

"Calm Your Mind"

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Readings –

The witness is always in the here and now, and it lives in each instant of living. To be in the witness is to listen with a still heart and with a waiting, open soul." ~ *Ram Dass*

Do you have the patience to wait until your mind settles and the water is clear? ~
Tao Te Ching

When water is still, it is like a mirror. And if water derives lucidity from stillness, how much more the faculties of the mind? The mind of the sage being in repose becomes the mirror of the universe. ~ *Chuang Tzu*

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ~ *St. Paul*

Scripture – Mark 4: 35 – 41 - On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to the disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took Jesus with them in the boat. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushions. The disciples woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. And Jesus said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The disciples were filled with awe and said to one another, "Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Sermon - When I was a child, I spent summer week-ends at my Uncle Lacy and Aunt Nora's beach cottage on an inlet of the Potomac River where it flowed into the Chesapeake Bay in southern Maryland. My uncle always had a boat with some kind of cabin. I loved to go down into the cabin and play house among the small bunks, kitchen cubicle and table. Whenever we took the boat out, there was always a running conversation among the adults about the weather. My aunt and my mother always asked: Is that a storm cloud on the far horizon? Has the wind changed? Are the waves kicking up? My uncle and my dad were always in denial: No, look at the sun shining; the wind is just like it was earlier; the waves aren't nearly as high as they were last week. Most often, we were just on little fishing excursions or cruising around not far from our cottage. But every now and then, we'd take a day trip from our inlet at St. Clemons Bay out into the Potomac River and all the way across to Colonial Beach, Virginia. That was really fun because then we got to tie up at the huge dock, get off the boat, and get some sort of treat. But, in order for us to take that trip, my aunt and my mother needed a weather forecast that guaranteed no rain, no wind and especially no lightning. Because you see, there was that time when I was four years old and we ran into THE STORM on our way back from Colonial Beach. I remember hearing about that storm many times – the flashes of lighting, the waves breaking over the bow of the boat, the rain pelting my uncle as he tried to keep us on a steady course to home. But my only real memory of that afternoon

was sitting at the table in the cabin of the boat, coloring in my coloring book, while the crayons rolled all over the table, back and forth with each wave. Through it all, my mother sat there coloring with me – the point of calm in the midst of the storm.

I think of that every time I hear this Bible story about Jesus and his disciples out on the sea in the storm. I imagine that this experience of being in a storm on the Sea of Galilee did happen, and the disciples who were there told about it over and over again – and it became part of the Gospel of Mark. It's also in the Gospel of Luke.

All faith stories are, in one way or another, metaphors – and all metaphors are mixtures of reality and images. So when you say "love is a rose" or "war is hell", those phrases get us started in understanding love and war, but the metaphor is also always incomplete in itself. So let's explore a way this Biblical story might speak to us this morning. The essential spiritual practice of calming the mind is much like this story of Jesus calming the seas. Our minds are like boats, sailing along through our days, and it doesn't take much to churn up the waters so that the wind swirls and the waves beat against the boat of our minds, and we feel swamped. We need a spiritual presence, like Jesus is in this story, a spiritual presence to say those same words - "*Peace! Be still!*" - and calm the waters of our minds.

It reminds me of all the images we've seen over the past few weeks of seemingly endless hurricanes. There in the midst of all that chaos of wind and rain in each hurricane is the eye, the quiet calm center. For me, that's a good vision of what I want to find within myself, that eye of the storm in my mind, that place of calm. It feels like a real accomplishment when I can get to that center and a significant feat when I can stay in that place for longer periods of time. Calming the mind is the ability to observe all your stormy thoughts as voices from a distance and not be seduced or carried away by the winds and waves of emotion, desire, and judgment.

In his book, *The Untethered Soul*, Mickey Singer refers to the mind as our inner roommate. If you'd like to meet your inner roommate, just try to sit inside yourself for a while in complete solitude and silence. What most of us will hear, instead of silence, is incessant chatter, just like the chatter I heard on Wednesday afternoon when I tried to sit quietly: *How long have I been sitting here? Where did I put my watch? Focus now, ok? Do I need to call my mom before tonight? I wonder why Jane didn't return my phone call last night. Maybe I should check my e-mail when I get home. Focus! Ugh, my neck hurts. I really need to finish writing my sermon instead of sitting here trying to be calm.*

That's my inner roommate, and she talks and talks and comments on everything, making judgments with the speed of that coin-sorting machine at Publix. At any moment, that chattering part of me can take center stage and run away with my focus and with my sense of peace. When a student once asked the Hindu sage Maharshi, "What stands in the way of my knowing myself or God?", Maharshi said, "Your wandering mind!"

