

Arvada
United Methodist Church

February 14, 2010 "Making Space in Our Hearts for God" Schawn Kellogg, Iliff Intern
Psalm 139 1-6: 23-24

On this Valentine's Day, I want to talk to you about hearts; but not the kind that contain chocolate. I want to talk to you about human hearts.

It's not unusual to associate our hearts with God. In fact, the Bible uses the word "heart" over one thousand times! We imagine the heart as where Divinity and humanity intersect. A place where God's presence...is sensed more clearly. When we speak from the heart, we speak with our most sincere emotions.

A beautiful thing about the **Psalms** is that they were composed as a way for people to talk to God with all of our human emotion. When the author of today's Psalm wrote, "Search me oh God and **know my heart,**" it was a plea on behalf of the people, for God to enter **their** hearts, the very center of **their** being.

Recently, my 13-year old daughter was given a homework assignment and she's given me permission to use this example: The assignment required her to describe her character. The assignment was to name people who had helped **shape** her. She chose to write about those she spends a lot of time with, people that know her well; people who honor her...and tell her when she's at her best, and when she's slipped a little.

It's like that with God. In order for God to shape the people **we** become, we must allow God into our hearts. Now, God is always present in our world and in us. But we can choose to be affected by God...or ...we can be indifferent. Like any relationship, if we don't nurture it...it becomes a relationship in **name** only.

Silent time is one way we can nurture our relationship with God.

We Protestants are sometimes uncomfortable with silence and meditation. I attend a mid-week chapel service at Iliff School of Theology, where I am a student. One week the guest preacher was a former Iliff student. Wonderful speaker...he has won awards for his preaching. He was dramatic preacher and had a terrific voice! That's what we celebrate in the Protestant tradition, you know, the preaching.

But I will tell you that the most memorable thing about the whole service was the silent time before prayer. As most of us closed our eyes, we waited for the pastoral prayer to begin. The clock ticked in the quiet chapel. Occasionally the floor creaked as a student arrived and slipped into a spot.

I began to get quite uncomfortable with the silence as it seemed to drag on. I thought something must be wrong. My sister, Shani, helped with worship that day. She was sitting up near the pulpit. I opened an eye and peaked around. There were a few others doing the same thing. But the pastor was still sitting in his chair poised in prayer. He didn't appear to be concerned. I looked at my sister. She was still quietly praying. Neither one of them looked like they were ready to stop anytime soon.

Well, after a long silent time, Shani stepped to the pulpit and began the prayer. After worship ended, I asked her, "What was up with the silence?!" She said the pastor had requested a full three minutes of silence before the Pastoral prayer. It seemed so much longer than three minutes!

We aren't always good at sitting in silence as a way of seeking God.

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Our wonderful Protestant tradition has grown out of a love for words, for the Scripture. A belief that all of us should know our Christian story. We gather, we listen, we give. But we don't always sit in silence.

Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, on the other hand, have embraced silence in their tradition. So today I'd like to mention a couple of those whose intense devotion and spiritual practices, such as silence, invite **us** further into spiritual discovery.

It's Valentine's Day....so first I will say a word about St. Valentine...

Tradition tells us that he was a kind-hearted Roman Catholic priest who defied the wishes of Emperor Claudius 11 in the third century. Apparently Claudius thought that married soldiers were not as effective as single soldiers so he prohibited marriage. Despite the Emperor, St. Valentine continued to marry couples who were in love. He was executed for performing those weddings. While his legacy is more about risk and commitment than about spiritual practice, he honored the love in the hearts of those couples.

Others are known for the kind of practice that the Psalm talks about; allowing God to enter our hearts.

St. Hildegard of Bingen was a visionary nun who lived in the middle ages. As a young girl, her family determined she would be a nun. (Something that was not uncommon in those days.) Her visions came early in life...and continued through her 81 years. Eventually, a spiritual leader convinced her to write about the visions...to journal...convinced her that God would help her make sense of her visions through writing. She wrote music, created art and experimented with colors that helped to describe her experiences. (You heard some of her compositions in our pre-service music today). Hildegard taught that God worked most fully in us...in a sense shaping us...when we open our hearts. Seven centuries after her death, Hildegard's music and images are increasing in popularity...as people look for tools to help them meditate and create quiet time with God.

Many of you are familiar with Thomas Merton. He entered a monastery in the 1940's. He lived exactly one half of his 56 years, 27 years to the day, in the isolation of a monastery; most of his time he spent in total silence and solitude in a hermitage...meditating, praying and writing. His most famous book, "**The Seven Storey Mountain**", became a national bestseller in 1948 and has remained in print ever since. Many young people read his book and became intrigued by a monastic lifestyle. Merton's monastery in rural Gethsemani, Kentucky became popular with people wanting to leave the turbulence of the world...to find union with God.

Now I don't know about you, but if I entered a monastery, leaving behind my phone, my computer, my "do-list"...I'm thinking I'd find time to pray. Some time to write or journal; some time to walk in nature; quite time with God.

A monastic lifestyle is a path a few people will take; but we can **each** find an equally close connection to God in a life lived in the world. Even Merton insisted that the monastic lifestyle was not the right path for everyone. He wrote and taught that all people could nurture their relationship with God, even fully living in the world. The challenge for me, and I suspect for you, is making the space to connect with God, even within our busy lives. If we ask God to be in our hearts we need to nurture our relationship. To make space for God.

Even Jesus, who had a special connection to God, went to a solitary place...and prayed. The Gospel of Luke says Jesus "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." [5:16] ...and that on one occasion He "went out to a mountainside to pray" and then, "spent the night praying" [6:12] Matthew also reports Jesus went to a mountainside, alone, to pray. According to Mark's Gospel,

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“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” [Mark 1:35]

As followers of Jesus, we are entering the Season of Lent. Lent is a time when we open our hearts to a renewed relationship with God through spiritual practices. Practices like prayer, journaling, creating art, focused study, meditation. These practices are not the same for everyone; but they should be intentional. Think about how **you** will make some extra time for God...how **you** will make space for God... this Lenten season. Amen.

Benediction: The Psalmist said, “Search me, O God, and know my heart;” We also ask God to **enter our hearts**, to know us, and to change us.