

*Models of Meditation*

John 1:6-8, 19-28

A sermon by Pastor Wayne Ibara

Makiki Christian Church

December 11, 2005

Copyright © Makiki Christian Church. All Rights Reserved.

On this third Sunday of Advent, we are continuing with our *Celebration of Discipline* series with a look at the ancient Christian practice of meditation. You are invited to come upstairs at 9 to view the 25-minute video of Richard Foster speaking about this topic, whether or not you are in a small group. This is the last video of the month, because next week groups will meet, and then we are taking a break for Christmas and New Year's. Next month we will resume the series, when our first topic will be prayer.

You may remember in the 1960's and '70's the Western craze for all things Eastern, particularly Eastern meditation. There was a great hunger and fascination, a real spiritual search for something more, and many thousands believed they found it in Eastern meditation techniques. Martial arts was often an entry point. I was in high school and for a while found Zen of interest. After my conversion to an intentional Christianity, it was many years before I discovered that all along, Christian faith has a very rich and deep tradition of meditation. What a sad thing that the church mostly didn't realize it back then!

This is one reason why Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* was so important and well-received. His book helped restore one of the church's ancient treasures to our own day. The more I have learned about Christian spiritual practices, the more I have appreciated Richard Foster's work, which he has continued to do in his career as author and teacher. Foster restored to Protestants and evangelicals a rich and deep legacy of the faith that is truly precious and priceless. But in contrast to Eastern meditation, which offers techniques of "emptying" one's mind, Christian meditation is aimed at being filled with God.

In his chapter on meditation, Foster includes what is to me one of the most memorable quotes of his book: *Hurry is not of the Devil; hurry is the Devil*. The practice of meditation is a simple yet powerful remedy to our frantic and frazzled lifestyle that all too often leaves us feeling stretched too thin and running on empty. Meditation invites us to dwell at a deeper level of being, where we can hear and obey God's word and remember that we are God's beloved.

Richard Foster says that the Hebrew Bible gives us two words that are translated as meditation, and they describe active listening, reflecting, rehearsing and ruminating. In our Scripture this morning, it seems to me that John the Baptist and the Jewish leaders who question him illustrate two models of meditation. The difference between them isn't so much in what they might have

done, but in what they were or were not open to. The priests, Levites and Pharisees certainly did some reflection and ruminating and rehearsing. That is why they were interested enough to send people to check out John. But they weren't open to anything beyond their own scheme of things. That is why they ask John their specific questions:

Are you the Messiah? No. Are you Elijah? No. Are you the prophet? No. The Jewish leaders had clear expectations for the End of Days. They were looking for the Messiah; for Elijah, whom the prophet Malachi (3:23) foretold was to precede the Messiah; and for a prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-18) who would speak God's word to the people.

John's answer offered a new starting point, if they had been open to it. *I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"*... This passage from the prophet Isaiah originally applied to the return of the Jewish exiles to the land. Now it refers to God coming to his people. But John's questioners don't get it. Locked into their own worldview, they can only stew within a closed system. New insight is barred entry; there is a lot of ruminating going on, but it isn't productive. Only their fixed answers are allowed. The problem is, none of their answers was adequate for the reality that confronted them.

The dilemma of the Jewish religious leaders was like a problem I had on Thanksgiving Day. Remember I told you about my attempt to roast a turkey, and how it came out greatly overcooked? Well, there was another part to that story. It has to do with the gravy that I prepared from the pan drippings. I collected a full quart of pan drippings out of the roasting bag. A quart! You'll never see any chef on TV catch that much because it means you really nuked the turkey!

But I know how to do gravy, so even though it was a LOT of liquid to start with, I determined to at least get the gravy right. I use ordinary flour to thicken the gravy. And this takes time. A lot of simmering and stirring. But no matter how long it took, I was fixed on redeeming myself from the overdone turkey. And I did produce a decently textured gravy. I reduced the pan drippings by one-half. It took a long while of simmering, but I did it.

The problem was, I was so intent on just producing a nice, thick gravy that I somehow never thought of *tasting* the thing before serving it. And man, was it *salty!* It was saltier than the Dead Sea. Salty enough to float a battleship. What happened was that the roasting bag trapped all the rock salt I had used to season the turkey. And because I didn't add anything to it, and instead reduced it by half, I ended up with a formula for hypertension instead of a gravy for dinner.

