

Spiritual Disciplines

Each year, we observe Ash Wednesday as the start of the season of Lent, the six weeks of prayer, fasting, and repentance leading to Easter Sunday. We gather in the church and in the community to be marked with ashes in a sign of the cross, and hear the words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” It is a humbling act of worship, as we remember our own finitude, and commit ourselves to a season of letting go of our selfish desires. May we rest fully in the Gospel, the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, this Lenten season.

In all of our worship services on March 3rd, we learned about five *Spiritual Disciplines*. To quote Rev. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, “[Spiritual practices] simply put us in a place where we can begin to notice God and respond to his word for us. [They] give the Holy Spirit space to brood over our souls.”¹ Here is a description for each discipline that we discussed in our sermons, along with some suggestions to carry these practices through Lent.

SILENCE/SOLITUDE

Be still, and know that I am God!

I am exalted among the nations,

I am exalted in the earth. (Psalm 46:10)

Silence and solitude require us to create a distraction-free environment, free of the noises of the world. This noise isn’t just the demands of others; it includes our own insecurities and fears. When we create space to be alone with God, we are invited to find our identity as beloved sons and daughters of God.

Try This

If you do not routinely schedule space for silence or solitude, try carving out at least 15 minutes of uninterrupted time each day to be still. Find a comfortable seat, or a simple activity, like walking or knitting, and simply be alone with God.

If you have developed a practice of solitude before, consider setting aside half a day to be alone with God.

PRAYER

The Lord is near to all who call on him

to all who call on him in truth. (Psalm 145:18)

Prayer is the conversation with God, born out of the desire to connect and grow in our relationship with Him. This practice involves a posture of the body – sometimes a bowed head and closed eyes, sometimes lying prostrate, sometimes standing with eyes raised – that reflects the posture of the heart.

¹ Calhoun, A. (2015). *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, p.20.

Prayers can be rote, such as the Lord's Prayer, or spontaneous and conversational. What matters is the intention to draw near to God, and "call on him in truth."

Try This

Mark Thibodeaux suggests that prayer evolves in four stages, listed below. Find the stage that best describes your prayer practice and consider trying the suggestion for that stage. As you grow more familiar with your time of prayer, try moving to the next "stage."

- Talking *at* God: prayers that are made up of thanksgivings, asks, and memorized graces. If praying outside of Sunday morning is new for you, learn the Lord's Prayer and pray it daily. As you pray, keep your focus on the different movements and parts, so that you remain sincere.
 - Talking *to* God: as we become more comfortable in prayer, we learn to intercede from our hearts regarding our needs and desires. Try offering a spontaneous (original) prayer out loud when you are alone.
 - Listening *to* God: prayer becomes a conversation; a dialogue. Create space to listen for God each time you pray.
 - Being *with* God: this is the practice of resting in God's presence, unconcerned for what prayer activity is going on.
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STUDY/MEDIATION

*But their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.* (Psalm 1:2)

Scripture gives us insights into God's character and human nature. Jesus, the incarnate Word, modeled a deep love of Scripture, and consistently used it to teach, rebuke, and encourage the crowds and disciples who followed him. Today, we are fortunate to own physical Bibles and to be able to access Scripture online. We have unprecedented access to Bibles and biblical resources, including sermon podcasts, Bible study guides, etc., giving us numerous options to engage with God's Word.

Try This

If you haven't before, devote time during the week to read through one entire book of the Bible. During Lent, we will be preaching Ruth, a short, narrative story in the Old Testament. As you read, write down questions that come to mind in a journal. Ask yourself, what speaks to my heart? What new thoughts or ideas come to mind? What does Scripture move me to do?

For some, spending time in Scripture is a daily practice. If so, memorize a passage each day, or one for the week. This is what the author of Deuteronomy meant when they instructed us to fix the words of God to our hearts and minds.

FASTING

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. (Matthew 4:1-2)

The Biblical fast is often one of the most misunderstood of the spiritual disciplines. Traditionally, people would fast, or intentionally decline food, at times of mourning, when they sought repentance or perseverance, or to hear a word from God. Fasting doesn't guarantee a response from God, but, like all other disciplines, is an act of faithfulness. Many modern Christians fail to realize that fasting is not

simply to give something up; rather, it is an act of self-denial from an appetite or necessity, to intentionally draw near to God. As physical appetites or cravings increase, we open ourselves the awareness that Jesus is the one who truly satisfies us.

Try This

Although it is sometimes encouraged during Lent, many of us have never tried fasting before. If this is true, try fasting during a lunch break or during dinner one evening. Choose a “necessity” in your life – food is the traditional choice, but modern “necessities” include your television or phone. *Note: If you are fasting from food, be sure that you aren’t sick, pregnant, or nursing, or have any diseases that might be adversely affected by a fasting period. Also, stay hydrated throughout the fast.*

In this time, allow your desire for that necessity to surface, and instead of satisfying that desire with the necessity itself, turn to God in prayer. Write down any insights or questions revealed during the fast. For those who have tried this practice before, try a 24 hour fast. Begin your fast after dinner on day one. During this evening and the following day, again lean into the initial discomfort of unmet desires or cravings and listen for God in the emptiness you might experience. Just before dinner-time of day two, you can conclude the fast. If you are fasting from food, conclude your fast with smaller portions.

SERVICE/ACTS OF MERCY

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)*

In Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus is asked which of the commandments throughout Scripture is the greatest, he responds that we should love the Lord with everything in our being. Jesus immediately points us to another commandment, inseparable from the first, saying that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The entirety of the law and the prophets, that is, everything God had instructed leading up to his revelation in Jesus Christ, the purpose of Jesus’ ministry, to usher in the Kingdom of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of each believer is summarized in these two commandments. To love God is to love people, and to love people is to love God.

The spiritual practice of justice, or mercy, is more than random acts of kindness. It requires a reordering of the priorities of our life, elevating a love of God and God’s redemptive mission in the world to the top of that priority list, and a recognition of the deepest needs of others just below it. We are then invited to faithfully act on these priorities using the gifts, skills, and resources that God has given us.

Try This

During your quiet time of prayer, intentionally pray for those around you. Ask that God show you ways to faithfully love others as yourself.

As your awareness of the needs of others grows, research ways to give of your time, talents, and treasures around your community. Consider serving alongside the church, or with other local organizations. Invite friends and family to serve with you.