

The Elizabethan



The Newsletter of St. Elizabeth Episcopal Church Burien, Washington

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From Fr. John: ON MEDITATION

“At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.”

-- T.S. Eliot

The Anglican poet, T.S. Eliot also said that, for most of us, there is only the unattended moment. The mind undisciplined by meditation is filled with scattered preoccupations – memories, conflict, plans for the future, envy, day-dreaming, sexual distractions and so on. Our undisciplined minds are like monkeys swinging from limb to limb. The goal of meditation, if that can be said of the practice, is to learn to attend to the moment by disciplining the mind. Beyond that, meditation is also a powerful and exceptionally effective spiritual exercise. The Quakers call it “bringing the mind to center.” Below the noise, there at the still center, is the dance; the presence of the Trinity.

St. Benedict didn't refer to meditation specifically, at least in the way that many of us have come to understand it, but the sensibility is woven throughout the Rule's guidance on prayer and certainly on lectio divina, or meditative reading, which we'll discuss in a later issue of the Elizabethan. Benedict's understanding of human spiritual growth was heavily influenced by the early church Father John Cassian to whom we can turn to learn more about Christian meditation.

Cassian lived in desert for almost 11 years where he had contact with the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the followers of the first apostles who went into the desert like Jesus to seek solitude and contemplation. Cassian brought back their teachings back and wrote his Conferences, in which he explored a number of spiritual topics. In his discussions on prayer, Cassian likens the mind to a waterwheel, continual in its motion. Because it seems intent on this motion, Cassian advises, why not use a phrase to keep it occupied while your spirit prays? He suggests using a significant phrase from scripture, such as “O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me” repeatedly as a way to free the spirit in prayer from the mind's distractions. This is a form of meditation that has been practiced, studied and advanced most notably in the Buddhist tradition. It has been neglected in parts of Christianity to our detriment.

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Our Food Cupboard

The winter months are upon us and traditionally this is when our food cupboard is used the most by our neighbors in need.

Typical items needed are spam, tuna, Vienna sausage, canned meat spreads, top ramen noodles packets, mac & cheese, canned soup, canned fruit, applesauce, canned chili or other ready to eat canned products (spaghetti-o's, etc), cereal, canned vegetables, toilet paper, toothpaste, you get the idea.

You don't need to make a special trip to the store or spend a lot of money – the next time you are at the grocery store, throw a can of spam in your cart and bring it to the church on Sunday when you come to the service.

Every little bit helps. The families are very appreciative of anything they get.

The Women of St. E will be having their after bazaar business luncheon on December 9th at 11:30 am at Mark Restaurant in Olde Burien. This meeting will be used to talk about our bazaar and to decide on what to do with the remaining amount.

Please plan on being there!!

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Why meditate? Physically, meditation can produce lower blood pressure, and increase body awareness and sustained relaxation. From the psychological perspective, meditation is a technique for the deautomization of one's personality, disidentification with the self, breaking down of defenses and development of the unconscious, producing responses ranging from reduced self-concern and self-consciousness to increased spontaneity and concentration. But it is in the realm of the spirit that meditation is most marvelous. Many of the great saints are examples of how prolonged, deep prayer and interiority leads to the breaking open of our contracted egos into deeper resources of personality and access to God.

So how do we tether our wandering minds, which the Desert Fathers and Mothers called our donkey minds? One method, already mentioned, is to use a repeated sound, syllable or phrase (called a mantra, a Sanskrit word that means "tool for thinking") such as Cassian mentioned. One of my personal favorites is "Be still and know that I am God." But don't be limited by your own culture: another Sanskrit word, "sohan," meaning "I am it," goes well with breathing meditation rhythms. A more familiar and excellent option is the Jesus prayer, a gift from the Eastern church through the Byzantine to Latin monasticism: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner" or simply "Jesus Christ, have mercy on me" if that fits your theology better.

Another approach to meditation is to use visualization, or yantra. This might be as involved as the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, or as simple as praying before a crucifix or the exposed Holy Sacrament, at the altar or before an icon. Henri Nouwen, the prolific and gifted Roman Catholic theologian, wrote in "Behold the Beauty of the Lord," and elsewhere, about "icon-gazing," which is the practice of maintaining an open focus without any formal structure to internalize the presence of an icon of some personal significance. The Ignatian exercises are far more systematic, but may provide discipline that you can't muster for yourself at first. And between the two, is the practice of "centering prayer" as taught by Cistercian Abbots Fr. Basil Pennington and Fr. Thomas Keating, a technique that provides some structure, but also allows room for a certain spontaneity. Know thyself and to thyself be true!

Are you oriented more toward images than sounds? Try praying to the Spirit silently, that is, entirely without thoughts while concentrating on an icon or representation of the Trinity. If you tend to think in words and phrases instead of pictures, try a breathing meditation as a way to tie down the mind. Of course, you can use both and will find some value in trying different approaches. What I've suggested are just a few options to help you start.

