Week 2. The way of *Life*

When I first tried Centering Prayer, I had an expectation of how it ought to go, and when reality didn't match my idea, I came away thinking "wow, I'm really horrible at this!" There is irony here. The guideline is to return to "consent to God's presence and action within," but when things didn't go the way I expected and desired, I was upset. I was not truly consenting to *God's* action—I was trying to accomplish something particular on my own. This desire was blocking true prayer, which involves letting go of such desires and seeking God's will.

It is these desires that prevent us from knowing and loving God. We are diagnosed with cancer. Fear may drive out the peace resulting from faith in God's love and care. We are insulted or slandered. Anger may block us from compassion for our enemy. We see something we want. Desire for it may make us forget God and descend into self-centered pursuit. Pure love seeks nothing, desires nothing but to love God with our whole heart, and soul, and mind, and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. This is union with God. Centering Prayer works toward this end by giving us a practice of letting go of desires and attachments.

In an effort to be accessible to everyone, Keating frames the effects of Centering Prayer in the language of psychology, "unloading the subconscious," "divine therapy," rather than the traditional language of pure love of God and God's gifts of grace. But authors such as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and Thomas Merton are explicit about the givenness of light and love in true contemplative prayer. Merton, for example, defines contemplation as "a supernatural love and knowledge of God, simple and obscure, infused by him into the summit of the soul, giving it a direct and experimental contact with him."[1] Centering Prayer is an exercise that prepares us to receive contemplative prayer.

In Jesus' teachings, and the rest of the New Testament, and in all of Christian History, the road to contemplative prayer, to knowledge of God, is through love. "Love God above all." "Love each other as I have loved you." Pure love is not a feeling or emotion, but an *affection*: a will to empty yourself, serve others, and even die for them.

In Centering Prayer, we learn to know and to let go of thoughts and desires that come between us and God—to know and let go of *self*. That's one side of the coin. The other side is *knowing Christ.* We open ourselves to God, to his presence and action within, to whatever he wishes to do in us. God works in us, and we are grateful. We can summarize the attitude with a modified guideline:

Place yourself in a posture to receive silence, and be grateful for whatever comes.

The road to contemplative prayer is *loving attention to God*. The exercise taught in *The Cloud of Unknowing* is described in terms of desire for God, of yearning, of "reaching out toward God" in love. This aspiration is at the heart of contemplative prayer. It is this love that transforms us, that purifies us, that teaches us. This love is the Holy Spirit in us.

Exercise for Week 2: Surrender

The modified guideline for this weeks' practice is:

> Place yourself in a posture to receive silence, and be grateful for whatever comes.

This may not exactly be Centering Prayer. We are willing to accept whatever God gives, even if it's not silence but insight, or contrition, or devotion, or tears, or distraction, or painful dryness. We experience it and are grateful for it, but we don't attempt to hold on to it—we thank God, let it go, and return to consent.

Some key points:

- The silence we seek is in the mind, but also in the heart—in what we desire. It's about letting go of affections such as fear or anger or desire and loving God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. It's union with Christ
- We "lift up our hearts to God." It's an act of will. Centering Prayer calls it "consent," but it could as well be called "openness" or "surrender" or "love"
- We should be open to *whatever* God will do in us, not expecting a particular outcome, responding with gratitude, and returning to surrender

This week's exercise will be similar to that of last week—it will involve daily *lectio divina*, a Centering Prayer-like exercise, and reflection. This week we will also make a point of surrendering any attachments we notice.

1. Pray for God's presence and for your own surrender
2. Take a few minutes to read the reading for the day and reflect on it
3. Practice the modified Centering Prayer exercise for 20-30 minutes
4. Take the remaining time to reflect on your prayer time through journaling

When you notice that you are distracted, or full of devotion, or anxious, or in pain,

1. Note briefly what desire or fear or other affection is between you and God
2. Without analyzing or dwelling on it, simply be grateful for its presence
3. Then let it go. Offer it to God and let him worry about it; you return to your simple intention toward God

During the rest of each day, when you think of it, check in with yourself to note what affection is coming between you and God. Let it go and return to faith and surrender.

Journaling and Journee

Reflect on your Centering Prayer time. How did it go? What kinds of thoughts distracted you? What kinds of attachments led to these distractions? Were you able to let go of these attachments and give them to God? You can reflect on these questions by writing about them in a paper journal, or you can use the online interactive journal, *Journee*, at

`life.ccel.org/agents/bcp-2-life`