

Sunday, August 23, 2026

Be Renewed!

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Today I'll be talking a bit about **contemplative practices**. And just so that we can all be on the same page, contemplative practices could be defined as "*mind-body activities that quiet the mind in order to deepen self-awareness and foster deeper connections to God, self, others, and nature.*" This can look like **stillness** – as in **centering prayer** and **meditation**. But it can also look like **drawing**, taking a **walk**, **singing**, **social justice work**...there are a lot of possibilities.

And, as **integral** as these practices are to my life, I didn't know anything about them until about **2014**. And I found them because I was starting to realize that I needed to **find sustainable ways to do life**. I needed a way to **become intentional** about **what** I was doing **and why**.

The other thing I can tell you about contemplative practices is that when I **first introduced** them to our church, there were **questions**: *Will this help me? Will I like being quiet? Will I feel like I accomplished anything?*

And so we would **try** something **together**. And inevitably I would hear some version of the **same feedback**: *I didn't really want to, but I gave it a try anyway, and I felt like God spoke to me. That was so meaningful.*

This happened over and over again. And it makes sense, if you think about it because a contemplative practice is **any practice that connects us with God**. Put another way, as we'll hear about in our 2nd Scripture lesson for today, it is all our **spiritual worship**.

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 12:1-5

¹*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* ²*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

³*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.* ⁴*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,* ⁵*so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.*

So, right away in **verse 1**, Paul starts talking about this “**spiritual worship**,” or, as some other translations say, “*your spiritual act of worship*.”

Those words on their own can feel like such a **high bar** – or maybe **too abstract** even. But if we keep reading, Paul shares with us a bit about what he means when he’s talking about this *spiritual act known as worship*.

Notice the words that come right away in verse 1: *Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. THIS is your spiritual worship*.

Now...like the **Presbyterians** that many of us are and many of us have come to be...we are likely to immediately begin to think about what we can “**do**.” Those familiar words will come to us: *We are the hands and feet of Jesus. God has no body on earth now but ours*. And this is certainly an **important part** of the story. The **ultimate result** of **God’s love** for us is that we just **can’t contain** it within ourselves. Something **compels us** to allow it to **overflow** into the world around us. We can’t help but **let our light shine**.

But, importantly, that is **not where Paul goes** with this idea of “*offering our bodies as an expression of worship*.” Instead, Paul **launches** in to a **conversation about our minds**. In **verse 2**, he says, “*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind*.”

Allow **change** to come by way of the **renewal of your mind** – by the renewal of the **way you think**. Allow **your thinking** to be **born again**.

In other words: **Don’t be content** to go on doing **as you’ve always done**, thinking as you’ve **always thought**. You will be **changed when** the **way your mind thinks** of things **changes**.

This is such a big deal. Maybe 7 years ago now, one of my spiritual goals for the year read like so: *Don’t get mad about things you cannot change*.

And let me tell you...I have had so **many opportunities to practice** this. And to this day, I’m still a work in progress. But it’s worth pursuing because, as Romans 12, verse 2 says: *When the mind is renewed, it is then that we are able to discern the will of God – God’s good, acceptable, and perfect will*.

Said another way: *God’s will is found in taking the time to transform your mind*.

And this **makes sense, right?** It’s very **hard to hear** anything at all, *much less the will of God*, when we’re feeling **keyed up** and **distraught**. Arguably, the same is true for when we’re feeling **depressed** or **worn out**.

If we think back to last week, **Roxie** talked about **grace and forgiveness**. She called us to **consider who** we might want to **connect with**, *even if* the **divide** has previously felt like *too great a thing to overcome*. This word “**previously**” is so important. The middle of an **argument** is probably **not the best time** to **discern** just how much you **love** someone.

It is just too difficult a thing to hear God’s voice when we’re caught in the **fears** we’re experiencing, the **needs** we’re having, and the **anxieties** we’re feeling.

Jesus experienced this, too, and was keenly aware of it. In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before he was crucified, even as he was sharing his fears with God to the point of sweating blood, we hear him say, “*Not my will, God, but yours be done.*”

It’s a **remarkable** thing that Jesus does. He asks God for transformation, something we all need. Because our world tells us: **Avoid pain. Gain recognition. Accomplish! Achieve! Do only** what **benefits you**.

If we **do not allow our minds** to be **transformed**, then we won’t be able to **lay our lives down** for our even our **friends**, much less, our **non-friends**. We won’t be able to look at the situations we face with **humility**. We won’t be able to **be love and light** in the world or see the **importance and connection for all people**.

We won’t do it because our **minds will be a mess**. And so we return to these words: *Your life will be an act of spiritual worship when your mind is being regularly renewed.*

In thinking about these things, I want to offer us a framework connected to both the work of M. Scott Peck and Ken Wilbur.

Starting first with M. Scott Peck, Peck was an American psychologist who offered up a 4-stage model for spiritual development.

In his work, he asserted that each and every one of us begins with **Stage 1**, our “*criminal*” stage, where we view ourselves, more or less, as **the center** of the universe. And if you think about when children are very young, it takes awhile before a child can say, “*Oh, you’re sick. You need some rest.*” There’s a period in time where they can **only think of what they are feeling and needing**.

