

Workshop Notes

Workshop Title: Christian Contemplation: A Heart that Listens

Presenter: Danny Mullins

CONTEMPLATION DEFINED

1. Contemplate (Lat. - *contemplum*)
 - a. *con (together)– templum (temple)*
 - b. Being together with God in His temple
 - 1) 1 Cor. 6:19-20
2. William McNamara
 - a. A long, loving look at the real
 - b. “The ability to see reality as God sees it.” Elizabeth Liebert
3. The experience of gazing at God while experiencing God gazing at us.

THOUGHTS ABOUT CONTEMPLATION

1. Contemplative prayer versus a contemplative life.
 - a. It’s important that we do not view contemplative prayer as an add-on to life.
 - b. To a contemplative all of life is prayer.
2. We must not approach contemplation as something to achieve, but rather living life in an increasing awareness of God’s loving presence. If we grow in our awareness of God, we may find that we have become contemplative.
3. Experiencing contemplation is a gift, not a goal.
4. Contemplation is not something you get better at, but rather something you receive and surrender to.
5. A contemplative life is very foreign to our false self which is nourished by doing. Contemplation reveals our authentic self which is nourished by being.
 - a. *“What really happens when one enters the cloud of unknowing, resting in God beyond thoughts, words and feelings, is a profound healing of the emotional wounds of a lifetime. As these wounds are gradually surfaced and released in (contemplative) prayer, more and more the false self weakens and the true self gradually emerges. For Keating, this is the real meaning of the term transforming union. As he states quite clearly in Intimacy with God: ‘We can bring the false self to liturgy and the reception of the sacraments, but we cannot bring the false self forever to contemplative prayer because it is the nature of contemplative prayer to dissolve it.’” (Sue Pickering, Spiritual Direction: A Practical Introduction.)*
 - b. *“The development of contemplative prayer is a process of liberation from everything that prevents us from being completely honest with ourselves. The more confidence you have in God, the more you can face the truth about yourself. You can only face up to who you really are in the presence of someone you trust. If you trust God, you know that no matter what you have done or not done, he is going to go on loving you.*

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“As a matter of fact, he always knew the dark side of your character and he is now letting you in on the secret like a friend confiding to a friend...You see the false value systems that are damaging your life...Divine love begins to show you what these are. If you let go of them, you will gradually unfold in the presence of God and enjoy his presence.” (Thomas Keating. *Open Mind, Open Heart.*)

- c. *“If you can sit and do nothing, then you can do virtually anything.”* Michael Elliston
6. Contemplation is resting from my preoccupation with myself. If I can somehow let go of my preoccupation with myself, I am much more likely to notice God.
7. An indication that we are sinking more deeply into a contemplative posture is finding ourselves reacting less and less in judgment toward and frustration with ourselves when we notice we have drifted away from our intention of being with God.

CONTEMPLATION AND HEARING GOD

1. Our focus must be upon having a heart that listens, not a heart that hears. If we focus on hearing, we will compromise our capacity to listen. We will begin to measure our lives by what, how much, or how often we hear rather than listening contentedly in God’s presence. One indication that we are too focused on hearing is that we are *concerned* that we are not *hearing* anything.
2. Just as growing in the gift of discernment does not mean to become more proficient with the tools of discernment but rather to become a discerning person, so the goal of growth in contemplation is not to hear God but to become a listening person. We become someone who hears God, not as a goal but as a result of *time together in His presence (i.e., con-templum)*.

THE ULTIMATE OUTCOME

1. Christlikeness
 - a. 2 Cor. 3: 18 (NIV) “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

BRIAN ZHAND

“When God broke into history decisively through the Incarnation, who discerned it? Not the Pharisees whose religious movement was loudly predicting that God was about to act. Not the scribes and priests who were the professional experts in prophetic scripture. Instead, it was pagan stargazers and peasant shepherds who discerned what God was doing. They were not the experts and they were not the reactionaries at the loud center of religious noise; they were quiet people on the silent edges of contemplative thought.

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“Gazing at stars and keeping watch by night are profound metaphors for the contemplative life. To most people it would appear that the Magi and the shepherds were doing nothing of significance in their long nighttime vigils, but they were the ones who were able to discern what God was doing. It was contemplative stargazers and shepherds, having learned how to wait in silence, who found their way to Bethlehem. They were the ones who discerned what God was doing in the seemingly ordinary event of a young woman giving birth in an out of the way place.”

“Waiting for God to act only seems like waiting for God to act. God is always acting because God is always loving the world and always giving birth to something. Waiting for God to act is actually waiting for your soul to become quiet enough and contemplative enough to discern what God is doing in the obscure and forgotten corners, far from the corridors of power or wherever you think the action is.”

“So let me say this to you quite confidently: God is about to act. God is about to act in your life and in our world. But if you want to discern the actions of God you must learn to first wait in quiet contemplation. Before you can become an activist, you must first become a contemplative; otherwise, you’ll just be a re-activist. And re-activists merely recycle anger and keep the world an angry place. Jesus was a contemplative activist, but never a re-activist.”

“So learn to gaze at the stars. Learn to keep vigil in the fields. Learn to sit with Jesus. Learn to be quiet. Learn to wait. Then, and only then, will you begin to discern what God is doing.”

CLEARING BY MARTHA POSTLEWAITE

Do not try to save
the whole world
or do anything grandiose.
Instead, create
a clearing
in the dense forest of your life
and wait there patiently,
until the song
that is your life
falls into your own cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself
to this world
so worthy of rescue.