Try this exercise for a minute. Close your eyes. Visualize a dark background with a white ring on it and a white dot in the middle of the ring. Focus your attention on that image, without being distracted, and keep that image clear and steady for one minute. It can be astounding to discover how much focus and concentration we need to keep this image steady for one minute.

So what do I do to deal with my meandering mind? First and foremost, I step back and watch and listen. I realize that a good time to observe and be aware of my mind

chatter is when I am taking a shower. Try that yourself – try to listen to what your mind is saying to you, how it loves to interrupt your peaceful shower, the time when you could be enjoying the relaxing touch of the warm water, the scent of the soap, the quality of the light surrounding you. Before we can be free of the chatter, we have to be aware of it and then able to identify these sandstorms of our thoughts and know that we are more than our mind.

Who am I, if I am not my mind? I am the one behind the mind: the one who sees, the one who is aware of the thoughts and emotions that pass through me. I am the center of that awareness which is the place where the Judeo-Christian soul is, which is the place of the Buddhist self, the Hindu Atman. How do I find that center that is me: by calming my mind, by finding that quiet eye of my true self in the midst of the storm.

"Peace," says Jesus, "Be still!"

I invite you to try two spiritual exercises this week. First, commit a specific day to doing only one thing at a time. When you are fixing dinner, just fix dinner. When someone is talking to you, stop what you are doing, make eye contact and really listen. When you are folding laundry, smell and feel the laundry. When you are working in the yard, look at the sky and the trees. When you are doing your work, do your work. You may not get quite as many things done, but what you do will be more enjoyable, better for your soul, and will probably, in the long run, be a more efficient use of your time.

Second, when your mind starts racing, be aware that it is happening and then be aware of your thoughts. Take three long deep slow breaths, relax, and let go as the air falls out. Adding a few simple words can make this practice of three breaths even better. Try these lines, one with each breath, right now. As you breathe in, silently say "in" – and as you breathe out, silently say "out." On the next breath say "slow" as you breathe in and "deep" as you breathe out. On the third breath say "smile" as you breathe in and "release" as you breathe out. Sit now for a moment in this quiet oasis, in this center. If you need to, repeat the three breaths again.

Meditation has been used for thousands of years in Eastern, in Jewish, and in Christian religious traditions. The word "meditation" literally means to stand in the center. It is not a practice of escaping from the world and those important issues we must deal with. It is the ability to stand in that center of calm and then emerge with the patience, the discernment and the strength to maintain a grounded soul that can be present to those important issues. Listening to God is this very process. To hear the voice of God, we must be silent, because God whispers in the silence in the deep center of who we are.

In addition to the calming power of meditation, I think it is important to mention another kind of shelter. Sometimes the eye of calm in the center of the hurricane is the presence of someone who comforts us, like my mother sitting with me on my uncle's boat during that storm. Often, we need to call on a power beyond ourselves, like the disciples calling on Jesus in that raging storm on the sea. The Buddha calls people to take refuge from the chaos of life in the Dharma (the sacred texts) and in the Sangha (the community of those who share in those teachings). Take refuge in the teachings and in the community of faith, like a traveler who finds shelter in a strong safe building.

So I leave you with this calming image of our soul station today, the place where we share the teachings and practices that help us maintain and repair our souls, the place where we gather as a spiritual community to walk the soul's journey together in one

another's company. We pause here at this comfortable safe soul station, a place where we can come in from the storm, put down our umbrellas and take off our raincoats, and calm our racing minds and our yearning souls with the trust that again, and yet again, all shall be well.

CALL TO PRAYER – *adapted from Psalm 46 by Stephen Mitchell and Norman Fischer*

You, O God, are our refuge and strength, our safety in times of trouble. You are the morning that dawns over quiet waters; you are with us, our silent center. When the earth is in upheaval, when the sea's waters roar and foam, in the storms of anguish and despair, You offer us your abundance of life and your peace. You are with us, our defense, our silent center. You whisper to our hearts: "Be still. Be still and know that I am within you. Be still – be still and know me. Be still and know that I am with you, the center of the center of all things."

PRAYER - As our closing prayer, I invite you to use those words from Jesus as he calmed the storm, "Peace! Be Still!" Use them as a breath prayer – saying them silently to yourself again and again – then let the words go and sit in the silence. If your mind begins to chatter, go back to the breath prayer, "Peace! Be Still!" And as you silently say those words, say them, not as commands, but in the same comforting loving tone you would use to quiet a restless child. At the end of the silence, I will close the prayer and ring the bell.

You are with me, O God. You are within me.
You are in all things, yet contained by no thing.
You are the center of the center,
The One who is always now! Blessed be!

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Resources used for this sermon:

- Essential Spirituality by Roger Walsh, John Wiley & Sons, 1999.
- The Untethered by Michael A. Singer, New Harbinger Publications, 2007.