

## **SERMON SERIES on PRAYER AND DISCERNMENT**

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*This is the first in a series of reflections and worksheets on the theme of prayer and discernment.*

*While most people think of discernment as decision-making, I want us to stretch and deepen our insight into this faith-filled process. In particular, I am hoping that many of you will engage in deepening your own prayer and meditation practices, so that, when we gather on Sundays, and at decision-making meetings, we will be able to do so from a much deeper place.*

*Our congregation is actually pretty spiritual, and I have found that many of you have practices of your own. Some more regular than others, but that's true for all of us, really. My hope though is that over the winter we can all take some time to just lean into the presence of Spirit, and be nurtured and fed there.*

*If you are following the worksheets, because of space considerations, I can't give really detailed instructions. I'll be producing a short bibliography for those of you who want to go even deeper. And obviously, the range of discernment exercises is vast; I am selecting just a very few of the most common ones.*

*Blessings on your journey!!!*

One day in the mother house in Calcutta there were about three hundred novices and they were all out for the morning. One of the novices working in the kitchen came up to Mother Teresa and said, "We've planned poorly; we have no flour to back these chapattis for lunch." Chapattis are little flour and water pancakes. The situation looked bleak—three hundred mouths were coming to be fed in about an hour and a half and there was nothing to cook with. No food.

"What I would expect Mother Teresa to do," one of her associates explained, "was that Mother would pick up the telephone and call some of her benefactors and mobilize them to find some way to feed her daughters. Instead, her reaction—her spontaneous reaction—was to say to this little one, 'Sister, you're in charge of the kitchen this week? Well then, go into the chapel and tell Jesus we have no food. That's settled. Now let's move on. What's next?'"

Lo and behold, ten minutes later there was a ring at the door and Mother Teresa was

called downstairs. A man she had never seen before was standing there with a clipboard. He addressed her saying “Mother Teresa, we were just informed that the teachers at the city schools are going on strike. Classes have been dismissed and we have 7,000 lunches we don’t know what to do with. Can you help us use them?”

*this story is web-based, public domain, not sure of author)*

An answer to prayer?

Was it just a coincidence, or is there some deep inner wisdom within the universe, a power that we can appeal to, and which we sometimes call “prayer”?

In his ground-breaking book on the Happiness Hypothesis, Jonathan Haidt has over 20 years of research to back up his claim that people who pray are happier people.

Now, put it in context:

He claims there is a happiness quotient, kind of like a see-saw, that is ingrained in our DNA, a set-point that we are born with.

That point can’t be influenced a LOT, but it **can** be influenced a little.

As a social scientist who has studied these things, he concluded there were only 3 ways to increase the set-point level of happiness:

One, through cognitive behavioural therapy, which is known as CBT,

2, through the use of SSRI drug therapy, in other words, the type of drugs commonly used to treat clinical depression,

And 3, the practice of meditation and prayer. Surprised? You shouldn’t be!

Suppose you read about a pill that you could take once a day to reduce anxiety and increase your contentment? Would you take it?

Suppose further that the pill had a great many side effects, you know the kind they read really fast on those TV ads for medicines, only in this case, the side effects are positive: increased sense of well-being, empathy and trust. Plus it even improves memory function, something many of us would love to have!

Suppose that in addition, the pill is all natural.

And as an added bonus: it costs absolutely nothing!

Now would you take it???

It’s called prayer.

Now within the realm of prayer, let me be clear, there are many forms of prayer.

There are ritual prayers like the Lord’s Prayer, there are conversational prayers,

There are spoken prayers people use as shields or as defences in times of trouble,

There are all kinds of body prayers, most of which are not taught in the western Christian traditions like ours.

And there are silent prayers.

What Jonathan Haidt refers to as the “magic pill” is meditation.  
Silent, intentional prayer.

I’m willing to place a bet right now, that not one of you has engaged in silent meditation this morning.

Here’s \$20. I’ll put it in on the collection plate if one of you has spent time in silent prayer at home this morning, before coming to church!

I know for a fact that we don’t pray.

And I’m pretty positive it’s widespread across our culture and across most religions, except perhaps the Muslim practice where only the men have to stop to pray 5 times a day. But those are not silent prayers usually. They are what we would call ritual prayers.

(Afterword: 4 people told me they had meditated that morning! I have put an extra \$80 in the collection)

**Prayer is, when practiced and honed, an invisible act of power.**

How so?

I certainly wouldn’t make the claim that prayer changes the world,

Or that it protects or shields us from danger.

I also don’t subscribe to the view that prayer can be used like a shopping list, or a wishlist such as you might write to Santa Claus. (many of you may have been taught that?)

Or that prayer on its own will heal, or change the facts of a situation like the human disaster unfolding before our eyes in Haiti.

Not that prayer is useless, it can certainly help communities come together for healing and shared power, but if we think that our prayers can make God do something we want God to do, then we will be sorely disappointed most of the time.

**No, the most beneficial aspect of prayer is that it changes YOU.**

And therein lies the reason I think most of us don’t pray.

Either we never were taught this, OR we just plain don’t want to be changed, we’re fine thank you very much.

Perhaps it’s a mixture of the two!