As with any new practice, you'll seem to be getting nowhere for a time. You'll be frequently distracted as your body and mind fight the new discipline. Later, you'll stumble upon insights that take you away from your mental silence. Learn to let them all go. (If they truly are inspired thoughts, they'll come back later.) Simply acknowledge that you are having a thought or a physical experience, and then let the thought, perception or feeling go. Go back to your mantra or yantra as often as necessary. In time, these will lead you to deeper and deeper states. You'll learn to let these deeper perceptions go as well.

There is a story told about a young monk who goes rushing out of the chapel with great excitement, yelling: "Father Abbot, Father Abbot! I've been deep in contemplation and I've seen the face of Christ!"

"Oh, dear," says the Abbot calmly, "well, don't worry. It will pass."

The "purpose" of meditation is to be present to God without purpose. It has rightly been called "wasting time with God." With enough time "wasted" in that peaceful, quiet space and non-agenda time, the heart, mind and spirit begin to center in unity with God. A dear friend of mine, Sr. Donald Corcoran, once put it this way: "At our own center we find the center of all centers; the infinite, loving mystery that, far from isolating us, brings us into true communion with others, with nature, with God. Our life is whole, harmonized, integrated, enriched even as it is simplified." Waste a little time with God this season. Be still and know that God is. Be still. Be.

Operation Nightwatch

Collecting socks here at St. Elizabeth was a booming success with over 130 pairs of socks collected. Father John is going to continue to collect socks during Advent along with travel size deodorants for the homeless that rely on Operation Nightwatch for comfort and hope.

Hospitality House News

Every month the house sends out a list of urgent needs and wants for the women at the shelter and every church that participates with the dinner program receives one. Ours is posted on the bulletin board by the drinking fountain. If you have the inclination, please take a look. There is a basket in the office for the collection of items and they get delivered to the house often.

Just a thought...

Every dollar in a church budget represents one person's generosity and goodwill. The church budget is not a necessary evil or a mere tool; it is a celebration of organized generosity.

Worrying won't stop the bad stuff from happening—it just stops you from enjoying the good.

The Elizabethan

The Elizabethan is published monthly by St. Elizabeth Episcopal Church. The deadline for articles is the fourth Friday of each month.

Articles, calendar items and ideas may be mailed or emailed to the addresses below or left in *The Elizabethan* box in the Parish Office.

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What inspiration, blind faith, and a Visa card can accomplish...

St Elizabeth's Episcopal Church is making a difference in the lives of girls in Aweil, South Sudan.

Imagine. What if you had to choose between feeding your children and supplying sanitary supplies to your daughters? It has become clear that women and girls in South Sudan need a quality answer for feminine hygiene which they can count on month after month. They needed something that was comfortable, effective AND discrete, giving back days of possibility, safety and dignity. In third world countries, girls miss at least 180 days of school in three years without such supplies. They use leaves, mattress stuffing, corn husks, rocks, the list goes on... all to try to stay in school. This also affects early marriage, as menstruating girls who are not in school are considered "eligible" regardless of age. It turns out this issue is one of the keys to social change. Hard to imagine? Yet true all over the world. Every girl in the world deserves education, safety and dignity, which quality sanitary hygiene helps to provide.

St. Elizabeth decided to act. They applied for one of the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia's 2015 Millennium Development Goals Grants. After several months of anxiously waiting and praying, we received the wonderful news that St. Elizabeth had been awarded the grant. This money went a long way in helping to cover the costs of creating the kits, because up to this time all materials had been purchased with blind faith and a personal Visa card.

Worlds away from South Sudan, in Burien, Wash., the Spirit touched hearts and inspired women. Adopting the model used by Days for Girls International, and with the support and encouragement of our priest, Fr. John, a group of St. Elizabeth's women enthusiastically embraced the task of making 125 feminine hygiene kits for the girls at Marial Bai Secondary School in Aweil, South Sudan. Each kit contains a colorful handmade drawstring bag, two moisture-proof shields, eight absorbent liners, two pair panties, wash cloth, two one-gallon Zip Lock bags, a bar of soap and a visual card of instructions for the proper use of the kit items. The kits are sustainable for at least three years.

St. Elizabeth's junior warden, Gwynne Taylor, bought several hundred yards of fabric and the women began to sew. Over several months, the fruit of labor and love began to appear. Upon completion of sewing the shields and liners, and once the other components of the kit had been purchased, the time came that everyone involved had looked forward to. It was time to pack the kits and to celebrate a job of love and sisterhood. St. Elizabeth's women contributed hundreds of hours of labor and dedication. In return, they felt they had helped to answer God's call to reach out to girls a world away from Burien.

Just recently, the kits were delivered to the Deng foundation in San Francisco, CA. The foundation is the founder of Marial Bai School in Aweil. Mr. Deng is providing transportation of the kits to South Sudan.

Faithful servants, it was a job well done!

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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

I would like to thank everyone who took the time to complete Time & Talent Pledges for 2016. My goal is to share the results with Fr. John and the leaders for the various groups by the end of the month so that they can contact you directly. For those of you who suggested new opportunities, I'll be in touch with you in January.

What a great way to start the New Year. If you have any questions you can contact me at sjktierney@gmail.com.

PS Time and Talent Pledge forms are available in the Office if yours has gone missing. Sue Tierney