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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT

4th Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

Matthew 5:1-12

Let us pray. Grant us, O God, to hear your voice, and in hearing your voice to love your word, and in loving your word to do your will, through Christ our Lord. Amen



In last week's gospel Jesus began his ministry by calling the first disciples and then ministering to the crowds of people who came seeking healing and hope. Jesus was revealed as God's presence on earth, calling us to follow him into respectful relationships with Christ, with other believers, and with those who are in need of God's love and grace.

Today, Jesus is revealed as a pastor who guides us into spiritual practices that form our faith and open us up to the kingdom of heaven that Jesus brings near.

Our gospel reading begins, "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him."

The key to spiritual practices is taking time to step away from the regular demands and routines of our lives so that we can be in the presence of God. Each of us stepped away from something to be here today. You made the choice to leave your warm, cozy bed to come to worship. You may have left the chores you didn't finish or didn't get to yesterday.

Or you decided that before you head off to do whatever fun thing you have planned for today that you would come here, to be in the presence of God, to listen to God's word for you, and to be fed by Christ with God's grace and forgiveness.

Worship is one of many spiritual practices that influence our faith formation. Some, like worship, are practiced in community with others, and some can be done alone. Either way, it's helpful to consider the purpose of spiritual practices so that we can see how it's not that hard to fit them into other parts of our lives besides Sunday mornings.

The word practice has two meanings. First, as a noun it is a habit or ritual or pattern we take on. We all have practices in our lives. Maybe you make sure the kitchen is cleaned up before you go to bed each night. Maybe you go to the same coffee shop to get your favorite drink. Or you have a set routine for exercising.

Practices help us order our lives so that we are sure to fit in the things that are important for us.

Practice is also a verb, an action. It means to repeat a behavior or skill so that we become better at it. I think about playing the piano and how, after practicing a particular song over and over my muscle memory takes over and I no longer have to think about which fingers go on which keys, or count out the tricky rhythms. Soon the song becomes an artistic expression instead of a mechanical exercise.

Spiritual practices are the ways we order our lives that make space for time with God, and as we practice them, we can become less attentive to what we are doing and more attentive to what God is doing in these times set apart.

Spiritual practices help us become aware of God's presence. They help us place our trust in God's power as we bring our cares and burdens into these rituals. They open us to see things from God's perspective, which is often much different from our own. And they help us learn to trust more fully in God's work to form and grow our faith.

Even when we're at home, there are ways to create space to be in God's presence. I have a chair in a room separate from the television where I sit to read or pray. Taking a moment to pray before a meal is easier to do if you sit at the table together and focus on one another and the concerns you bring to God in your table blessing.

Spiritual practices don't need to be complicated. Let's use today's gospel, known as the Beatitudes, as we consider possible spiritual practices.

Rather than pick each line apart, this sermon from Jesus is like ripples on the shore of a lake or an occasional breeze that flutters the leaves on a tree. Perhaps you can imagine yourself in a setting like that as I read a portion of this passage again.

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

We have used a spiritual practice here from time to time called *Dwelling in the Word* in which we listen for a word or phrase that stands out for us. What might we do with that word? We can ponder it for a while. Am I mourning or do I feel meek today?

Who are those who are hungering for a right relationship with God? Or maybe you can rest in this moment that you have heard a word of comfort and hope.

Some people like to use a journal or create something artistic. Take that one word that stood out for you and let the free flow of thoughts flow through your pen or paintbrush.

Or take that word or phrase with you as you go for a run or a hike. Let it pull you forward or sink into your heart with each step.

Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." We repent when we turn our hearts and minds toward God. And in these blessings, Jesus teaches us what that kingdom of heaven will be like.

Jesus came to usher in that kingdom of God's grace and blessing, even as we await the fullness of that kingdom when Jesus comes again.

This first sermon reminds us that the world does not function as God intends. And sometimes our spiritual practices are a way to bring those challenges before God. We may need to name the hurt we've received—or given out. We may need to plead for God's mercy for those who are sick or grieving. We may come before God wondering if our faith can make a difference—for us and for those we are called to serve.

In these first blessings, Jesus assures us that God sees the struggles in the world and promises that the kingdom of heaven has come near. The kingdom of heaven is not like this life, and in our time spent with God we are reminded that the faith God is growing in us also helps us to share the hope in this promised future with others.

7“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

As we spend time with these verses in particular, God moves us from the hurting and struggling parts of life to inspiring us to use what God gives us—mercy, pureness of heart, and peace. Spiritual practices strengthen our awareness and connection with God—so that we can serve our neighbors with the love and care we have received from God.

Spiritual practices are not about pleasing God so that God will love us more. We are not made more righteous or more holy when we do them. The reading from Micah today points that out. God doesn't want lofty gestures that are meant to impress. All God asks from us is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

And when we begin by walking humbly with God—taking time away to listen, to lay our burdens down, to rest in God's promises—we are more able to engage in justice and live with kindness.

Remember, that new spiritual practices take practice! If you try something new, do it several times before moving on to something else. This week I attended the Friday morning mass at St. Leo's. I don't get to worship without being the leader very often. I'll admit it was a little awkward. There were responses others knew that I didn't. But in that setting, I was able to take time apart to rest in God's presence and hear God's word.

As you consider a spiritual practice you would like to start, think about where you'll do it, what you need around you—a Bible, a candle, your *Taking Faith Home* page. Choose a time when you are less likely to be distracted.

If your spiritual practice is more active like walking or running, what will help you focus on God's presence with you? Maybe it's music without words, or reading a passage before you go, or simply paying more attention to the glory of God's creation around you.

There are few rules when it comes to spiritual practices. Take a break from the noise and demands of life. Turn your heart and mind toward Christ. Rest in God's love and receive the blessings of that time. It is in this time of renewal that God prepares us for lives of faith-filled service—which we will look at next week.

Let us pray. O God, we come to you this morning as a gathering of your people to receive your word and blessing for us. As we go into our daily life and work, open our hearts to follow you into moments of rest and refreshment in your presence, through Christ our Lord. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Trusting that God hears us, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

God of liberation, you set your people free to serve others. Embolden your church, that we seek justice for the oppressed, share generously your lovingkindness, and live humbly together. Unite us as one people under the foolishness of the cross. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of the universe, your care is evident everywhere—from the foundations of the earth to the summit of the tallest mountains. Reconcile all of creation to itself and repair the environmental destruction caused by human carelessness and greed. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of the nations, you desire peace and justice among all people. Deliver us from systems of fear that seek to divide us. Guide our local and national leaders. May their decisions empower and serve the needs of all, especially the poor and the disenfranchised. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of the oppressed, you raise up the lowly and comfort those in despair. We lift up to you all who are victims of abuse and discrimination. We pray for those who are suffering in any way this day, especially...

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of blessing, guide our congregation, especially as we conduct the business of the church later this morning. As we grow in faith and love for you may we serve as instruments of your blessing to the world. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Confident that you are able to accomplish more than we even dare to ask, we bring these prayers before you, believing in your saving grace revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.