



Centering Prayer: What is it anyway?

The new Centering Prayer Group is underway at St. Mary's. We gather at 4pm, either in the St. Mary's Chapel, or weather permitting, in the Garden Gazebo and we are done in plenty of time for those who would like to stay at St. Mary's for Holy Eucharist at 5pm.

Centering Prayer is a contemporary form of the ancient practice of contemplative prayer. All are welcome to explore this side of Christian experience. The group offers members support, encouragement, and an opportunity to share with others their experience of their spiritual journey. You need not have any previous experience with centering prayer.

Through Centering Prayer we:

- Deepen our relationship with God by quieting the mind, yet maintaining alertness.
- Are transformed through deepening our faith by resting in God's presence, beyond thoughts, words and emotions.
- Exercise faith, hope and selfless love.

The Group Format:

1. Introductions & check-in.
2. Read a lesson from scripture, especially the parables.
3. Begin a 20 minute Centering Prayer session.
4. Close with the Lord's Prayer and blessing to send us forth.

The How of Centering Prayer:

- Sit comfortably with your eyes closed, relax, and quiet yourself through your breathing and use of a sacred word.
- Choose a word sacred to you, so that as your mind wanders you say the word silently, come back to your breath, relax and have an open intention to allow God's divine presence to dwell in you. Examples of sacred words are: "Jesus", "Lord," "God," "Savior," "Abba," "Divine," "Shalom," "Spirit," "Love," "Peace" etc..

Interior silence is emphasized in Centering Prayer; it prepares us to receive the gift of contemplation in which we experience God's presence within us.

In this interior silence we do not seek to analyze our experience, have no thoughts, or make our minds a blank. We do not even seek to find peace and be consoled, although we may find that; we simply seek to open ourselves up to our God. This is unlike other contemplative practices, such as praying the Rosary where we contemplate on the Holy

Mysteries, *lectio divina*, through which we contemplate on the scriptures, or the contemplation we find in being attentive to the Holy Eucharist or praying the psalms.

Our practice strengthens our awareness of God's blessed trinity: God our Father and Mother, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit.

History of Centering Prayer

The roots of centering prayer can be traced back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 3rd century, A.D. The father and founder of the desert movement is said to be St. Anthony the Great. Thousands of hermits, ascetics, monks, and nuns sought to live his example of a solitary life of prayer, to be in communion with God in the deserts of Egypt and its surroundings. These were the forerunners of Christian monasticism of both the eastern and western churches. Their lives revolved around daily cycles of prayer, meditation, contemplation, and scripture reading. Their solitary existence didn't last, as men and women came to them seeking to gain greater knowledge of God and how to live godly lives. Eventually these solitary monks and nuns gathered to live communally in monasteries and convents, but maintained their ascetic and contemplative practices, praying of the daily offices, and *lectio divina* in which the scriptures contemplated upon.

In the daily lives of those living outside the monastic communities, meditation and contemplation took the form of praying the rosary while contemplating on the Holy Mysteries in the western church and in the Eastern Church, the use of the prayer rope to pray on contemplate on the Jesus prayer: "God have mercy on me a sinner".

Today

During the changing and rebellious 1970's, many young people who grew up in the Christian faith turned to eastern Zen masters and gurus to learn meditation. The Monks of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts happened to be situated in an area with numerous religious retreat centers. The monks tell the story of noticing how many young people were stopping by the abbey to ask for directions to these other retreat centers. They realized that most of the youth had no knowledge of the rich tradition in Christianity of contemplation and meditation. The monks, in particular Fr. William Meniger, Fr. M. Basil Pennington, and Abbot Thomas Keating began to explore how they could make ancient contemplative practice relevant to what young seekers were looking for outside of their faith. Thus, Centering Prayer, as we know it today was born.