

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Susan Scott, Guest Preacher

June 25, 2017

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Galatians 5:16-26

Drinking in Life, Part 1

Several years ago I took a walk in the woods with my oldest son, who is an ecologist. Had I taken that walk alone, and you had asked me to tell you about the animals I had observed, I would have mentioned some pesky mosquitoes and some birds I heard singing, whom I could not identify. However, Eric had spent the walk pointing out to me dozens of animals. Animals he identified by their tracks, by their song, by the way they moved through the underbrush — or the lower level canopy, or the middle-level canopy, or the upper-level canopy, by their bite marks, and by their scat. While neither of us had actually seen an animal directly (other than those mosquitoes), he was tuned into those hidden from our sight, while I was oblivious. How had that come about? Since he was a small child, he has been an avid observer of the natural world, and a student of it, eventually getting his Ph.D. in zoology. Had a deer walked across our path, no doubt we would both have noticed it; but it took someone trained and attentive to see the more subtle evidence of the animal world.

In a similar fashion, we would all notice if God appeared before us in a burning bush, as Moses experienced. But how many of us go through our ordinary days oblivious to the God who is always present? Think how much richer your life would be if you cultivated an awareness of the One who is head-over-heels in love with you and lived securely held by that knowledge throughout the day. In order to promote that awareness, Christians through the centuries have developed a host of spiritual practices, ways you can intentionally connect with God. In our reading from Galatians, we heard Paul talk about “walking in the Spirit”, that is, staying in step with God — that’s what spiritual practices are all about. All of you are participating in one right now — corporate worship. I hope many of you have the habit of reading your Bible and praying daily. This week and next week, I plan to teach you two other spiritual practices.

The “examen” is today’s topic. How many of you have heard of the examen? (show of hands) St. Ignatius Loyola developed this exercise back in the 1500s and, if we were Jesuits, we would be expected to practice it twice a day. This is a spiritual exercise of discernment and a way of becoming more tuned into God’s presence throughout your days. It helps you clarify what gives you life and what robs you of life.

Rather than my simply jabbering on about it, I would like us to try it out in a very simple form. After we do so, I will comment further. So, are you all with me? You all were handed some scrap paper on your way in, that is for you to use if you find it helpful to write down the things I will direct you to think about. For some of us, writing is an easy way to capture our thoughts, for others, it gets in the way. Do what is best for you in that regard.

Let’s begin. Still yourself on the inside and the outside before God. Open yourself up to God’s love and rest there for a moment, soaking in it. (pause) Now place your hand on your heart and silently ask the Holy Spirit to show you the moment from this weekend for which you are most grateful. If you could relive one moment, which one would it be? (pause) Silently talk to God, or write to God, about that moment: what made it special? What was it like to be in that moment? (pause) Breathe in your gratitude to God for that moment and let it feed you again. (pause) Think: what did you learn about yourself in this? Again, talk to God about this or write about it. (pause) If we had more time, I would have you get into groups of two or three and talk about this, but we don’t, so I encourage you to seek out someone during the day and discuss this.

Now we'll try the flip side of this exercise. Let's quiet ourselves down and refocus our attention on God. Breathe in God's presence, open yourself up to God's love again. (pause) Open your palms and ask the Holy Spirit to show you the moment from this weekend for which you are least grateful. When were you least able to give and receive love? (pause) What made that moment difficult? Be with your feelings; don't try to change them or clean them up; offer them up to God. Talk or write to God about this. (pause) Where was God in that difficult moment? Thank God that he is always with you and ready to listen to you. (pause) If this moved you, or gave you a new insight, I encourage you to find someone appropriate to share it with later today.

The examen is most useful when practiced regularly over time, but we got a little taste of it today. So, how was this? (solicit feedback) Just a note about the things I asked you to do with your hands — put them on your heart, open up your palms. Our bodies can participate in our prayers; in some Christian traditions, you wouldn't consider praying except on your knees; in others it is routine to raise your hands while praying. None of those gestures is required for prayer, but when they are done intentionally, they can contribute to the experience and help keep us focused. It is a way of bringing more of yourself into attention before God.

What good does the examen do? When I was taking my training to become a spiritual director, I was doing the examen daily. What was underscored for me, was that my job was killing me and that I desperately needed more connection with people. At the time, I was the solo pastor of a small congregation. When I had taken that position, I had a husband and two children living at home. By the time I was doing the examen, I had lost the husband and the children had grown up and moved away. What had been fine — working largely alone — was draining me now. I noticed that all my best moments had to do with being with other people. I held this out to the Lord and stayed observant. Over time, new possibilities opened up for me, and I am now serving as a part-time associate pastor at a young, growing church, serving alongside a team of pastors. In addition, I am building a spiritual direction practice with private clients. I feel like new life has been pumped back into my body and soul. Those of you with teens who are thinking about the future — this is an exercise they could do to help them figure out what gives them life. Should they go to college, or should they study a trade? This is an exercise you can do while pondering retirement, or moving, or having a child. This is an exercise you can do about your work, or your family life, or a meeting you've been in. What gives you life? What robs you of life? The examen is intended to help us pay attention to what our minds and our bodies are trying to tell us, it is a way of listening to the data of our lives and bringing that to God, leaning more deeply into God's presence and coming more into alignment with God's purposes for us.

There are other ways to "do" the examen, other sets of questions you can ask, for instance, instead of asking about the most grateful and least grateful moments, you could ask about the moment you gave or received the most love or the least love; or what was the most life-giving part of your day vs. the most life-thwarting part of your day, or what was your moment of greatest closeness to God and the moment of greatest distance from God. Perhaps one of those sets of questions resonates better with you. In your bulletin you will find some resources should you want to learn more about this practice. One of them is this book, *Sleeping With Bread*; it describes the examen in greater detail and offers many suggestions for how you might use it, replete with illustrations about how it has been useful to people in a variety of circumstances. If you would like to try the examen out with your children, a very simple version is to have an "I spy God" conversation over dinner or before bed, in which you each talk about the times during the day when you were most aware of God.