

Northbrae Community Church
March 1, 2020

Sermon: Practice but without perfect

The other day Roy and I went walking in Tilden, following a trail that starts just past the Little Farm. On the way to the trail you can see families with toddlers, most of them carrying bright green bunches of celery to feed the cow and sheep and goats. It is a Berkeley childhood standard, that little farm and it's nature center. The children are babbling as the toddle up a little rise in the lawn. The cows are mooing, and the goats are bleating. It's good to be reminded of days when I was coaxing little ones to come along now, come along, the goats are hungry, the cows want to say hello.

The trail continues past Jewel Lake, where it happens that there are currently a few otters in residence. Otters! In Berkeley! Underneath us all it is wilderness, and sometimes we are lucky enough to be reminded of it. But mostly the lake is home to turtles, heron, and ducks. We have measured the health of the watershed by the life in Jewel Lake.

If you keep going, if you get to Wildcat Canyon. I have never seen wildcats there, not for want of looking, mind you, but because the cats have their ways, which are very different from our own. The Wildcat trail goes all the way to Richmond. But this winter, we don't follow it all the way. Our goals are much closer in. Years ago, Roy found a population of Leatherwood shrubs beside Wildcat Creek. Leatherwood are one of the few remnants of life in the Bay Area from before the ice age. They are not plentiful now, and to find one is lucky. To find a standing of them is truly a thrill.

The Leatherwood bloom very early with sweet, tiny little bright yellow blossoms. They are about the size of the tip of your little pinky, with yellow stamen popping out like giggles. Through the last six weeks, we've watched them bud and then bloom—little yellow lights in a dark winter afternoon. On our walk most recently, we saw that the Leatherwood and the shrubs surrounding them are now quickly leafing out. The blossoms are almost all spent. Soon, the unassuming Leatherwood will recede from prominence, and appear as just another California green shrub.



We started this walk late in the afternoon, and the sun was starting to set already by the time we got to the leatherwoods. We would have to hurry to make it back before twilight faded. As we picked up our own pace and walked, we could hear a parliament of owls hoo hoo hoo in the trees across Wildcat Creek. So deep and somber their voices.

We heard other birds chattering as we walked. Twilight, everyone Twilight. The Tilden Nature center has created a new pond across the trail from Jewel Lake, and long before we got there, we could hear the frogs. Dozens of frogs, maybe a hundred frogs, all singing away around the pond. Please forgive me if I tell you that when I heard their chorus, I thought of us here in the chapel at Northbrae, singing our hymns. They had the same love of song that we do, the same certainty of tune and message. And I thought this chorus of frogs was singing praise in the best possible way they can. This is their praise of life, praise and gratitude. Can a frog sing praise? How can it not? How can it's throaty, warty croaking be other than praise, for that is the voice it has inside.

We are now official in the Lenten season; Ash Wednesday having been last week. As I have mentioned before, I did not appreciate Lent when I was growing up. I did not like the giving up, the weird kind of boasting that some of my more pious friends made as they rejected chocolate or white bread or a particular television show. The abstention alone seemed to be the goal of it all. Yes, I understand the value of a fast, of giving up a full plate so as to better focus the mind, or, in a time of plenty to understand what it means to go without. There are so many who go without, even in this our time of plenty. But to boast of fasting seems a misplaced ambition.

Traditionally, in Lenten practice we try to feel our way inside the 40 days at the end of Jesus' ministry and life. It was his preparation for what he knew was coming his way. Beyond his presence as a healing, loving, forgiving soul of souls, he was a rebel. And the Rome did not permit rebellion. In Lent, we have the opportunity to contemplate what it is to give in to the way the world is, spirit, body and soul. For one man so long ago, he knew he would give up his life. I don't believe in substitution atonement; I don't believe that Jesus gave up his life to save ours. But I am awed by his commitment, his trust in his message. Every day now, we have the opportunity to envision what the world could be if we live by that message. We are living that message when we recognize and honor the dignity of each spirit, body and soul we share this life with.

A couple of weeks ago, I spoke about the Christian idea of the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven. Call it what you will, "It ain't the Kingdom unless we all make it," as my friend Larry Foy taught me. In Lenten time, we have the opportunity to envision the Kingdom, not as an airy, distant haven, and through our actions bring its brightness to this daunting world where we live and breathe. When we care for our neighbors, we make it manifest; no matter how far away they are in distance or in practice; no matter if they are with us now, or if they are our great grandchildren to come, no matter if they are human or otter or croaking frogs.

Today I want to look at another Christian practice. Last Summer I mentioned to you the feature essay in the *New York Times* about Nuns and Nones.¹ Nuns, as in female monastics, and Nones, as in people who claim they have none: this growing number of young Americans who are both

¹ "These Millennials Got New Roommates. They're Nuns," by Nellie Bowles, *The New York Times*, May 31, 2019

deeply spiritual yet who do not identified with traditional religion. Demographers call them “Nones.”

