

Joanie:

Good morning. For those of you who may be visiting with us this morning for the first time, my name is Joanie Levenson and this is Jody Thatch. Our Senior Pastor, Jack Price, is out of town this weekend, and he thought today would be a good opportunity for us to share a little bit about our first year as *Souljourners*.

For a little over a year now, Jody and I have been traveling almost monthly to a monastery in Atchison, Kansas, where we've had the great pleasure of spending time with a number of the Benedictine sisters who live there and who facilitate the three-year program called *Souljourners* in which Jody and I – and, beginning this year, Debbie Rockford – are enrolled.

Primarily *Souljourners* is a spiritual formation program that's designed to train people in the art and practice of being spiritual directors. There are lectures and small group times, and these are interspersed with a variety of prayer experiences, including opportunities to join the nuns in their daily prayer services. And between our visits to the Mount (as we are fond of calling the Mt. St. Scholastica campus), we have visits with our own spiritual directors, we read a variety of required and suggested books, we write reflection papers, we try to stay caught up on book reports . . . Probably most important to the process of our spiritual formation . . . we do a lot of wrestling . . . wrestling with the material . . . with ourselves . . . and occasionally with each other ;^)

In preparation for this morning, for instance – *just to start* – we first had to wrestle with how to condense and convey an entire year of learning experiences – *for two people* – in thirty minutes or less. What we've been learning from the matchless hospitality of the Benedictine sisters, by itself, could fill at least one teaching time. As we wrestled with what to share from *all* the things that we've learned and experienced, Kate emailed that she needed the title of our teaching for the bulletin. So we wrestled with that for a while, and that title, ultimately, became our 'spiritual director' as Sunday came closer.

Jody:

We wanted to title our sermon, "The Listening Life," because listening is so important in the ministry of spiritual direction. In fact spiritual direction is often referred to as "holy listening." A spiritual director, or companion, as some prefer, is someone who listens to us, listens to God and for God on our behalf. Because it is sometimes easier to listen when we stop talking, spiritual direction often calls us to silence.

The "listening life," though, was not very catchy. We noted the important role questions play in our practice of listening. We benefit from being asked questions and from learning to ask questions. Questions help us notice things. They help us pay attention to our lives and look for God in our lives. So we decided on "the curious life," hoping it would spark more, well, curiosity about our talk this morning. For us, inherent in "the curious life" is the desire to go deeper, to want to grow spiritually—and to just grow as human beings. In fact they are not separable. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote: "You are not a human being in search of a spiritual experience. You are a spiritual being immersed in a human experience." It is what we see in Jesus, this unity of human and spiritual. It is what we seek to realize in our lives when we decide to follow Jesus.

You've heard the story of the disciple who asked a Holy One, "Is there life after death?" The Holy One answered, "The great spiritual question of life is not 'Is there life after death?' The spiritual question is, 'Is there life before death?'" The curious life wants to be conscious in its living.

Joanie:

The curious life is a life of noticing and asking the questions that come to mind. The curious life thrives on new questions, not on old answers. The curious life always wants to know more – not because of some need to be right, but for the sake of better and deeper understanding.

Part of gaining deeper understanding involves being *aware* that there is always more than one choice about the way something can be experienced and interpreted. There are layers of choices, you might say. And lately, I notice that I'm paying more attention to the deeper layers of my life. Being *aware* of multiple layers is something I *think* I've done for a long time, but my growing interest in and attention to them feels new – fine tuned by my participation in the *Souljourners* program. One of the times that I recently noticed this growing attention to layers of experience was when I was looking up today's scripture on a Bible website. This particular website offers several choices for reading a passage, one of the choices is 'with or without section headings' . . . I chose 'with' . . .

"1 Samuel 3 . . . Samuel's calling and prophetic activity" the section heading read. It occurred to me that this heading might represent all the information about this chapter that some people might need or want to know – Samuel was a man who was called to prophetic activity – enough said . . . now on to some action in Chapter 4 where the Israelites are encamped at Ebenezer to do battle with the Philistines for the Ark of God !!

But wait a minute . . . *Most* people do want to know at least a little more than that. They remember that Samuel was sleeping in the temple and had to be called three times by God before he heard and answered. . . no, wait, they think . . . maybe it was four times. They're curious enough to read on and to pay a little more attention to the details of the story . . . Oh yeah . . . there was also the older and wiser Eli who helped Samuel to figure out what was going on with the voice he was hearing. So . . . Samuel was able to begin his prophetic career, and as he got older his good reputation spread throughout Israel . . .

But somehow, interpreting the passage this way doesn't really offer much more information than the section heading alone, does it? Now we know that Samuel was a man called to prophetic activity . . . *and* he was called by God with Eli's help. Still, for some people, *that* is enough said.

