

Morning Meditation

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:1-3

The world around us can often define and determine the world within us. The people and places which we encounter and experience so often leaves a lasting and lingering impression upon our minds, hearts and souls. But there are some moments we would prefer to not allow to live rent free in our hearts. There are some words we would prefer to not leave well-worn ruts in my mental file cabinet. This pandemic has caused a shift in the ways we structure our lives. Masks, washing hands relentlessly, heightened awareness how close I am standing, and a low-grade anxiety that is ready in a moment's notice sound like the robot in the tv show, *Lost in Space*, "Danger, Wes Bixby, danger!"

How does what is happening around effect what is happening within you?

I ask because Paul was in prison. As a matter of fact, if you look at chapter three in Ephesians, you will see he begins that chapter with the same claim. Apparently, Paul's physically location was important to keep in mind. Yet, like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail; or Conversations with Myself by Nelson Mandela or the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer; like Pilgrim's Progress or The Enormous Room by e.e. cummings, sometimes great ideas are born in the small cells. Sometimes when we feel confounded and contained, our minds break free from the walls that close in around us.

Likewise, Paul found himself where his freedom was restricted. Yet, Paul processes the pain and can transform, transcend his surroundings. To be sure, that is not easy. I know I have struggled to not let the brokenness of the world cause me to pitch my tent permanently at the camp site of cynicism. I know I have had to work hard noticing and naming my emotions. I don't think Paul's point is just to grin and bear it or put on a happy face or fake it til you make it. I think Paul is holding the both/and reality of life. His body is in prison, but his soul doesn't have to be. He may not be able to go where he wants, but he is able to control how he responds to others. Too often, we can get tripped up and trapped in thinking, "Why bother?" Rather than realizing that what we do and say does make a difference. Maybe it won't solve the pandemic or persistent racism or ever be remembered by anyone. But that isn't the point. Paul is suggesting that we live a certain way because the One who feeds and fuels our lives inspires/infuses us with these traits: Humility, gentleness, patience, and love. I encourage you today to spend a few moments with these words.

How might you embrace and embody these traits? With whom can you share them easily? What objections and obstacles does your mind say in response to such a suggestion? For example, my mind might say, "Really, you can't be serious with this list, especially with that person!" Hold these words, pull them close, and let them speak to your life this day.

Prayer: Out of places where we feel confined and contained and closed off, O God, cause us to enter the sacred spacious way of Your grace. Amen.

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There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God of all, who is over all and through all and in all.
Ephesians 4

Humility, gentleness, patience, and love...how did those words work and wiggle in your life yesterday? Did they find expression in your experience? Did you feel foolish trying to be patient with that person who always pushes your buttons? Did you feel like it was a waste of time and energy to let loose love with that family member who happened to call right after you read the morning meditation yesterday? So, you thought, "Surely, this is a sign from God for me to be nice." Maybe it went well...maybe it went south and became a hot mess real quick.

I come back to those words because I believe that is what Paul is saying brings us together. This litany is what offers us hope. Humility, gentleness, patience, and love are not just nice nouns we can possess, they are verbs that possess us...if we let them. So often I excuse myself from practicing, sharing, letting loose these words in my life because: A. I don't wanna; and B. I am not sure I can; and C. I am not sure what others will think of me. Oh, and do not forget D. It's hard...and life is hard enough.

C.S. Lewis said, 'The Christian way has not been tried and found lacking; it has been found difficult and so we leave it untried.' We know from scriptures God's call and claim is upon our whole life, but there are countless other voices clamoring for us at the same time. This can make it difficult to plan the day. In a few verses after the one above, Paul says, that we can feel tossed to and fro, which we can feel in the world right now. To chose to be grounded, guided by humility, gentleness, patience, and love has never been the easy path. Yet, it is the one that could bring us together and connect us.

The passage above reminds us that God is over and through and in all things. There is nothing that does not contain God. (This echoes what Paul says in Romans, "Nothing separates us from God's love" because wherever we are God's love is there). To be sure, I am still trying to develop the spiritual musculature around this, especially in the face of suffering and struggle. On the other hand, sometimes it is only after I have shed the tears, named my fears, felt what is deepest in the midnight of my soul, that I can begin to surface realizing God was there in the depth.

The Oneness of God within us and through us and hovering around us. The Oneness of God already filling every moment this day. The Oneness of God waiting for you and me to encounter and embrace the holy in the good, the bad, and the ugly. Paul proclaims and preaches this pathway for us which is so powerful in such a time as this. Yet, it is not just for us as individuals, but as a community. We need others to engage this practice. I need your help and

support. I need your listening ear. I need to lean into your questions, doubts, thoughts, and hopes in response to what I have written here today. To covenant to be a community that walks through the fire and water of life holding hands and hearts together. May that be our practice and may we reach out to one another today.

Prayer: May the words I have typed today and have been read by others be imprinted upon our hearts and enlivened in our lives this day. Amen.

