

“Finding God, Finding Ourselves”
Psalm 46:10 & Mark 4:39

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March 2, 2020

When I lived in New England, I was close to an incredible yoga retreat center called Kripalu. Kripalu is tucked into the Berkshires in Massachusetts surrounded by mountains, overlooking a lake, and serving the best plant-based food in the region. Everything about Kripalu is designed to help you tune into your body and spirit. In addition to the wide variety of yoga that you would expect at a yoga retreat center, the whole place radiates a kind of stillness that sinks into your bones. After an hour at Kripalu your pulse slows down, your anxiety drifts away into the atmosphere, and you find yourself walking around with a permanent quiet smile on your face.

I went to Kripalu for the first time over ten years ago for a 3 day retreat with my best friend Molly. We would start our morning with sunrise gentle yoga and a delicious breakfast together, and then we would go our separate ways to workshops and classes, meeting back up at mealtime and again for sunset yoga. We'd inevitably cross paths on the grounds during the day - there was a nap room that probably had a more official name but I called it the nap room because it was filled with natural light, comfy chairs, and always had a dozen people snoring through their close-eyed meditations. We'd run into each other in the nap room and silently laugh together when someone's meditative snores got too loud. I walked through the garden labyrinth one afternoon and high fived Molly as she crossed my path going in the opposite direction. It was great to have a friend to compare experiences with and to ground myself in the midst of so many new experiences. The retreat was one of the most spiritually renewing experiences I've

ever had and the effects followed me home, introducing new practices and ways of being fully present in my daily life.

The second time I went to Kripalu was a few years later when I went alone for a retreat. I did not have the same relaxing, enchanted experience that I had on my first retreat with Molly. I went to the same classes, and they were fine, but I couldn't find my rhythm or balance. I thought that going alone would deepen my experience - encourage me to go deeper mentally and spiritually, but the opposite happened. I felt a little disconnected from the space. I walked through the garden labyrinth aimlessly instead of in contemplation. I went to the communal nap room but couldn't get comfortable in my seat and got annoyed at the snores of the people around me. It was an okay retreat, but I didn't go home with the same mindset or with the same level of renewal that I felt the first time.

Through these two experiences I discovered that part of my sense of spirituality is relational. I had done other retreats and experiences that called for absolute silence or extended periods alone and they just don't connect with me. For a long time I thought that I was somehow deficient because I did not enjoy these experiences or type of prayerful connection. I thought I had to try harder, be silent longer, and find more discipline in order to be the kind of centered, self-awakened, spiritually inspiring person I assumed we were all called to be.

But going on a retreat with a good friend, and then again solo, made me realize that part of the joy and rejuvenation I experienced was because I was with someone who became a part of my journey - our friendship was a touchstone I could return to, a person to process my experience with, and someone who challenged me to step outside my comfort zone while knowing I wasn't the only one doing so. These two experiences at Kripalu were an important part in beginning to understand that there are many different ways we can tap into our sense of

spirituality and it requires trying many different things before we can understand what works best for us. This is true about spirituality in general, and is especially true when we start talking about prayer.

Although we pray a lot in church, we don't actually talk about it a lot. Instead we jump right into an instructive or experiential exploration of prayer - we pray together saying the words in unison, we say different prayers each week and we repeat a few favorites every time we are gathered. We pray in silence, we pray with words that are prewritten and I lead us in prayers that are made up on the spot. We pray through music, both listening to it and singing it ourselves, and we offer each other blessings - a type of prayer - to each other when we pass the peace each week. But never do I stand up here and say, "How would you all like to pray today?" Or I don't ask, "Is there any kind of prayer that we've been neglecting? What kind of prayers do people need in order to feel most connected with God today or what would we like to try together?"

We rely on the traditions of our community to guide us in our prayerful words and prayerful actions, but we don't talk much about what we're doing, why we do it, and truthfully, we don't spend a lot of time exploring different types of prayer together in worship. It looks pretty similar week after week, and I imagine if it doesn't connect with you, it might be challenging to stay connected to worship in the church or connected to God through this hour.

