

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Spiritual Practices: What are they and why?

Pacific creek flows out of the two oceans wilderness area of Grand Teton national park, flowing out of the mountains heading west. On my recent trip, I dropped in above the national park campground and worked my way a few miles upstream through an area where the stream bed is meandering strands over gravel beds and punctuated with stands of willows. The pools and runs that hold fish are spread out at that point, drawing me further and further into the wilderness, far beyond the crowds, the stream to myself, though I still left a good ten or fifteen miles of the river still unexplored. At first glance, the water is clear and the bottom visible, and you see no fish. But they are there, lurking under large boulders, or in the soft water under the main current.

It would be an overreach to say that my day on Pacific creek was of the same nature as Jesus' early morning alone, separated from the crowds and their requests and demands. Jesus seems more intent on prayer, as in conversational prayer, talking with and seeking wisdom from the Father. Though maybe not, maybe he is communing in the quiet, and that is enough. We don't know. But there is a similar effect, I think, between my time on Pacific creek, and Jesus' time in the morning away from the crowds. It is to be unplugged from the stimuli that regularly direct one's responses, that determine one's reactions, and to do this long enough that one is able to feel and think afresh, to let your body and your mind reset.

Jesus had a frenzy of a day prior to our reading. If we back up a few verses, they were having a serious rally, a revival of sorts. Crowds coming, Jesus healing, locals getting excited, a movement feels a-foot. "That evening, at sundown," it says, "they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons." When Peter and the others awoke, they were ready to get it going again for a second day, but they are not able to find Jesus, for "while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."

If he had stayed asleep until awoken by Peter and met with the crowds and their needs, it is likely that his response would have been different. Not that his response would have been bad, he would have been still doing good and meeting needs. But the Lord did not want him to settle in as their local clergy, did not want the locals to become attached to Jesus as their local miracle worker. Jesus needed to keep

moving. That was God's plan. And, it was in separating himself long enough to listen that Jesus could discern this. Otherwise, he would have just kept responding to the needs and demands in front of him.

Now we are not told that Jesus did this every day, to go off early in the morning to pray, though it feels like it probably stemmed from a habit, not just a one-off. A habit of putting oneself in a space and a place where one can center one's mind and heart and hear God's voice more clearly.

This fall, our sermons will be following the theme of spiritual practices. What is a spiritual practice? One definition is "specific activities you do to deepen your relationships with the sacred and the world around you." I might add that spiritual practices seek to alter the relationship between stimuli and response, altering our patterns and reactions. Spiritual practices invite us to create new patterns that might shape our perceptions, responses, and emotional state differently, to push us closer to the Lord to the person we want to become.

I use the term spiritual practice openly. I'm not advocating for a specific set of practices such as what the term spiritual disciplines sometimes denotes. Spiritual disciplines may refer to prayer or fasting or charity, referring to a certain set of prescribed activities, and their application can quickly feel overbearing or burdensome. Rather, a spiritual practice could be a whole range of possible activities or practices done with this question in mind – how would I see, feel, or think differently by doing this every day, or every time a certain stimulus happens or every time you feel yourself growing stiff or angry or distant?

I chose a Mary Oliver poem this morning. If there was ever a person who has chosen practices that shape her perceptions, emotional response, and way of being in the world, I think of Mary Oliver. Her spiritual practice is clearly to be in nature and to observe and to write poetry about it.

Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,
which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.

Now, one can be critical of Mary Oliver, as I sometimes am. Because it seems some balance might be appropriate. There are real problems in the world, but by all means Mary, stare at a bird again. I mean, how valuable can you be to the world if all you do is stare at nature, and how many poems can you write about observing

nature. Similar criticisms might be lobbed at the fly-fisher, I suspect. Well, as Mary Oliver, demonstrated, the answer is quite a lot of poems can be written.

It makes me think of my favorite quote by E.B. White. He says: “I wake in the morning torn between a desire to enjoy the world, and a desire to improve the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.” And caught in that bind, it might lead us to be paralyzed, to be blinded by the ultimate questions and failure to prioritize and act. Whereas, for Mary Oliver, she has chosen her practice, identified her particular calling, and chosen the activities that shape her view of God, the world, and that determine her own emotional responses to both God and world.