There is much of interest in the essay, but I want to point to one particular point. When a group of Millennials first visited a convent and began to develop relationships with the nuns, one young person turned to a much older nun and said, “Tell me about your Practice.” The nun was momentarily confounded. Usually the question is “Tell me what you believe.” And really that seems to be the primary metric in much of our tussles about religion these days. Indeed, that’s the primary metric in Christianity going back to its first days.

But what if we can let our beliefs settle through our beings like breath for a little while, and know that they will call out to us in different ways at different points in our lives? What if we can leave our believes to just be, and likewise let the beliefs of others, just be? Instead, in the spirit of Millennials, let’s look at practice. In particular, let’s look at prayer.

Imagine for a moment that you are in a vibrant and joyful gospel choir, singing and clapping and moving your whole being to the beat, singing with your heart and lungs wide open, giving and receiving, moving, singing together louder and louder.

Now imagine that you are standing in an Eastern Orthodox church, looking at the brilliantly framed icon images of Gospel figures all around you. A priest is chanting the prayers, while another is walking through the congregation swinging a censor, the heavy, fragrant incense filling up your being.

Now imagine yourself sitting in the still of a Quaker Meeting House, the prayer silent within each man, woman, and child, until one felt moved to witness, stood humbly to speak, then sat down quiet again.

Is any one of these the right way to pray and the others wrong?

This may seem a rhetorical question at best and silly besides. But it has been a question of strife and division since — since long before Jesus answered his disciples’ nearly desperate questions about practice:

His disciples asked him and said to him, “Do you want us to fast? How should we pray? Should we give to charity? What diet should we observe?”

Jesus said, “Do not lie, and do not do what you hate, because all things are disclosed before heaven. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed, and there is nothing covered that will remain undisclosed.”²

² *The Gospel of Thomas*, translated by Marvin Meyer

Prayer is one of our most personal, sacred practices. It is spoken in our inner voice, the one most vulnerable. Think about what you pray about, for, with, to. Often our most sacred inner prayers have no words to them, no words at all. A prayer for the safety of a loved one, for healing that seems out of reach, for reconciliation with another, or wholeness for the broken self we each of us feel sometimes.

Yet prayer is also one of our most communal practices. We learn and love the prayers of our community. We pray together here: psalms that do not sound right in other translations, hymns sung as prayers our parents might have sung, our grandparents. Others of us here may have left the prayers and practices of our parents and come to find a community that feels more authentic to who we are, who we are becoming. We feel at home in certain prayers. Through them we have a shortcut to peace. It can be a light in dark times just to say the words of a psalm of David.

When we step outside our practiced, beloved psalm or prayer, when we hear someone say it with a different accent or emphasis, it can feel jarring, even downright wrong. Is there danger in saying a prayer in an odd way?

We live in a time and place where it is safe to hear and say our own prayers, and to pray in the way it enlivens us. It has not always been this way. And it is not that way elsewhere. Still in our given, gifted lives, prayer in our language is tradition and comfort. For others, only a few centuries ago reading the gospels in English translation was a death sentence, their prayers have been deemed heresy

Yet, when I read the gospels now, I see Jesus teaching his followers that the felt prayer, the lived longing inside, for God, for peace, is the prayer that though often silent is the prayer that heals us, that connects us to our God and to each other.

Do not lie, and do not do what you hate.

Simple enough to say. not so easy to embody. This is an invitation to live in honesty, with our own conscience and with our own community,

It is a call for authenticity of the self, to yourself, to others. Hillel the Elder, a beloved rabbi whose life overlapped Jesus' life by about ten years, said:

“That which is hateful to you do not do to your fellow. That is the whole of the Torah. Go and learn.”

Simple enough to say. Not so easy to embody. Both of these teachings demand of us an authenticity of being that will rise up from within our deepest understanding. They call us to see ourselves as honestly as our fellows, and to treat our fellow as compassionately as we would treat ourselves.

The word Lent, it turns out, has its root in the old Saxon and old High German *langaz* for lengthening days. It means this time now, this late winter and early springtime when the day is getting longer, and the new life is only just starting now. But now, early in the season, we have

a chance to look deeply, listen carefully to what is in our being, and through that kind of prayer discern how we wish to be in the world.

This morning as finished preparing this sermon for today, a poem from Langston Hughes sprang up in my Instagram feed. It is praise for Helen Keller:

She,
In the dark,
Found light
Brighter than many every see

She, within herself,
Found loveliness,
Through the soul's own master.

And now the world receives
From her dower:
The message of the strength
Of inner power.³

This strength is in our power too. It is in the power of the leatherwood, the owls, the creek through which the otters swam to Jewel Lake. It is in the song of the frogs and the lengthening days. It is in our honest selves and our deepest prayer. It is ours to have. It is ours to give.

Benediction:

Cry like a bird; sing like a frog; pray like the heart of a flower as it opens to the coming spring.

³ "Helen Keller," by Langston Hughes