

“Opening Myself to God”  
Isaiah 2:1-4; Acts 17:22-29;  
2 Corinthians 3:12-18; John 5:39-47

June 30, 2019  
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As we are talking about the spiritual disciplines, I realize that I continue to have a struggle around the word “spiritual.” It often seems when I think about the word “spiritual,” there’s something kind of misty and vague about it. Indeed, I come from a tradition that really doesn’t have that level of holding the spiritual experience as central or as part of one’s life. When I went to seminary, there might have been some spirituality stuff going on on the side, but the real meat of faith is about knowing the theology, knowing about how it is all supposed to work, trying to understand it all with my academic experience and my intellect.

I was at a conference this past week where I was with a group of people who grew up in a different context. Some of them had no problem believing the Spirit was at work and moving. I heard their responses during a sermon as it was going on. For those folks I’m sure at the moment they felt an experience of the Spirit moving in some way. It’s a different tradition. And yet, the question continues to come to my mind about how I might pay attention to the spiritual aspect of our faith.

I’ve come to believe that as much book learning as I can do, it only gets me to a certain spot. I can make a long talk out of this part of it, but I’m going to try to not. It really feels to me like we’re recognizing the limits of our ability to predict the future. Our knowledge has all been basically focused on our ability to know and predict the future. We could then be in control of our lives. And yet, the world continues to kindly, or perhaps sometimes not so kindly, point out that we don’t completely control our lives. The world brings surprises, things we don’t understand.

It’s been partly through my studies that I’ve recognized my own limitations. There is a certain limitation to knowledge. I cannot read all the books that tell me how the world is supposed to be, understand all the theological tomes that tell me how I should understand my faith. Goodness, they can’t even tell me what the weather is going to be two weeks out!

How do I live into an uncertain future with a knowledge that is partial? One of the things I truly believe is that in order to do that, we have to let go of some of the control we think we have and recognize that we do have a way to live into the future. We need to be aware of the Spirit. There is a way in which I don’t have the full guidance I need simply from the books I own or from the society in which I live, or the people I know. I need a guidance that transcends all that, that goes beyond all that. I need a view of goodness that I can’t have on my own. I need a sense of what the gifts we have as a people, as souls, are and how we use them. I need to know the grace that enables me to walk forward even though I know I’ll make mistakes, and recognize how I have. I need a spirituality that is open to the spirit of God, that works by enabling us to recognize the gifts and the goodness and the grace and the guidance that is continually among us and with us. We need, I need, the Spirit at work in my life.

In this series about spiritual disciplines, we are using the acronym W-O-R-S-H-I-P. “W” was the worship we talked about last week. Today we are at the “O” and we are talking about Opening ourselves to God. But why do we call it spiritual disciplines? I don’t like discipline, especially when somebody else is giving it to me. I have a hard enough time creating my own sense of discipline to get things done sometimes. I would actually rather not talk too much about discipline.

The other piece to that is that we can set up disciplines that become rules or ways of judging whether we are doing it right. Helen had that experience when she was in college. She was with a group of Christians who would compare whether they got their daily devotions correct. That’s not what this is about. It’s more a recognition that if we care about who God is, if we care about the idea that we’ve been created, if we care that God loves us, if we care about Jesus, if we care that God wants to be in our life and part of who we are, we might pay attention.

One of the things I realize is that so much of my life is governed by habits—behaviors done with little or no conscious thought. I don’t think all those habits are bad things. I happen to get up and make a cup of coffee for Helen and me every morning. I don’t think that’s a bad habit. I hope it’s a benign habit, at least. It’s a pleasurable habit. We have all kinds of habits in our lives—things we do and ways we think.

This week at the ministry conference I attended at Whitworth University, they were suggesting that we have this habit we don’t even think about. We have a way of thinking with little or no conscious thought to it. We have a way of seeing. The conference was mainly about reconciliation—Christian racial reconciliation and the idea that we have a habit of privileging whiteness. We privilege people who are white more than people who are not white. Sometimes we graduate that. It’s a habit of the mind of society that we don’t even notice a lot of the time, and yet it’s contrary to the will of God. As Peter recognized as he was about to go eat with Cornelius, God shows no partiality.

