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Part 6 in the Keating Series

The 4 Rs of Centering Prayer
By the Rev. Salying

Today, I'll be preaching the last sermon in this series on Thomas Keating's teaching on the practice of divine silence called Centering Prayer. Previously, we learned about how we were born with a built in survival system founded on three energy centers: safety and security, esteem and affection, power and control. As we grew up, these energy centers were tested when we didn't have an important need met. We reacted with afflictive emotions—like anger and jealousy—and produced afflictive commentaries—like, “Nobody appreciates me! Or, I always get the raw end of life!” Or, we react by suppressing our emotions, till they spike out when something triggers us and we find ourselves behaving in such a way that we are a mystery to ourselves. All of these compensatory reactions create an identity, cumulatively called the false self. The false self operates under the “monumental illusion” that God is absent in some way because we don't get what we want. So, we take matters into our own hands and become god, constantly churning out ways to make ourselves happy, writing programs for happiness—like accumulating credentials as a bid for esteem, like hoarding wealth as a means for safety and control.

The end result is actually a general dis-ease called the Human Condition. It is a restlessness, a search for something more, an underlying sense that we don't really know what we're doing or being. After a lifetime of working under the illusions of the false self and its programs for happiness, we are barely aware of how we got here.

Centering Prayer posits that where our true self is is in God. But we are caught up too much in the noise of our illusions to become aware of this, to

become trusting of this reality. In fact, the false self is so afraid of losing its identity that it will get us to be very busy and noisy or seeking after pleasure or numbness to avoid surrendering to this reality of God who is in perfect communion with us; the false self understands that this is where it dies. Centering Prayer, then, helps us practice the surrender to silence, which silences the false self.

When we practice Centering Prayer, we consent not only to the divine presence, but the divine action within. The action of God within is to suss out the wheat and tares that are inside of us. Here, the wheat can be our will that wills God's will. (As Paul says, the thing that I want to do that I cannot do.) The tares can be the will of the false self that wills separately from God. (As Paul says, the thing that I do not want to do that I do.) Indeed the false self is so committed to its own programs, that when its illusions are burned up in God's love, the false self will struggle against it with weeping and gnashing of teeth. We see the ways in which we have harmed others and ourselves in our striving. The pain of it can make us angry and go into denial or blame. It can make us loathe ourselves. Or, it can help us fall into the arms of God. Over time, this consent to God's presence and action within, allows God to dismantle the false self, to make fertile our internal landscape, so that our will and God's will become one will. That will is love. When this becomes more and more true, we will produce not only wheat, but the delicious fruits of the Spirit—patience, kindness, self control, humility, etc.

So, let's practice silence together today. Keating teaches the 4 R's of the practice:

1. Resist no thought
2. Retain no thought
3. React to no thought
4. Return gently to the sacred word.

I will add a fifth R. When the prayer is done,

5. Rate no prayer

There is a misunderstanding common about Centering Prayer—which is to think nothing. That is not the goal. Centering Prayer understands that our brains and body are always at work. We are thought and sensory beings. The trick is to not become attached to them. Don't resist it.

But some thoughts are brilliant and the very thing you've been wanting to know. Centering Prayer asks you to surrender even this. Retain no thought.

Some thoughts are evocative and they have more tentacles. Don't add to it, don't subtract from it. Release it to the stream of consciousness. React to no thought.

Keating says that even if the heavens were to open and you see the angels ascending and descending, ignore it and go back to your silence. The point of this practice is not an ecstatic or mystical encounter. It is the intention of sitting in silence and surrendering to the divine presence and action within. Each time you do find yourself ensnared, you say a sacred word. This is a short word that helps you to return to your intention of sitting in silence before the presence of God and your surrender to God's action within. The word can be as simple as Jesus.

At the end of the prayer, I will add a fifth R: rate no prayer. This prayer is not under your control, so it is not for you to figure out how well it goes. God is doing the work on you and you surrender. Even if your brain has been active like a screaming monkey, it doesn't mean that the prayer was bad. The prayer is the prayer. God is the one who saves.

4 Guidelines for Centering Prayer

It is recommended that you practice for 20 minutes for each session and work up to 2 sessions a day.

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When engaged with thoughts/feelings, return ever so gently to the sacred word.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

Let us practice for 10 minutes.