

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Winston Charles on Sunday, September 25, 2011.

(Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32)

First, let me thank Anne for the invitation to come to St. Luke's in order to introduce myself a little bit, and to talk a bit about the course that I will be leading this fall on Tuesday evenings. As some of you perhaps know, I retired from Christ Church, Raleigh, about two and a half years ago. And since then, there have been questions just abounding about my retiring. "How's retirement going? Have you been traveling a lot? What have you been doing?" Well, the answers are retirement's going great. And traveling? Well, no round the world tours yet. Still waiting for that opportunity. And what have I been doing? Well, I can give you a little summary by quoting the sublime to the ridiculous.

First of all, on the sublime side, I've been involved with the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation that is centered in Washington, D.C. Shalem was founded about 1973 and has focused on encouraging and educating people about contemplative spirituality. I'm taking two courses with Shalem. The first is focused on spiritual direction which is a meeting one-on-one with people in order to talk about their spiritual journey in their lives. And the other is concern with leading contemplative prayer groups and retreats which seeks to introduce various contemplative prayer practices and to nurture the spiritual life by dedicating a specific time to go away in order to be with God and with one another. My time with Shalem has been absolutely wonderful. My work has resonated with something deep within me, and now I'm very grateful to have an opportunity to share that with the people of St. Luke's.

On the ridiculous side, when I retired I bought myself a pool table. This must have been something that stirred a deep desire within me to hang out at pool halls. We had one in Bennettsville when I was growing up, but it wasn't exactly the place that my parents wanted a teenage boy to hang out. Now, after the eight o'clock, James told me that in his small North Carolina town, an Episcopalian owned the pool hall. Now, that could have changed the whole course of my life right there. Well, despite this or perhaps because of it, the pool hall carried this sort of enticing mystique. So finally my dreams have been fulfilled. Every Thursday night I'm at Buck' Billiards on Buck Jones Road with my pool team. And soon, we shall compete in the city's -- really the Triangle -- the city championship for nine ball. And if we win that, we get to go to Las Vegas. Now, in the APA pool world, Las Vegas is like going to Jerusalem. Everybody just dreams about going to Las Vegas and participating in the national APA pool tournaments. So maybe I'll have my chance. We'll see.

Actually, the pool hall is a most interesting place. The crowd is the most diverse group that I have ever been a part of. White, black, Asian, about one-third are women. Every socio-economic and educational level, every age represented. I'm on the older side of that. Every skill level, tattooed and non-tattooed. In case you're wondering, I'm in the latter category there. All joining together by one thing, the love of playing pool. Now, the church just might have something to learn from the pool hall about inclusivity.

Other dimensions of my retirement include gardening and piano playing and writing and cooking and golfing and substituting on Sundays occasionally so that my fellow clergy can go on vacation or continuing education and offering spiritual direction so that retirement, I always say, is not really the right word. Some people call it not retirement, but re-wirement. I kind of like that. But I just sort of call it the next chapter. Certainly a larger part of my next chapter has been my work with Shalem and my going deeper into my own spiritual life for which I am very grateful.

What I've learned and experienced about contemplative spirituality through my work and play with Shalem is as applicable to being with that diverse pool-playing crowd at Buck's Billiards as it is to being with you, the faithful people gathered here at St. Luke's, because contemplative spirituality has to do with discovering your true self and caring for others as you receive a deeper relationship with God. Like all true spirituality, contemplative spirituality has to do with life, all of it; with love, all of it; with joy, all of it; with purpose and meaning, all of it. Through entering into simple silence, we enter into God's presence whose light reveals within us our true selves and whose power enables us to live more out of that true self that is a gift from God.

The seven sessions of the series that I'll be leading -- Contemplative Prayer Practices, Opening the Heart to God -- will discuss basic principles of contemplative spirituality that open one's heart and life even more deeply to the love of God. They will introduce a variety of contemplative prayer practices like centering prayer and Lectio Divina that make us more available to God's presence. They will provide encouragement for each person on their spiritual journey wherever she or he may be in relationship with God. We shall approach our time together with some basic assumptions that provide the context in which all that we do takes place.

The first of these is that every person is on a personal spiritual journey from the time they are born until the time they die and beyond whether or not they are aware of God's involvement in their lives or not. Secondly, that God is always active in our lives, always. And third, that God always acts for the good, always. Fourth, that we can be more open and aware of God's benevolent presence through contemplative prayer practices in which we enter into simple silence and intentionally open our minds and hearts to God. Next, that the more open we are to God, the more we know and are able to live out of that true self that is deep within us and shed those false selves which is developed in all of us in order to protect us, to defend us from hurt and pain and maybe even to reach for meaning and joy but in a very misdirected way. And finally, to become our true selves unites us with the constant benevolent activity of God so that we are involved in God's activity in the world, and it unites us with one another and reveals our unique purpose and calling in this life, and as a result, it brings joy.