There’s a whole new branch of psychology that has developed in the last 15 years, called Positive Psychology. Martin Seligman is the most well known proponent.

In this realm, instead of focussing on the negative aspects of human genetic and behavioural influences, (the DSM Manual lists all different kinds of pathology, the dark side of human nature), this type of psych takes a broader and richer view, that is, a “constructivist” approach. Positive psych emphasizes that we **co-create our reality** by how we engage with the world. What we do and how we do it, how we experience the world in which we live, can actually change OUR experience. The collection of our experiences becomes the story we tell ourselves about the world and our place in it.

These two researchers have spent years looking at what is RIGHT with people rather than what is wrong with them, and how this positive approach can have lasting positive effects on people's lives.

If you ask me, I think they may be on to something!!

One thing they have all discovered is that meditation and silent prayer are ways we can learn to tame the mind. They are ways we can learn to live our story differently!  
It's like we are riding an elephant. (Haidt's analogy; wish I'd thought of it)  
The elephant is our ego, and it basically has a mind of its own.  
The part of our mind that controls what the elephant does, is the part we want to tame.  
Research has been very productive in showing that we can indeed train and tame the mind, the one riding the elephant.

Better yet, we could try and tame the elephant itself.  
If the elephant is the wild mixture of your unconscious desires, left unchecked, you can see how hard it is to train an elephant that is allowed to run all over the place.

In our day, it's virtually impossible to get through a day without seeing a commercial for something.  
I saw a picture the other day in the newspaper of a player in the NFL, who had an ad for a product painted INTO the black paste on his cheeks.  
Buses, park benches, telephone poles, billboards, even TV screens when you are pumping gas, all want your attention.  
Everyone wants to get enough of your attention because of course they want you to buy their product.  
Why is Google such a successful company? They sell gobs of advertising space.  
In fact, we know that corporations will pay millions of dollars for just one commercial in the upcoming Superbowl game, that's how effective advertising is.  
We all complain about the pervasive nature of the ads, but we all feel powerless to control it and keep it at bay. One study in the US showed that to 3 year old kids, the image and likeness of Ronald McDonald was more recognizable than George Washington or even Jesus!

Here's the thing: if others are spending a fortune to compete for YOUR attention, don't you think you should have some tools to control level of distraction????  
Obviously, your attention is a pretty valuable commodity!  
And, if you were conscious about where you put your attention, think how your life might be different!  
Would you be spending more time paying attention to the things that really matter in your life?  
Would you find more time to develop talents or strengths or interests, if you paid more attention to them?  
How would you prioritize what is important to you?

ATTENTION is a precious resource!

Think of how much attention we are literally wasting away each day, as the advertisers and sponsors work away at us.

Perhaps you might even get angry enough to take some action.

I hope you do!

This is YOUR DAY.

These breaths you have are YOUR breaths.

These thoughts are MY thoughts.

They are precious to me because they are the raw material of MY life.

What do you WANT to think about? Where do you WANT YOUR energy to go?

How do you want to live?

I hope it's obvious to you now that if we are not paying attention to these things, about the basic stuff of our lives, we can end up living a life that is guided by all kinds of outside forces, marketers, news media, and other people's agendas. Like an elephant out of control.

Personally, I think life is too short to give it away like that.

Confucius compared moral and spiritual development to learning how to play music: Both require the study of texts, observance of role models, and many many years of practice to develop the skill in question.

In our time, we want to be able to play the guitar without practice; in fact we can do this in a video game and very quickly become a "Guitar Hero", but not actually know how to play the guitar.

We want to have all the benefits and blessings of life, but we don't want to suffer any hardship to get them, and we want them before we can afford them. But in the end, we feel empty having sped up the journey, and not having learned the steps to taking as the Chinese proverb terms it: a journey of 1000 miles, which begins with every step.

What all the studies are unearthing in the field of positive psychology is actually ancient wisdom: life is best when we focus our attention on the higher-values of humanity. These might be described as wisdom itself, courage, kindness, justice, humility and spiritual grounding.

What the research shows is that those who focus on spiritual grounding are better equipped to find the other high-value human values, values such as zest for life, hope, appreciation of beauty and forgiveness, all of which serve to raise the set-point for happiness that we have been born with.

St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, uses the metaphor of the body as a temple of the spirit, as a place where God's spirit lives.

While he doesn't always mention the spirit directly, his body-parts analogy works best when we extrapolate from it the idea that just like we each have eyes, or hands or feet, so too do we have spirit.

What science is teaching us today is that when we pay attention to our spirit, our body performs better, and attending to our spirit has a marked and beneficial effect on our overall sense of wellbeing.

It's like blood: it's in you to give. It's in you to develop, train and tame.

So I hope you will join me on this spiritual journey of discernment and discovery. I don't want to minimize the difficulty of the work in question, but one thing I have learned in my journey so far is that it really is a journey of a 1000 miles, a splendid beautiful rich and rewarding trip, but I won't enjoy any of it at all if I don't put my feet on the path. Sure I'm not going to have the faith of Mother Theresa, Only Mother Theresa had the faith of Mother Theresa! What I want to discover is the faith of my own being, And that's what I covet for each and every one of you.

May it be so!!!