But if all goes well, we move on to **Stage 2 – the Rules-Based** stage, which, in part, looks a little bit like our first years in school where we learn the **rules**, and we learn how to get through a day together in a **safe and orderly fashion**. This tends to make us hyper-aware of when our **friends aren’t obeying** the rule, and so our motto can tend to become: *If I have to follow the rules, so do you.*

And then – again if all goes well – we will continue on to **Stage 3 – the Rebellious stage**, which Peck would have argued begins around **adolescence**. At this point, having **followed the rules dutifully** for awhile now, we begin to **think about freedom** again but from a **different angle** than when we were babies. This is the point at which we start to wonder, “*What is the purpose of all of these rules anyway?*” (And if we think we’ve outgrown this stage, just ask yourself how often you figure that going 5 miles over the speed limit is just as safe as going the actual speed limit.)

But ultimately, according to Peck, we’re **not meant to stay here**. We are meant to grow and mature, reaching what Peck’s **Stage 4**, which he called “**Mystical**.” In this particular stage of life, we’re **meant to understand** the various **boundaries** of life – those things we began learning in Stage 2 – but with **new appreciation**. Hopefully, with this maturation comes the ability to begin to be able to **discern** that **not all** things are as **easily explained** as we **once thought** they were. We begin to understand that not everything is **Either/Or**. Sometimes the answer is **Both/And**. We agree to making decisions on a **case-by-case basis** rather than responding in broad strokes.

...So those are the stages according to Scott Peck. It’s a pretty simple developmental model, but the thing about these stages as I’ve just described them is that they **sound linear**. And that’s where I find the work of **Ken Wilber helpful**.

For those of you who might not know him, **Ken Wilber** did a lot of writing regarding transpersonal psychology. In his then, “**theory of consciousness**,” he also **incorporated** this idea of Stage Theory, but Wilber’s take was that we **don’t graduate** from stages. Rather, we **take what we learned** in each stage of life and we **incorporate** it into our next stage. We **transcend and include**. And what’s more, we **slide around** within our stages, depending on the circumstances. In other words, we are probably all of the stages, depending on the what we’re talking about.

But we are meant to meaningfully **grow and change**. It’s also possible to **burn out and plateau**. But what we are **called to** is **Romans chapter 12**: to see *our minds renewed and transformed, more able to discern the will of God on our lives*.

The whole of our lives is an unfurling. Early on, we begin by becoming aware of our desires - our gifts and callings. At the beginning of life, we’re really just waking up to it, only just beginning to sense that our **lives are meant to be about something**. **What** that something is, we really **can’t say**.

As we continue to grow, we become able to move into more meaningful and more concrete **spiritual exploration**. Our foundations become increasingly set as we engage with spiritual exploration and prayer. *What do I believe? Where do I put my trust? What do I have faith in?* And in these early stages, our answers will be **very concrete – very either/or**.

We may begin to develop a heart for a particular population of people. We may find ourselves developing a passion for causes that aim to leave the world better than we found it in some way.

In thinking about my own life, this is probably where I found myself when I discovered Contemplative Spirituality. There came a point where I was supporting not only my own interests but the interests of others. I was caring for babies and young children, often bringing them along with me to work. And I needed a way to discern God's will for my life in the midst of so many good and worthy things to do.

This is what the contemplative **can offer us**: *Connection to a living God, to ourselves, to the world around us, and to the earth.* A **renewal of our minds** that allows us to **discern the will of God in our lives**.

Be transformed by the renewing your mind so that you can live out your spiritual worship – those giftings and callings within – that overflow from God's love, that just can't help but pour out of you.

So how do we get there? The path is going to be unique for each of us. It may take **trial and error**. What helps us feel connected may change from one season of our lives to the next.

And so we **ask** ourselves: *What is it that I need?* Is it Bible Study, Game Night, Music, Walking the Labyrinth, serving on the Immigration Action Team, attending Meditations, participating in a protest, feeding people? So many possibilities for connection and discernment.

So if you try something, and you find it's not what you need in this season, it's okay to try something else. We are looking for the renewal of our minds in order to **discern the will of God** in our lives.

So for me, I don't play in the **bell choir** because I feel like I have to **fill a spot** or because I should be doing something with that fancy **music degree**. I do it because it **makes me so happy**. The resonance of the bells **evokes emotion**. The feeling of being a part of something – that we need each other – I love it. It's more than just music. It's more than just service. It's a **spiritual act of worship for me**. And being **able to articulate that helps me** to know that I'm **exactly where I need to be** at that moment. It's like last week when during the Announcement Cheri said, *"We need greeters. And I have to say, I'm greeting today, and I'm loving it. I love getting to talk to everyone that comes in the door."*

And so, in the **spirit of** *presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God as your spiritual worship*, and in the **spirit of** ²*not conforming to this world, but being transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...* maybe take some time even yet today to **become curious**.

What resonates with me? What do I want to try? What do I maybe need to let go of? Because our lives are **meant to be transformed**. We are **meant to be reborn into new ways of thinking**, new **ways of being**. We are meant to **play a part** in this **life** that is **infinitely larger than us** and yet also **relies on us to play our part** so that those who **come after us can play theirs**.

Whatever our starting place this morning, *just as the disciples experienced revelation in the presence of Jesus*, may this be **our story as well**. May **God's word to us be revealed**. May we each **know with increasing measure** that we **have a light to shine in this world**. **Amen**.