Morning Meditation

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4

We need each other. I know very few people who can make it on their own. While we might idealize individualism, it is our relationships with others that help to give meaning to our lives. When I hear this part of the passage to the Ephesians, I hear Paul reminding the church then and now that our connections to each other matter and make a difference. I hear Paul challenging us to realize that **not** everyone will share the same gifts and not everyone will be faithful in the same way. Our unity is not uniformity, it is found in the One who crafted/created/loved each of us into being. The divine breath that fills us, the spirit that sustains/surges within us, is the source of our connection.

I also think of the great hymn, "Take My Gifts" by Shirley Erena Murray. Read prayerfully and slowly the first verse:

Take my gifts and let me love You, God who first of all loved me,
Gave me light and food and shelter, gave me life and set me free,
Now because Your love has touched me, I have love to give away,
Now the bread of love is rising, loaves of love to multiply.

I want to invite you to hold those words today. What responses to do these words awaken? What actions might these words provoke for you? How might God's love introduced and infused in your life cause you, like bread, to rise and shine and share your presence with others in ways that are uniquely/beautifully you?

Prayer: Creatively connecting God awaken within me a chance to combine the ingredients of my life with others in humble, gentle, patient and loving ways this day. Amen.

Morning Meditation

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. Ephesians 4:14

If ever there was a verse of scripture that sings to my soul in such a time as this, it is the above words from Paul's pen. I feel tossed to and fro by the waves and winds of the world today. I feel tugged and torn between wanting to help and wondering if I can really make a difference. The crashing, shattering sound you hear is my soul each time I read the news or hear someone say something racist or homophobic or just plain hurtful/harmful to another person. The news yesterday about the shooting of Breonna Taylor; the words we are hearing from our leaders; people I care about in the hospital; people you know you cannot afford rent or have already been evicted. The crashing, shattering sound you hear is trying to go about this world spinning out of control with hurricane force winds, destruction like a wildfire, and leaving devastation behind.

Perhaps you are thinking, "Well, thanks for that inspirational thought, Pastor Eeyore. I wonder if there is a new funny cat video on YouTube." Paul is reminding us that just because we have a connection to each other, doesn't mean life will be perfect. Just because there are people in our lives who we can let love loose with, doesn't mean things will change immediately or instantly.

The world is broken.
People are broken.
I am broken.

I don't say 'I am broken,' to shame myself or rain down guilt upon myself. I say that to realize that I am a participant (not an observer) in this world. Even if I stay silent on the sideline, my presence at this moment in history is still causing a shift like the wings of butterflies impacting weather patterns. 'I am broken,' of course, is only half the story. The other half is, "I am loved." Love, not because of what I manufacture or make or by trying to be good, I am loved into being with every breath because that is way God works. I don't earn love, otherwise it isn't love. Love is freely given. Who is someone you can share love with today? Who can you call or text or Facetime to express what is within you amid what is going on around you? What helps to ground us in days like this is finding others we can hang onto, if not literally at least over the phone and through our words.

May you and I find ways to be bring forth a bridge over the troubled, surging, swirling watery chaos of today.

Prayer: May that last sentence be my embodied prayer today. Amen.

Morning Meditation

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Another week wraps up and winds down. My heartfelt prayer on this Friday is what I have written this week has been an echo of the above verse from Ephesians, that my words have

spoken/witnessed to a truth drenched in God's love. I pray I have witnessed to both the pain and possibility of this moment. I pray I have given you space to prayerfully ponder what is happening around you and within you.

I recently heard that that love is spacious.

Love will never narrowly try to confine or define you.

Love will let you be where you are. Love will keep reaching out to you. Love will keep trying to connect. Love will provide room to roam. Which lands us right back where we started on Monday, Paul in prison. He was not free. He was not physically in some spacious space, but his soul was. He might have been alone in the cell, but was connecting to a community of people he cared deeply about.

While I love the phrase, "Speak the truth in love," I wonder what happens when we reverse the order. In love, speak truth. This tells me the soil out of which truth must be planted. This teaches me how to nurture what I say and do and inhabit this moment. In love, speak truth. This also slows me down, gives me a pause to wonder, "Is what I am about to type, say, toss/throw out into the world both loving and true? If not, do I really need to say or do that?"

These five words could change so much because it would challenge us so greatly. Some of what I read might be loving, but it is sentimentalized. Some of what I read is true, but it is said with such viciousness that it causes my soul to break. To be sure, "In love, speak truth," doesn't have to avoid difficulty, it doesn't need to side step tension, it doesn't have to put you silently on the sideline to go along to get along.

In love, speak truth happens at our sacred conversations on race. In love, speak truth happens in Bible Study and Coffee Hours and Collage gatherings. In love, speak truth can happen in our lives together and in how we connect to others.

Stop and ponder what thoughts this meditation awakens for you. Stop and prayerfully ponder if you think this is possible? Stop and let these words work into your soul to see what happens when planted in that soil within you.

Prayer: Let the meditations of our minds, the thoughts of our hearts, and the stirring of our spirit be attuned and aligned with Your presence, O God, every moment this day. Amen.