What I recognize is that I have habits that aren’t helpful. Spiritual disciplines are about creating habits that *are* helpful. How can we create holy habits, habits that engage us with God? I have lots of ways of creating habits around other things. I have a habit of thinking that the intellectual, the reasoned, is what’s important. Being right in some kind of logical argumentative fashion is what is most important, but I find out that it is limited and can lead to another kind of discrimination. We have all kinds of things we create habits around. We create habits around power and fame and wealth and comfort, and perhaps around our emotions. We can create all kinds of habits.

How do we create holy habits? That’s what spiritual disciplines are about. It’s about beginning to try things, to do things that open ourselves to God. Of course, like any relationship, if we don’t open the door there’s not going to be a relationship. There’s a passage in Revelation (3:20) where it talks about Jesus at the door knocking. God is not going to break the door down. God’s not a God that does that kind of violence to those he has created. He invites us to open the door and to allow him to come into our lives. This particular spiritual discipline asks us to think about how we open the door. What kinds of habits do we have in our lives that are holy habits that allow us to open ourselves to who God is?

The passage in Acts was about how we have veiled our minds so that we don't have to deal with God. And yet, there's a sense that, like the Athenians, we perhaps recognize that there's something unknown out there that we still have to deal with. The unknown God.

Then, if we think we are beginning to draw near to God, how do we do that? In the passage from John today, he describes a group of people who think they are doing that because they have control of the scriptures. They have searched them out and they now basically believe they can control God, causing God to save them and make them the best people. It's another way of making distinctions. Jesus says, "You are so caught up in your understanding of scripture that you are not listening. You are not opening yourselves to the work of the Spirit, to the very words I'm offering you." By hanging onto that control, they are missing the gifts, the grace, the goodness, and the guidance that God wants to give. We have to be open.

How might we open ourselves to God? First, I need better habits. I need to show up. I need to be part of that relationship, because if I don't, then there can't be one. We know that if we do show up, in some way God will show up. We can't control that. We don't know exactly how that's going to happen, but we know that through our openness to what God might do through the scriptures and the way the Spirit moves and speaks to us through people, places, or experiences in our lives, we might recognize these as God speaking into our lives. We will begin to recognize a grace, a goodness, and the gifts and the guidance of God in our lives.

In Second Corinthians, it said "Where the Spirit of God is, there is freedom." We have so many other things in our lives that want to claim ultimate importance, claim that they can guide us and direct us, claim that they will show us those gifts I have been talking about—the gifts, the goodness, the guidance, and the grace. I think there are very few places that want to talk about grace besides faith, but they want to show us the way and control our direction. The only place we're really going to find true freedom is when we fit where we're made to be. Where we experience the true love and are truly loved in a relationship with God, through the grace God has given us, through the work of the Holy Spirit, through the comprehension of the grace Christ offers.

I invite you this week to open yourself to God because these practices are practices that transform us, that begin to help us see in a new way. If I thought spirituality was just a feel-good thing, I wouldn't be that interested. It's nice to feel good, but spirituality, to me, is something that is about the essentials of living. It's central to helping us find our way. I want to know the goodness of life. I want to understand the gifts we have that we share together. I want to know the grace of God, because I certainly know the need for grace. I want to have the guidance for living in a world that I don't control, that I don't understand. I want to have the guidance that helps me learn what it means to find the full meaning of life, the wonder of love, the beauty of existence.

So I invite us to open ourselves to God. The "Spiritual Disciplines Handbook" by Adele Calhoun gives us a number of ways to do this. I'm not going to talk about those this morning. I invite you to look at those or to simply think about what it is in my life, how in my life do I open myself to God? What are the ways I do that? What are the kinds of practices I have? Do I have a practice of opening myself to God?

It feels so hard these days to not have noise in my life, or busyness, or uncertainties that make me not want to have any quiet time. I may recognize that when I begin to get quiet, I have all these things that come upon me. How can I let those things be part of what I give to God, and ask God to help me carry them? How can I show up for my relationship with God and not fear the transformation that comes, but know it's a transformation that gives us grace, that enables us to know the gifts and the goodness of God, that guides us into life?

I invite you to open your life to God with some kind of practice, some kind of habit. Don't be surprised if the unexpected happens, because God showing up is always unexpected. Amen.