



CENTERED Podcast – Week 4, Introduction

December 20, 2020

Karl: Welcome to Centered: a podcast filled with spiritual practices for everyday life. Our goal, our hope for you, is to help you find just a little more stillness and less distraction, a little less anxiety and more peace in the whirlwind of your everyday life. I'm Karl Helvig.

David: And I'm David Dillon

Karl: If you are joining us for the first time we are really glad you are here and hope this won't be your last time.

David: As a quick recap, we have learned about and practiced together three different spiritual exercises that people for thousands of years have found to be centering, and grounding in life. Those three practices are: Breath Prayer, Praying with Your Body, and the practice of praying scripture called *Lectio Divina*. Again, we really encourage you to go back and listen to the past three weeks.

Karl: Today, we are going to talk about a fourth and final practice for this season of the Centered podcast, it's called Imaginative Prayer.

To start that off, I want to talk about the imagination. In our modern Western world, when we think about our brains and all the amazing things we can do with our minds, we tend to think about just one specific part of our thinking, namely our *rational thought*.

A couple observations about that: first, clearly the ability to reason is NOT the only ability our brains have. Second, prioritizing rational thinking over other forms of thought - like imagination or creativity or abstraction - is more of a modern point of view than it is a universal human view. Throughout history, so many people have seen the imagination as equally as significant as our rational capacities. There's even been times or cultures where the imagination has been valued *above* rational thought. The same is true for many Christians.

So, here's my invitation - especially if you are more of a reason and rational thought kind of person - don't think of this as *imagination versus reason*, rather, think of imagination as a complementary way to use your mind. God created us. God created our minds both with the ability to reason and with the ability to imagine. And both of those abilities we have, have the potential to be powerful and meaningful in our prayer. I believe you will find this to be a significant and meaningful exercise.

That said, David, these practices we have been sharing with people, you know, we didn't come up with these. We've said it before, faithful people for hundreds - in some cases, thousands - of years, have been using these practices for the same reason we are engaging them. People desire to find a stillness, and a centeredness in life. In that sense they have stood the test of time; they're important ways that God's people have connected with God.

David: Yeah, that is an important thing to remember. The history of people truly seeking God is filled with spiritual practices like these. And this week's practice is one tradition that has been particularly significant in my own life, so I am excited to share it with our listeners.

It comes formally from the life and teachings of one man, St. Ignatius, who was an important figure in the Counter Reformation during the late 16th century. Just a few years after Martin Luther did his important reformation work in Germany, the Catholic church had its own internal reform that happened, seeking to get the church back on course with following and honoring the God of the Scriptures. As I said, that was called the Counter Reformation, and Ignatius was an important part of that work. He was from Loyola, Spain and is often referred to today as Ignatius of Loyola.

He became a Christian leader who taught a number of spiritual practices that were initially designed for participants to do in an intensive 30-day retreat, and they are commonly referred to as "The Exercises" or "Spiritual Exercises." People across the world and throughout the generations have found them to be powerful and meaningful ways to center their lives and pursue God.

Karl: And, David, you have had some significant personal experience with really taking a deep dive into these practices. Would you tell us a little about your personal experience?

David: Sure, I would love to. As I said, "The Exercises" were initially designed to be done in a 30-day retreat setting; however, even in Ignatius's time, he found people could not leave their jobs and families for 30 days to go on retreat (as wonderful as that sounds!), so he adapted a version of them to be done over a 9-month period, calling it "a retreat in everyday life."

That is the format that I did The Exercises in back in 2007 as part of my training as a spiritual director. During that 9-month period, I met pretty much every week with a spiritual director and filled up a journal full of reflections, confessions, and hopes as I engaged with Ignatius's material. The great thing about his material is that so much of it is direct interaction with the life of Jesus, through concentrated time in the four Gospels. This is where the Imaginative Prayer piece comes in as a part of The Exercises.

You see Ignatius didn't want to merely fill his students with head knowledge about Jesus as they looked at the Scriptures. Instead he wanted them to encounter the resurrected and living Jesus in the deeper way that he had encountered him through his own rather miraculous conversion from a womanizing, immodest soldier in the Spanish army. To do this he appealed to the imagination.

The process was rather simple: as he had his students reflect on each gospel story, he would have them imagine they were one of the participants or characters in the story, maybe a disciple, a pharisee, one being healed, or even a bystander. It was really up to the student to prayerfully let God lead him into the role that would be best for him. In addition to that, to make the scene all the more vivid, Ignatius would encourage his students to color in the scene imagining the sights, the smells, and even the feel of the weather for the scene they are engaging.

One way to approach this, especially for a more rational thinker, is to picture yourself telling the Gospel story to a young child, keeping them engaged and piquing their imagination. Jesus himself encouraged his followers that if they wanted to enter the kingdom, that they needed to

do so with the wonder of a little child. I think these exercises are a wonderful way to cultivate that type of posture before Jesus

In getting ready for this week, I dug out my journal from when I did these exercises, and if it's okay, I'd love to read one of my brief entries, so that you get an idea of how God led me in that particular time to engage one of the gospel stories. With it being so close to Christmas, I'd like to read my reaction to the birth narrative, as it's recorded in Luke chapter 2.

