

Being Present so We Don't Miss the Present

Luke 24:36b-48

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I want to begin with some news to keep you updated. During these last few weeks, I have been working on a grant application to provide funding to cover my sabbatical in just over a year from now. The Lilly Foundation, which is a philanthropic arm of the Eli Lilly Corporation offers 125 grants each year of up to \$50,000 per congregation through their clergy renewal program.

As you'll remember from our annual meeting, the Presbytery of Southern New England is now requiring that sabbaticals be included in clergy terms of call after 6 years of service. For me, that will be next year.

My grant theme is "Connection with God, self and others as a path to spirituality." The programs and activities in which I will be participating are aimed at providing deep reflection and renewal by connecting with God self and others, so that I may better do my ministry here in the upcoming years.

The generous grant provides funding to the congregation to hire a full-time pastor to come in my absence for 3 months as well as to allow me to travel, study, rest and grow. It was an extensive application, and has allowed me to dream a bit with some of our leaders about what I would do with extended periods of time to stop and be present in the moment, and how that can potentially benefit the congregation as well. We will hear whether we will be granted those funds in late August. May God's will be done!

One of the activities I've planned to do is to go on a 5 day silent retreat at the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth in Wernersville, PA. From 1987 to 2000 when I adopted Peyton, I went to the Jesuit Center two times a year for anywhere from 3 to 7 days of silent retreat. I only got to speak one hour a day, to the priest or nun who was providing spiritual direction. During those times, my experience, without exception, was that the first 24 hours are the most difficult. Excruciating, in fact. Going from a fast-paced life to a sudden halt of all activity and communication to silence made me want to crawl the walls. But invariably, after some hours, there would be a settling down of my spirit to be still, to be present in the moment...fully present. And great things would happen from there. Every single time I went there...God did showed me amazing things, brought about deep healing...all by taking time to be present, to pray, to meditate and to listen. Having a spiritual director helped me to discern what was going on during my periods of prayer, by guiding me to different scripture passages upon which to meditate.

During those retreats, one of the most interesting exercises is to eat in silence with others at the table. People are encouraged to eat slowly and savor each bite...to receive the food, to chew intentionally and consider what is being taken into your body. It may sound ridiculous...and many times I've caught myself holding back laughter as I have looked around the room to see dozens of people doing the same thing...but there is a point. Mindfulness. Being present in the moment.

You're going to hear a myriad of quotes throughout this sermon from people who have practiced mindfulness far more than I. Listen and hear truth....

Buddhist Monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, says “Many of us live like dead people because we live without awareness. We carry our dead bodies with us and circulate throughout the world. We are pulled into the past or we are pulled forward into the future or we are caught by our projects or our despair and anger. We are not truly alive; we are not inhabited by awareness of the miracle of being alive.” (Thich Nhat Hanh, No Death, No Fear)

And...“The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it.” (Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life)

The disciples could have used a big dose of mindfulness. In Luke’s account, the disciples ridiculed the women who told them what they had seen earlier that day at the empty tomb. They even accused them of telling idle tales, that’s lies! After that, the risen Christ appeared to Cleopas and his friend as they walked on the road to Emmaus, right before this morning’s story. The two men were busy talking about their shock and disbelief over the empty tomb and totally missed the risen Christ walking along with them. Fortunately for them, the risen one stayed with them, and it was as they broke bread together that they recognized him.

Have you ever been so caught up in your own emotional stories that you miss something going on right in front of you?

Flash to the next scene. Cleopas and his friend went to be with the disciples, and told them what had happened. The risen Christ came among them and said, “Peace (Shalom) be with you.” They didn’t know what to do. They were frightened out of their wits. They questioned their reality. They were not present.

The antidote? The risen Christ told them to feel his hands and feet. To bring them right into the moment, to the physical and out of where their fear had taken them, which was somewhere else.

Mindfulness Teacher James Baraz says this: “Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different; enjoying the pleasant without holding on when it changes (which it will); being with the unpleasant without fearing it will always be this way (which it won’t).”

Then the risen One said...I’m hungry. Got anything to eat? How present can you get?!! And he ate a piece of fish right in front of them.

Then, as they stood, mouths gaping open, the risen Christ went back over, once again the teachings he had been trying to reveal to them about his mission and his purpose. This time they “got it.” They “got it” because they were still long enough to have their minds opened to the scriptures—the Hebrew prophecies which he said he had come to fulfill.

I wonder what the disciples thought after that. Maybe it was something like...“Oh NOW I understand what he was trying to tell us all along,” or “How did I miss all this before?” Don’t get me wrong, I find myself very much in their shoes most of the time in life. The reality is I miss so much in my life because I am thinking about the next thing, or what I’m going to say, or do. Perhaps I’m still held by some old belief which keeps me from seeing things other than as they really are. Are you anything like me?