The Jewish leaders did a lot of stewing and simmering within their own system of thinking. But because they had fixed the boundaries of their expectations and ruled out any new input, no matter how refined their meditation,

their outcome didn't fit. John wasn't the messiah, Elijah or the prophet like Moses. But John was a forerunner, a herald of the Coming One. And even though John here refuses to view himself as Elijah, the other Gospels and Jesus himself affirmed that John in fact played the role of Elijah, preparing the way for the Messiah.

John offers us a different model of meditation. John also reflects, ruminates and ponders the Scriptures. But where the Jewish leaders are locked into a closed system that has left God out of the picture, John has an intimate and startling awareness of God's activity. *I baptize with water; but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.* And in the verse right after our reading, John says of Jesus, *Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*

Like the Jewish leaders, John has done a good deal of meditating on the word. But in his reflection and rumination, John is graced with an openness to something new and unexpected. He hasn't boxed God in with his human expectations. He has instead been transformed by his encounters with God. And the God that John knows is not the same one that the Jewish leaders expect.

God is always new and renewing; we can never box God in. But we often forget that. Especially when we are privileged to learn more and more about the Bible. Pastors and Bible teachers in particular, but ordinary Christians too, can come to feel so confident about their grasp of God's written Word that they get locked into a particular system or a particular perspective that becomes their idol of understanding. We think we've "figured God out." We think we know the details of God's mind. If we do, we're probably wrong.

The practice of meditating isn't given to us so we can figure God out. No one ever plumbs the depths of the Divine Wisdom. But a humble practice of meditation can help us to live more deeply in God's great grace and love. When we slow down, make room in our lives and give our time to listen to whatever God may want to say to us, we cultivate our hearts for the Spirit's dwelling and working in us. We do what we can to prepare the way of the Lord in our own lives by making an offering to God of our lives.

For many of us, this may be the most difficult thing about the practice of meditation. Making time, making room in our overbusy lives, making unhurried space for this discipline. Meditation invites us to sink deep into the joy and peace of Christ. Perhaps the reason why experiences of joy and peace elude us so often is that we are too busy whizzing and skipping off the surface of our lives like stones tossed across the surface of a pond.

Advent as a season of spiritual preparation, and meditation as an ancient Christian spiritual practice, beckon to us to receive the gifts that God wants to

give us. Not just for our sakes, but also for the sake of the world. As Richard Foster says at the very beginning of *Celebration of Discipline*,

*Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.*

Ironically, it is during Advent, or the so-called “Christmas season,” when we should be most attentive to the spiritual disciplines that offer to deepen us, that we are in fact least able to do so because of the holidays being the busiest time of the year. Even during the rest of the year, our lives are so over-full that simply making the time to gather and *be the church* is a difficulty. We are talking about spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines, but it is spiritual warfare taking place, with our lives as the battleground. How can we begin to take back what it seems we are losing more of each year?

This is not an easy question to answer, and for each of us, the specific answer is likely different. But since this is Advent, this is where we need to begin. I don’t have a proposal, a solution or an answer. Instead, I just have a story—a parable from an unlikely source. Patrick McDonnell does the cartoon strip called “Mutts.” I am not very familiar with this strip, but my sister recently gave me a book based on the series. The book is called “The Gift of Nothing.” It has fewer words than many of my son’s preschool books. Here’s how the story goes.

Mooch the cat wants to give his friend Earl the dog a special gift. But Earl already has a bowl, a bed and a chewy toy. Earl has it all. What do you give a friend who already has everything? Mooch thought and thought. And then he got it. He decided to give Earl the gift of *NOTHING!* All he had to do was find it.

*Mooch often heard Frank say there was “nothing on TV.” But as far as Mooch could tell, there was always something on TV.*

*Mooch often heard Doozy and her friends say there was “nothing to do.” But as far as Mooch could tell, everybody was always doing something.*

*Millie came home from the store and said, “There was nothing to buy!” So Mooch went shopping...but as far as he could tell, nothing was not for sale.*

*So Mooch went home and sat on his pillow and just stayed still (as cats often do). And not looking for it, he found...nothing. So he went and got a box and put nothing in it. He got an even bigger box.*

Mooch presents Earl with the big box. “There’s nothing here,” Earl says. “Yesh!” sa(y)s Mooch. “Nothing...but me and you.”

*So Mooch and Earl just stayed still and enjoyed nothing...and everything.*

Meditation is a practice of clearing some space in our lives so that there is *nothing but us and God*. Nothing to keep us from God; nothing to separate us from the love of God. And dwelling in that love, may we discover how indeed, in Christ, God has given us *everything*.