



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

10-10-10 Sermon
August 20, 2023

“Spiritual practices that will change your life”
A Homily by the Rev'd Jo P. Popham

Spiritual Practices that will change your life. Really? Can spiritual practices be life-changing and life-giving? Absolutely. What are spiritual practices?

Meditation

Hymnity

Taizé

Lectio Divina

Anglican rosary

Icons

Walking prayer

journaling

Praying the Daily Offices

Fasting

Almsgiving

By the time this service has ended we will have experienced a number of spiritual disciplines, albeit just a taste. We routinely do a mini-meditation after the announcements. Today we ended 90 seconds with a gong meant to bring us back to the present. Hearing, singing, and studying hymns is a spiritual discipline, because when we sing, we pray twice. And we Episcopalians love to sing, and we do it well. Singing Taizé hymns surely is an intentional spiritual discipline. Today's Gospel acclamation is a Taizé of sorts, although it was not written in a French community the last century. We will sing a proper Taizé just before the Prayers of the People. One could say that we practice Lectio Divina three times every Sunday, though not as it traditionally practiced in the monastic tradition that began in the Benedictine community. Usually, it would begin with scripture reading, followed by meditating on the word, and eventually praying as the needs of those practicing Lectio enter into the living word. In 1980 a group of Episcopal parishioners contemplated a way to use the ancient practice of praying with a rosary, and

they developed Anglican prayer beads. The Anglican Rosary is patterned after the Church calendar allowing for our own personal journeys through the Cross, an invitational bead, and the four Cruciform beads made up of seven small beads as the weeks. I have placed mine on my chair for you to see when you come to communion. The art of making and using Christian icons began in the Greek Orthodox Church and continues today. Byzantine icons are the most beautiful examples of the meditative use of images of Christ, Mary, and other Biblical characters that allow us to enter into the stories they depict in the many layers of paint and gold leaf. There is a picture of a St. Andrew icon on the cover of today's bulletin. An icon of our patronal saint is in the Narthex. Walking prayers (without our iPod in our ears or maps in our hands) are intended to offer us the peace we all need in our lives as we allow ourselves to think and pray and, dare I say, meditate on where we are on our journeys of faith as we walk our way. I intend to borrow the Labyrinth from our diocese to use in the parlor this fall. Journaling is a discipline that allows us to record our experiences and relate them to our individual faith journeys. It is easy to get into the habit of reading the Bible by praying any of the Daily Offices – Morning, Noonday, and Evening Prayer, Evensong, and Compline. The readings are listed in the Book of Common Prayer – Year One and Year Two. The Sunday readings are chosen for a three-year cycle, Years A, B, and C. And using a meditation book, like *Day by Day* that is based on the daily readings is a lovely and easy way to make Bible reading part of the structure of our daily lives. And then we could adopt the practice of fasting and almsgiving, which actually are related, because almsgiving is not tithing but rather giving to the poor. On a deeper level it means loving our neighbor as ourselves – and being satisfied with enough, with our daily bread – living beneath our means, so others might have enough. So fasting can be intimately related to almsgiving because they both teach us how easy it is to get along with less. In a way, in all spiritual disciplines, we intentionally give up something (like our time) and give it back to God who is the source of all that is anyway.

What is common to all spiritual practices is the intentionality and the routine of connecting with God. When we set aside the time to pray, when we put down our phones, when we turn off the television, when we eat in silence, or walk with God for 30 minutes, we are choosing to rest in the Lord. In creation, God created a time of rest, and we all need time to rest and reconnect with the one who made us. However, one thing we must never do is set ourselves up for failure. When (and I mean when, not if) we find the spiritual discipline that is right for us, we must never beat ourselves up when we do not pray or meditate or journal every single day. We are human. There was only one perfect person – our Lord and Savior Jesus. What is important is our intent to give God ourselves, our souls and bodies. And when we fail in our resolve to do this or that spiritual discipline, and we will slip, know that we are already forgiven.

At the heart of all of these spiritual practices is meditation, which is called by differing names: centering prayer, contemplative prayer, mindfulness, and contemplation, among many others. And it is truly the heart of all these opportunities to give God our time and connect with our creator and accept the love God offers us in these many different ways. But can spiritual disciplines change our lives? As you all know Hurricane Katrina was a marker in my and Jim's lives, just as Michael and Sally were for you all who live on the panhandle and in Destin. You may remember that during Hurricane Katrina, the television reporter Anderson Cooper was holding on to a signpost as the wind and rain swept him off his feet in downtown New Orleans. He since has become a household name and has been in constant demand for his brave and thorough investigative reporting style. He was asked by CBS to do a piece on meditation for *60 Minutes*. Anderson enrolled in a weekend meditation retreat. He admitted that he was skeptical at first, but respectful. Afterwards he was disappointed when he had to take his phone back, and that came from a man who is constantly in touch with the world. He confessed that it is rare to do a story and find that "it actually changes your life." Now he practices meditation and mindfulness every day.

I must confess that for much of my life, I could not practice spiritual disciplines however good my intentions were. I was simply too easily distracted. I could pray and do the Daily offices because I had an actual book in my hands, but many of the spiritual disciplines I longed for were beyond my reach. Through a number of miracles we even bought an island as a spiritual retreat place for ourselves and to offer to friends and family to get away from the world to hear God and experience God. But it was not until Jim and I went on a 10 day silent retreat that I learned to be still and experience God in that stillness. Yes, I know it is hard to believe, but I did not speak for those 10 days except during service when we were allowed to pray out loud. Since then I can get to my quiet spiritual place anywhere - even in season on traffic on Highway 98.

So with many disciplines, which spiritual practice should we choose? I like to think of all the spiritual disciplines being in a toolbox that we have access to anytime. One tool may fit my hand, but not someone else's. We pick one up and use it for a time to see if it fits. But, again, it is the intentional practice that is important. Being aware that we have an open two-way conduit to our loving God and then entering that conversation is how we begin. We always seem to be worrying about the future or reminiscing about the past and what went wrong or how we might make things better. But if we could rest for a moment, intentionally rest in the present, we can let our thoughts go, if but for that moment. Let us give our time back to God, who created us and who is constantly in communication with us. This as a gift from God. Spiritual disciplines allow us to tap into a conversation with God and be in touch with the ever-present ever-loving life-giving one.

Yes, spiritual disciplines will change our lives. But how and why? Every spiritual discipline is some form of prayer – a two way conduit of prayer. But be forewarned, prayer is addicting. My friends, no one can predict the product of our prayers. When asked what we gain by praying regularly to God, someone wiser than I [am] answered “we gain nothing.... but let me tell you what I lost: anger, ego, greed, depression,

insecurity, and fear of death.” So who knows what we – or those we pray for – might gain or lose when we take on the practice of prayer through our chosen spiritual disciplines.

I invite you to reach into the spiritual disciplines toolbox to find the one that works for you. I invite you to live a prayerful and prayer-filled life. I think you will find it life-giving and life-changing.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.