In his book, *The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have*, philosopher and poet Mark Nepo says, “We waste so much energy trying to cover up who we are when beneath every attitude is the want to be loved, and beneath every anger is a wound to be healed and beneath every sadness is the fear that there will not be enough time.

When we hesitate in being direct, we unknowingly slip something on, some added layer of protection that keeps us from feeling the world, and often that thin covering is the beginning of a loneliness which, if not put down, diminishes our chances of joy.

It's like wearing gloves every time we touch something, and then, forgetting we chose to put them on, we complain that nothing feels quite real. Our challenge each day is not to get dressed to face the world but to unglove ourselves so that the doorknob feels cold and the car handle feels wet and the kiss goodbye feels like the lips of another being, soft and unrepeatable."

What a lovely description of being present, of being mindful. It's raw, it's vulnerable, and it describes so well how we can so easily miss the Spirit in our daily lives.

Being mindful takes practice and it's difficult. In fact, I can already feel some discomfort over my retreat planned for next year, remembering what that first 24 will be like. Oh sure I can sit in meditation for up to 20 minutes without too much problem, but then I'm off and running. But you don't have to go to such extreme measures to practice mindfulness. If 20 minutes seems like a century for you, why not try just 5 minutes a day? Just sit in silence and as thoughts come by, just let them pass. The more you practice, the better you'll get and I promise the more you will be able to be present in your day. An article I read this week promises that daily meditation also increases longevity!

I came across a really interesting podcast this week as I was preparing for this sermon. The title, Christ on the Psych Ward, jumped out at me, so I listened to the 55 minute production and am glad I did. The title come from David Finnegan-Hosey's book of the same name. It was recorded just last week.

Finnegan-Hosey currently serves as a chaplain-in-residence at Georgetown University, having previously worked with campus ministries at American University and the University of Hawaii. He holds an M.Div from Wesley Theological Seminary. In 2011, David was diagnosed with bipolar disorder after a series of psychiatric hospitalizations.

Sharing from his own journey, David Finnegan-Hosey shares how faith communities can be present alongside those suffering from mental illness and crises.

A few weeks ago, I preached about the importance of the ministry of presence—of just being with someone in crisis without fixing them or giving solutions, as an example of how Jesus was in some of his interactions. The reality is, most of us are not professional helpers. We don't have the skills to lead someone to mental, physical, spiritual or emotional help. But we can be there, we can be present with them in the moment. That's being mindful, even if it feels uncomfortable.

We may even say the wrong thing. Finnegan-Hosey recalls when he was hospitalized at one point of his own journey. "We don't know what words to use; (We want) to come alongside someone but not make it worse." In his time of crisis, he says, "I remember who was there but not what they said....like grace, it is enough. (Oh sure), People said dumb stuff and you (are) an exposed nerve; but showing up is what's important;"

Community is messy...we'll say dumb things; we will hurt each other's feelings. "Mike you said something that hurt my feelings and I know you wouldn't want to but..." But the beauty of authentic community is the reconnection, the owning of one's actions and the miracle of being present enough to make reconnection.

Finnegan-Hosey spends his time ministering to college kids as a residential chaplain at Georgetown along with his wife. He says, "Loneliness is the most common pastoral care need I respond to." Think about it. You have a population of which the vast majority are 18-22 surrounded by peers; everyone else is having a great time and has a friend group; He sees the ones who say, "I'm the only one." Because he has been through his own desolate period and forced himself to be with himself, Finnegan-Hosey says he can sit with them in that space, and it's needed he says because campuses are experiencing mental health crises...The number of students seeking services is higher than ever; Thank God for him...as a mother of a college student, thank God for him.

In her book, *Don't Just Do Something, Sit There: A Mindfulness Retreat* with Sylvia Boorstein, the author says, "Mindfulness meditation doesn't change life. Life remains as fragile and unpredictable as ever. Meditation changes the heart's capacity to accept life as it is. It teaches the heart to be more accommodating, not by beating it into submission, but by making it clear that accommodation is a gratifying choice."

So let's stand with the disciples and embrace them, in all their awkwardness. Remember, we have the advantage of having read the end of the story. We know that the Risen Christ, the Spirit of the living God remains with us and empowers us to do all things. So let's act on it!

Perhaps my favorite quote I found on mindfulness is this. It's by Bo Lozoff

"Like a child standing in a beautiful park with his eyes shut tight, there's no need to imagine trees, flowers, deer, birds, and sky; we merely need to open our eyes and realize what is already here, who we already are - as soon as we stop pretending we're small or unholy."

May it be so! Amen and Amen!