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Text: Matthew 14:22-33

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“Stepping Out”

Alan Watts an Anglican priest who later became a Buddhist observed that what people were most deeply seeking in religion was not a collection of doctrines, rituals, symbols or even moral precepts but rather a pathway to a deeper connection to God’s creative power and life...seeking a conscious experience of being at one with Reality itself. That certainly captures my longing.

In my experience what I call prayer—an intentional focus on becoming more present to God—is a key pathway toward this connection. A few weeks ago, I spoke about Christian meditation and silence and how central those forms of prayer are to my personal practice. This group of practices is, however, one of many forms of prayer. In *Finding Your Hidden Treasure* Beignus O’Rourke shares what he calls two golden rules of prayer. “One is that we have to pray as we can in the way best suited to us, not in the way we think we ought. And the other rule is: the less we pray, the harder it gets.”

It takes experimentation to find the forms of prayer that suit us and that we can build into our daily lives as a regular practice.

So, this morning I’d like to share another form of prayer with you. This approach to prayer comes from what are called the Spiritual Exercises developed by St. Ignatius Loyola. St. Ignatius lived in Spain in the 1500’s and is best known today as the founder of the Jesuit order. I was first exposed to the spiritual exercise many years ago when I completed a five-day Ignatian retreat at the Gonzaga Eastern Point Retreat House, a Jesuit retreat center in Gloucester Mass.

A key component of the spiritual exercise is a form of prayer called imaginative contemplation which is focused on engaging a scripture passage by using your imagination to place yourself in the story.

Like most prayers, the preparation is simple. Sit quietly. Set your intention to be open to the movement of the spirit. Choose a passage with a strong story line like our passage today.

Then use your imagination to place yourself into the story.

Enter the scene

Imagine:

- What do you see?
- What sounds do you hear?
- Who is present?

Become part of the story

You might:

- Be one of the named characters.
- Be an unnamed bystander.
- Simply observe.

Allow the story to unfold within you

Notice:

- What draws your attention?
- Which person do you feel connected to?
- What emotions arise?
- Does Jesus say anything to you?
- Do you want to ask Jesus a question?

The goal is to use our imaginations to let the story speak to us from, and to, our depths. To engage the story from a level deeper than the thinking mind, with what the mystics call the eyes of the heart.

Using our passage for today as an example we could begin with the boat on a stormy sea. Enter the scene: Imagine the boat and the waves, the reactions of those in the boat. Imagine yourself on the boat.

Then we might shift to Jesus walking across the sea toward the boat saying "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Again we would seek to enter the scene - imagine what the voice might sound like, imagine the reactions of those in the boat. Imagine yourself in the boat hearing these words and see what response that evokes.

Then shift to Peter - "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Depending where your imagination is drawn connect to someone in the scene. To Peter—how does he feel? Or connect to others in the boat observing Peter—how do you imagine their reactions? What do they do? Do they say anything?

Then the pivot point—Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

Place yourself in Peter's place—imagine standing at the edge of a tossing boat...hearing Jesus say "come". Imagine--What thoughts/emotions could be telling you to sit back down? What could draw you to step out? How does this feel? Imagine the emotions that would be swirling at the point just before taking that first step onto the water.

Finally, imagine Peter noticing the strong wind, becoming frightened and beginning to sink.

Try to feel the terror of the wind and try to imagine starting to sink. How does that feel? Try to imagine calling for help...then imagine seeing Jesus' hand outstretched...imagine reaching out and being held up. How does that feel?

As you close out the imaginative engagement with the story, the guidance is to ponder any part of the story where you felt particularly connected to one person in the story. Any part of the story that seemed to offer some insight into something you are dealing with. Anything in the passage that resonated with where you are in life right now. St. Ignatius called this-- asking what God is inviting us toward.

Maybe something in the moment between "come" and stepping out of the boat.

or the first steps walking on the water...then the fear and the sinking

or the hand reached out...or the hand taken.

Forms of prayer that connect us to our deepest imagination and intuition are efforts to open our hearts so that we can hear God speak to us and accompany us in ways the rational mind cannot fully compute. The eyes of the heart can see things our rational mind miss. And what we find when we allow our attention to be guided by imagination and intuition can be profound. As Iain McGilchrist who has written extensively on what shapes our understanding of the world writes “The nature of attention that we bring to bear on the world...changes what we find.” I think even those with a brilliant analytical mind like Albert Einstein recognize the power of this other way of seeing. When asked if he had any regrets he reportedly replied, “I wish I had read more of the mystics earlier”.

We can cultivate this type of attention guided by imagination and intuition through our own prayer. We can also benefit from the experiences of others often captured in poetry, art and music. I'd like to close with one such poem that I have loved for years. It is from the contemporary poet David Whyte and in it he applies his imagination to the story we have just read.

The Truelove (David Whyte)

There is a faith in loving fiercely
the one who is rightfully yours
especially if you have
waited years and especially
if part of you never believed
you could deserve this
loved and beckoning hand
held out to you this way.

I am thinking of faith now
and the testaments of loneliness
and what we feel we are
worthy of in this world.

Years ago in the Hebrides
I remember an old man
who walked every morning
on the grey stones
to the shore of baying seals
who would press his hat
to his chest in the blustering
salt wind and say his prayer
to the turbulent Jesus
hidden in the water,

and I think of the story
of the storm and everyone
waking and seeing
the distant
yet familiar figure
far across the water
calling to them,

and how we are all
preparing for that
abrupt waking,
and that calling,
and that moment
we have to say yes,
except it will
not come so grandly,
so Biblically,
but more subtly
and intimately in the face
of the one you know
you have to love,

so that when we finally
step out of the boat
toward them, we find
everything holds us
and everything confirms
our courage, and if you wanted
to drown you could,
but you don't
because finally
after all the struggle
and all these years,
you don't want to anymore,
you've simply had enough
of drowning
and you want to live and you
want to love and you will
walk across any territory
and any darkness,
however fluid and however
dangerous, to take the
one hand you know
belongs in yours.

May we each find pathways that can open us to God's call and invitation to waking. May we find pathways that allow the eyes of our hearts to recognize the hand continually stretched out to us from deep within us, through this beautiful creation, through the love of others. And maybe most importantly, may our hearts be prepared us to say "yes" to loving fiercely the one who is rightfully ours.

Amen