what Don Samuels, our guest preacher from last week, has been doing for the past twenty years, living on the North side in Minneapolis, rooted in his love of God in Christ, giving birth to the Beloved Community.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is about to be arrested and crucified, and he knows it, so he is giving his disciples his last and most important teaching. And he does not tell them to go build buildings and create doctrine. He tells them to constantly stay in the experience of the love of Christ, so that they will be able to love one another. This is the practice that Church is in fact about. And the truth is that studying scripture together, and praying together, and learning to be silent before God in prayer and meditation, and serving one another, and entering into relationships with our neighbors who have different life experiences, are all geared toward this one goal: to abide in the love of Christ, which is real, so that the fruit we bear is judged by one standard, which is whether or not we are loving.

The basis of that loving is the understanding that we are all already inseparably connected by a power greater than ourselves, and that that power is the love of God. This is not just a spiritual idea, it's being borne out by scientific discoveries in quantum physics. For example there is something called quantum entanglement, have any of you ever heard of that? I'm probably not going to get this right, since I'm not a scientist, but let me do my best. Quantum entanglement is the scientific discovery that when two atoms bump into each other, then wherever they go, even if it's as far apart as the entire universe, what happens to one of them affects the other one instantly. We are bound together, we are connected, we are wired for connection as Brene Brown would say. And the Church exists to be a practicing community, a community that practices that connection by abiding in the love of Christ. The church exists, not to be an institution that shames and excludes people who don't have what it judges to be the right beliefs, but to radically experience and practice the Beloved Community. We exist to be a community that engages one another and learns from and with one another and practices the love of Christ together.

Do I as a clergy person have all the answers about how to do this? No, I don't. Each one of us brings wisdom and personal experience and a relationship with God and your neighbors to the table. But I do have one small beginning suggestion about how we might live into the experience of being a practicing community, one that even more consciously and intentionally seeks to abide in the love of Christ. There is an ancient spiritual practice called the Examen that I'd like to invite you to try, if you are interested and willing.

The Examen is a daily practice of considering two questions at the end of the day. Each day before bed, or at the dinner table, you light a candle, think back over your day, and ask yourself this: What am I most grateful for today, and what am I least grateful for today? Another way to express the same idea is, Where was I most able to give and receive love today, and where was I least able to give and receive love today? Once you've come to an answer to both questions, you do the following. In that part of your day where you felt least grateful, least able to give and receive love, you hold that memory before God without shame or judgment, and simply allow God to love you in it. You allow yourself to be loved until you see underneath the hurt or disappointment or whatever it was, and you are able to see where God might be inviting healing in you or in the situation. Then, you think of that part of the day where you were most grateful, most able to give and receive love. And you hold that memory before God also, and take in the experience more deeply. You allow yourself to recognize that in that experience, God was present to you, and continues to seek to be present to you.

In both cases, the parts of your day that you were least and most grateful, this practice invites you to abide in the love of Christ through that experience. The Examen is about training ourselves to recognize the presence of God in our daily lives, so that our experience of the love of God becomes so constant we can truly say we are abiding in it. Then we can share our experience of the Examen with each other.

Let us become ever more conscious of ourselves as a practicing community—a community that is always practicing what it means to abide in the love of Christ, so that God might work reconciliation and healing and wholeness in us and through us, for the world God so loves. Amen.