O the mess of birth, even the violence. What an awesome thought that the Maker and Lord of the universe would subject himself to that. Vulnerability. What must the heavenly host have been thinking as they peered into that stable? Were they nervous? Or did they have such trust in who He was that they just excitedly watched to see how the story would unfold?

O the intimacy of birth, the love and the instant bond that at last becomes physical reality. I cried when I saw each of my two boys born - tears of unimaginable joy. How much more to witness the birth of my Lord. Would Mary and Joseph trust me enough to hold their swaddled child? I timidly ask, "Please give me this joy." My whole body is warmed as the Light of the World rests in my arms.

Karl: David, that is awesome, and I really appreciate you sharing from your own personal experience. I can really only imagine how transformative of a season that must have been for you to engage to intentionally over such a significant period of time.

With that in mind, I want to introduce us now in more detail to that practice of *Imaginative Prayer*. David already explained a little bit - we're going to try to engage with our imagination the sights, the sounds, the feel, the hustle and bustle of these gospel stories. So many stories in the scriptures are just filled with rich and vivid detail.

Now, the first thing to mention is that this prayer is a natural extension of - in some ways, a different version of - the practice we engaged last week, *Lectio Divina*. In Imaginative prayer, we are going to follow the exact same structure - practicing stillness, reading through a passage of scripture three different times, and prayerfully discerning the significance or meaning of that passage for our lives. The difference will be in how we are prompted to engage with the scripture during each reading.

You may recall, and if you didn't I'd encourage you to go back and listen to last week, but you may recall that with *Lectio* we prompted you to seek a specific word or phrase that stood out to you. To then let that word or phrase inform your understanding of the scripture as a whole. And then to draw some sort of conclusion for your life why that word or phrase stood out to you.

Here's the new prompts we're going to give you with Imaginative Prayer today. We've again broken it up into five parts. First, we begin with Rest. Continuing to practice that foundational stillness we've been learning together all along. Then during our first reading of the passage, we Imagine. We simply let the sights and the sounds come to life. Third, as David mentioned, we Locate ourselves in the passage. Which character are you? Where are you standing in the scene? Fourth, we Listen. As we read the passage again we consider, how am I responding to the scene that is unfolding, and also, how is Jesus responding to me? Is Jesus speaking anything? And then last, we Learn. Whatever it is we hear God speaking to us in these readings, let it sink a little deeper into our lives.

So, the process is Rest, Imagine, Locate, Listen, and Learn. We're going to practice a more brief version of that together today, and then again we'll release three different episodes this week on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday with a more extended engagement of Imaginative Prayer. We'd really encourage you to fully engage your imagination with scripture as an opportunity for God to speak to you.

David: One thing that is really important for people to remember, Karl, is that, whatever your reactions in the story, whatever you might hear from the story, maintain a posture of kindness towards yourself. Remember, you're doing this praying of the Scriptures with Jesus. Often in exercises like this, people might find themselves experiencing any number of hard emotions, or there might be difficult memories or painful experiences that are surfaced from the past. This is not a time to beat up on yourself. Rather, this kind of reflection is meant to be eye opening, a learning experience. In fact that is the thrust of the whole first part of Ignatian Exercises, before even getting to the gospel stories - that God is all-good and all-loving, and that his purposes are always redemptive, meant to move us forward in life and closer to himself.

Karl: Thanks, David. That is a really, really important reminder. With that in mind, like I said we are going to go now through a short version of imaginative prayer. So, make sure you are in a place where you can spend about five minutes or so. And so, here we go with our first practice of Imaginative Prayer.

David: Thanks Karl. The scene that we've chosen today comes from the end of chapter 10 of Luke (verses 38-42). And so, again, to begin our time, let's enter into a posture of rest. Find a comfortable place where you can sit, and take in a few centering breaths.

If it helps your imagination to close your eyes, then I would encourage you to do so. And let's move into this first reading, where you will Imagine the scene that is described. As vividly as you can, picture what this room looks like. What are the people like that are in there? What are the smells like? And let's listen:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

So again, imagine this scene as vividly as you can for the next few moments.

For the second reading, Locate yourself in this scene. Is there a character that you feel particularly drawn to, or perhaps just a bystander in the room? As we listen again to the text, listen through the ears of that character.

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So again, Locate yourself, and experience the scene through that character.

For the third reading, Listen. Listen to what you may be asking of the others in the room, in this scene. And then particularly listen to what they might be saying back to you in response, and especially, what would Jesus say to you?

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The final movement is Learn. That is, what do you want to take away from this time in God’s word today? What things do you want to remember as you go through this day? This might be a good time to have a pen in hand and jot some things down.

And take a few, centering breaths once again, as we come out of this time of prayer.

Thank you so much for joining us today, and please do join us for the three episodes to follow this week, where we will practice more Imaginative Prayer. May God bless you on your journey.