I think of Tom Roth who gets up way too early every morning to read and pray, or the Bennetts who spend their pre-dawn hours every day with goats. Or my friend Jack whose phone sounds an alarm every evening at nine pm for him to stop and pray for others. Or I think of what I described in the MWU, a time when our kids were younger, we would keep bottles of water or snacks or “blessing bags” with socks and tooth brushes and such in the car. This way, we would always have something to offer a homeless person on the corner. And after the day that Hudson almost gave a grown man his child-size coat insisting upon offering something, we became more disciplined about having something in the car to give.

Now our practice of handing out water or a power bar or a blessing bag was not the end all to homelessness. One may criticize our practice, demean its effectiveness. But what it did do is cultivate a compassionate response, to affirm our kids’ soft hearts and their belief that something small can be significant, and to be willing to do something.

What do our practices do to us, for us? How do they shape our responses, shape the way we see and respond to God, shape the way we see and respond to ourselves, and shape the way we see and respond to others?

When I was in the coursework phase of my Ph.D., we spent a fair amount of time learning of various approaches to the study of religion and to the study of the bible. And one shift in the study of religion in recent years is the shift from determining or describing religion based on its set of beliefs and to being more attentive to the practices. The premise is that 1) the focus on belief is a western, protestant perspective that gets widely applied, and that 2) it is the shaping practices and habits that do as much to form a religious perspective and experience than anything else. For example, even here this morning, we probably have a lot of different beliefs and ideas at play, if we spent time unearthing them, but what gives the impression and experience of religious commonality is our coming together,

singing together, praying together, coming to one table – the practices that shape us in common ways.

A benefit of this approach is that we might stop thinking of God as some kind of belief accountant, that what is most important to God is you believe in the right ways, getting your doctrine of the trinity just so in your head. And that we might be more attentive to the ways we act in the world and how those actions and rhythms shape us. For anyone who walks every day, or those that sit and knit or crochet, or those of us to tie flies, or those that work with wood, we know there is a relationship between the physical activity and our mental and emotional state. Yes? And sometimes, to change our way of thinking or feeling, we have to do something physically, change our posture, move in some way. And, even those that literally meditate, or do yoga, there is a real focus and attentiveness to every breath, every movement. It is very active.

So, in thinking about spiritual practices, we might be more attentive to the habits and rhythms that have already shaped our thinking, and our reacting, and we might consider if those are serving us well. And we might consider what new practice we might take on, not because we have all things figured out, but that by doing that thing for a while, we might shape differently how we see, think, feel, or act in the world, and in response to the circumstances of our lives.

I think of our OT readings which implore us to certain habits. The Old Testament writers, you may notice, don't spend a lot of time telling us a theology of the scriptures. They don't tell us what to believe about the bible, other than it came from the Lord. Rather these scriptures tell us of the practices that may shape God's people's responses to the world and that may cultivate rhythms that keep them faithful to the Lord over time. They speak of meditating on the law, to internalize God's word and to talk about it on our ways, to recite these to our children and to bind these very words to our being.

Now any practice can lead to staunchness, to legalism, to rigidity. Certainly, our traditions that focus on the written word have been guilty of this. But, what effect would it have upon you if you did this every day? How would it affect the ways your heart and mind respond to circumstances?

“so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.” We often interpret this as if you obey as God wants you to, then God will bless you and give you good. But perhaps we could read this in light of practices. That if you meditate on the book of the law, Torah, it will shape how you act, and how you act

in regular ways will result in a life, in patterns. And that by beginning with the Word and with the right practices, this will shape a life that is fruitful and fulfilling.

And as it stands to reason, for humans like us, that get off track at times, that have to keep repenting and changing direction, that perhaps we have to change up our practices and rhythms from time to time.

So, as worship the next month and a half, as we read our scriptures and consider things like forgiveness and justice and reconciliation and sacraments, we will not try to figure it all out for absolute truth. We will not try to understand it perfectly and thus paralyze ourselves in the dilemmas. We will try to think about the practices that might move us closer to the Lord, and that might reshape the way we respond and react, to reshape the way we think and feel and move – so that we might grow in fresh ways in those great commandments, to Love the Lord with all our being, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And all God's people said...

Joshua 1:8

⁸ This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.

Deuteronomy 6:

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Mark 1: 35-39

A Preaching Tour in Galilee

(Mt 4:23–25; Lk 4:42–44)

³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” ³⁸ He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” ³⁹ And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.