This Lent, the opportunity before us is to explore prayer. Lent is the 40 days before Easter, and it marks the 40 days that Jesus spent alone in the wilderness. It was a time of wrestling with his demons and searching for connection with God, and so each Lent we strive to create our own wilderness season where we seek a renewed connection with God. Some people do that by giving up something that keeps them separate from God or from their faith values. Fasting from meat, giving up Facebook, giving up negative self-talk are all examples of things or

behaviors people might give up during this time. In more recent years it has become popular to take on a practice, to add something enriching to your life that draws you toward your faith and allows you to practice it in a new way. Some folks take the season to read a new section of the Bible, keep a daily gratitude journal, or volunteer in their community.

This year for Lent Edgewood is doing a deep dive into prayer. Each of us is asked to consider the role prayer plays in our life and to explore new ways of praying and talking with God. In worship I'll be weaving in different ways of praying. I strongly encourage folks to come back to Edgewood each Wednesday evening from 7-8pm for our weekly workshops where we'll experiment with new prayer practices and dig deep into what feels weird or uncomfortable or new about having a personal prayer practice. And we are also offering a daily writing prompt as a written prayer practice and encouraging folks to share their written reflections in an Edgewood Facebook group. There is still time to join this and even if you don't do it daily, you are more than welcome. We're on the fifth day of Lent and I've only written one day so clearly daily is a sliding scale around here.

Prayer is the opening of our spirits to the divine. It is tuning our hearts and minds toward our Creator and setting forth intentions that align with our faith and our God. I don't think prayer changes God - I think God's spirit is always at work in the world and in each of us, but I do think prayer changes us. I think it can transform how we move through the world, what we do individually and collectively, and can shift energy in ways that sometimes feel powerful and life-changing.

Recently I attended a lecture by Tamara Hamilton, a professional speaker on diversity and resilience. Hamilton talked about how we constantly expend and renew energy in four domains of resilience in our bodies: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. It is only when

these four domains are in balance that we have coherence. Hamilton calls these the dangling threads that are up to us to weave together.

Hearing her talk about our bodies in these four distinct ways caused a lightbulb to go on for me. When we talk about our physical needs, we know that those needs look different from person to person. We have different diets that keep each of us healthy. We have different exercise needs. And not just the amount of exercise needed but the type: some people find joy as bikers, others are swimmers or runners, others prefer yoga or something else all together. And we spend a lot of time throughout our life trying out different activities to find the one that works best for our needs. The same is true of our mental health - some of us go to therapy periodically as the need arises and others of us have had a committed therapist for many years. Others of us see a therapist and a psychiatrist to find the right balance of support for our mental health. And emotionally, anyone who has ever been in a relationship with another human knows we all have different emotional needs and it is important that we figure out what those needs are and how we can get them met in healthy ways or else we're a little bit of a nightmare to live with.

So we all expect to spend time working on our physical health, our mental health, and our emotional health. We know that it looks different for every single person in here and it's a lot of trial and error, lifelong learning, and adaption required to find what works best for us. Why would it be any different for our spiritual domain? Do we expect to spend time working on our spiritual health or trying different practices to deepen our sense of spirituality? Why don't we talk about it in the same way or commit to it in our daily lives the way we do going to the gym or making an appointment with our therapist? We're all here at church on a Sunday morning so it's a little bit like preaching to the choir, but I do think that coming here and taking in whatever is offered without questioning, exploring, or trying things on during the rest of the week isn't as

robust as it could be. I often wonder if our spirituality is as strongly woven with our other dangling thread domains in our bodies.

This Lent the invitation is to tend to our spirituality through prayer. Try praying with someone else and see how that feels. Try praying alone and see if you have better luck than I have. Try praying to the words someone else has written or try writing your own. Pray with your body, pray as you move, pray in your car or at work or school or even with your family the next time you all happen to be sitting somewhere together whether it's at a dinner table or crowded on couches. We will be exploring it together in worship, in Wednesday evening workshops, and through Facebook with our writing.

Our guiding texts are these two verses that call us to be still. "Be still" might more accurately be translated today as be in tune: be in tune with who God is, where God is speaking in your life, where God is calling you, through the storm and into the calm. Being in tune with God comes through prayer - through talking to God, to listening for the Holy Spirit, to reflecting on where Jesus' journey might echo in your own life today. This Lent the call is for us to be still, to be in prayer, to begin or deepen our practice of listening to God in our lives. You all know now that I'm not a fan of taking spiritual journeys by myself, so I'm grateful that we are taking this Lenten journey together, knowing we might end up in different places, but trusting that this is a church where it is safe to explore, learn, and grow together.