Each Tuesday evening, as well as the Saturday morning that begins the series, will include a short presentation on contemplative spirituality and then an explanation of one of the contemplative prayer practices and then an experience of that prayer practice, a time to reflect on our experience doing some journaling and other, a time to share with others just as much or as little as you wish to share, and concluding with worship. It's simply a gathering of the faithful to worship and journey together into a deeper spiritual life.

Contemplative prayer practices always include extended periods of silence since silence is a time in which we can let go of all of those 10,000 thoughts that flow through our mind constantly. And then for a short time, we open our hearts to God's presence and simply be with God. One of the opportunities of our time together will be to become more comfortable with silence which for a lot of people, maybe for most of us, is somewhat of a challenge to be comfortable with silence because our culture does not honor silence. Rather, it sort of fills our lives with all types of noise, and our mind is not trained for silence. Rather, it's filled with all these 10,000 thoughts. Silence is one thing that we can do in order to open ourselves up more to the presence of God.

The summer before my senior year at Bennettsville High School, a small town in South Carolina, while my fellow Green Gremlins were hard at football practice in the heat of a South Carolina August, I was fortunate in that I was sent away to Cullowhee in Western Carolina in order to take an English literature course, a preparatory course for college. My most memorable teacher was a middle-aged woman by the name of Mrs. Holtzclaw. And one day -- I don't remember which classic English literature piece we were studying. It doesn't really make any difference -- but one day she made the following statement: "Some of the best times my husband and I have are when we are sitting on the couch together and not saying a word." And knowing Ms. Holtzclaw, she wasn't talking about watching TV or some kind of sexual activity, but rather, she was just talking about being present with one another in silence, being connected sitting on that couch together. I was 16 years old at that time. It's interesting that that one sentence sort of resonated deep within me. Something was released there that I had no consciousness of because there was something in me that said, yes, that is exactly right. That's the power of being present with one another in silence.

Simple silence of contemplative prayer practices resonates with Mrs. Holtzclaw's insight. In simple silence, we seek merely to sit on the couch with God not saying a word, not doing a thing, not expecting some emotional high to determine whether we're doing it right or not, not looking for some immediate confirmation of spiritual conversion, but simply sitting, releasing, opening, receiving. Being present to the moment, present to the presence of God. This simple silence transforms the heart and opens one to deeper joy and more effective and meaningful living.

Today's epistle reading from Philippians is so appropriate for contemplative spirituality. Within that reading is found an ancient hymn that predates the writing of the epistle, and Paul has put this ancient hymn in there in order to say something important about Christ. The hymn is perhaps the earliest theological statement that we have written down on the incarnation. Christ, the word, the eternal word, the second person of the Trinity, the essence of God, emptied himself in love, not counting equality with God as something to be exploited. The RSV says not counting equality with God as something to be grasped; it's as if you're grasping it in order not to let go, in order not to lose something. But rather letting go, taking on human form, becoming as one of us and was obedient even unto death in order that we might know God through this incarnation, know God's loving involvement in our lives.

The Greek word, the theological word for this emptying is *kenosis*. Cynthia Bourgeault in [The Wisdom Jesus](#) asserts that this emptying, this *kenosis*, is the central characteristic of Jesus' life and ministry. We can use *kenosis*, emptying, as the lens through which to look at Jesus' life and

ministry and to understand it more deeply. Our response to kenosis, of Jesus, is another type of emptying. In a way, it's a mirror image of the emptying of the eternal word that leads to the incarnation. The eternal word, the Christ, releases aspects of the divinity in order to become fully human just like you and me. We in turn release our grasping hold on those false selves and how they have a hold on us in order that we might become more divine. That is, that we might become more our true selves that reflect in our own unique way the very essence of God. In this transformation, we become a continuation of the incarnation, living God's presence into the world. Paul points towards this transformation of our persons when he says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure."

Now, I could continue and tell you how contemplative spirituality has really helped my golf game, but I'll save that until later. Just remember, God is always active in our lives. God always acts for the good. The more we open our hearts to God, the more we become our true selves.

Finally, Thomas Keating, one of the great leaders of contemplative spirituality who has introduced centering prayer to tens of thousands of people, offers the following affirmation at the end of his book, Open Mind, Open Heart. He writes, "The fundamental goodness of human nature, like the mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of grace and the mystery of the incarnation, is an essential element of Christian faith. This basic core of goodness is capable of unlimited development. Our basic core of goodness," Keating writes, "is our true self and its center of gravity is God." The acceptance of this basic core of goodness, the acceptance of our basic core of goodness within is a quantum leap in the spiritual journey because most of us don't believe it's there. But once you realize that God has placed this basic core of goodness within us and open to that reality, it is a quantum leap in the spiritual journey.

The series Contemplative Prayer Practices, Opening the Heart to God, seeks to help us take that quantum leap in our spiritual journey so that we might discover and live out of the basic human goodness that is the very image and likeness of God within. Amen.