But wait another minute . . . this inquiring mind wants to know about a few other things. Why does this story start out by talking about visions not being widespread? Is mention of Eli's dimming eyesight in some way connected to this talk of infrequent visions? I wonder why God calls out to Samuel while both Samuel and Eli are sleeping – or at least trying to? Why *then*? Did you notice that God called "Samuel, Samuel" the first time . . . but only one "Samuel" the second time . . . and by the third time God doesn't call him by name at all? I think it's interesting that Samuel seems to hear it the same way every time. And after God's second failed attempt to reach Samuel, why did the writer bother with the obvious statement that Samuel did not yet know the Lord? . . . And, for that matter, why did the Lord bother to *call* him yet a third time? I wonder if the intention is for us to understand, by inference, that Eli obviously *did* know the Lord – at least well enough to recognize what was going on with Samuel?

And then I'm curious about what exactly did "knowing the Lord" mean to the writer of this story and to the people back then? It seems likely that it probably meant more than just hearing God's voice. Probably they understood "knowing the Lord" to mean really *listening* to God – that is to say, hearing *and* obeying. One thing that does seem clear from this story is that good listening takes practice and persistence . . . on God's part *and* on ours!

The other thing that seemed really clear to me was the sort of man that Eli was. In spite of the bad news for himself that he knows is coming, Eli insists that Samuel be responsible for the word he's received from God. By his insistence, Eli models for Samuel the qualities for which a servant of God is responsible – courage, integrity, obedience, faithfulness, and self-sacrificing love. The ultimate result of Eli's guiding influence is that “as Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground” which is to say that when Samuel spoke, other people listened – other people heard and sought to obey the word of God.

The more I approached this text with a willing curiosity, the more I began to understand why it has often been used as a key text for describing the relationship between spiritual director and spiritual directee.

Jody:

Eli is a good example of a spiritual director. He listens to Samuel, to God and he directs Samuel to hear God's voice, to recognize God's call, and to respond to it. Samuel, in this story, is a picture of a listening, questioning, seeking, and responsive learner. It was interesting to learn at Souljourners that the root word for obedience is to listen. Obedience, in the spiritual sense, is not compliance. It is a stance of listening and being ready to respond. It is not a master/slave relationship. It is a relationship of attention and loving response. Samuel does not look like someone who is merely complying with his teacher. He assumes a stance, a position of attentiveness, responsiveness and obedience.

St. Benedict, in the 4th Century established a community of monks. He wrote *The Rule* as a way of ordering community life so it would live out the Christian call to love and service. In her commentary on *The Rule of Benedict, Insights for the Ages*, Sr. Joan Chittister writes that when Benedict talks about obedience it is not obedience to a spiritual taskmaster who will bully us or beat us down but that instruction is given by someone who loves us and will, if we allow it, carry us along to fullness of life. No one grows simply by doing what someone else forces us to do, Sr. Joan writes. We begin to grow when we finally want to grow. All the rigid fathers and demanding mothers and disapproving teachers in the world cannot make up for our own decisions to become what we can by doing what we must.

She continues to say that Benedict sets out the importance of not allowing ourselves to become our own guides, our own gods. Obedience, Benedict says—the willingness to listen for the voice of God in life—is what will wrench us out of the limitations of our own landscape. We are being called to something outside of ourselves, something greater than ourselves, something beyond ourselves. We will need someone to show us the way: the Christ, a loving spiritual model, this rule.”

This is what Benedict writes in the prolog to the rule:

“Listen carefully, my child, to my instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from one who loves you; welcome it and faithfully put it into practice. The labor of obedience will bring you back to God from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for Jesus, the Christ.”

Let's sing together.

Joanie:

Jody demonstrates hand movements as congregation joins in singing:

I'm opening up in sweet surrender to the luminous love light of the Lord.

I'm opening up in sweet surrender to the luminous love light of the Lord.

I'm opening. I'm opening.

I'm opening. I'm opening.

Singing is one of my favorite practices – spiritual or otherwise. It's the time I am most aware of how much God loves me, which, after all is the whole point of spiritual direction and spiritual practices – to open to the loving presence of God in our lives. With that understanding, we thought this would be a good time to do another spiritual practice.

(pause)

I'm guessing that some of you jumped at the idea of getting to do another spiritual practice . . . Maybe some of you groaned . . . The practice here right now is to notice – to listen, to notice – listen to the things you're thinking and feeling about doing a spiritual practice . . . notice your immediate reaction . . . and your next conclusion . . . *(pause)*. . . don't hide from what you're thinking and feeling . . . don't try to change it . . . don't judge it . . . or justify it . . . just notice . . . open to what is . . . open to God . . . *(silence)*

(reprise song 1x)

So there you have it. Two simple spiritual practices. But spiritual practices, while important are only part of what we explore in our training to be spiritual directors. For me personally, the most important work often seems to happen in the in-between times and places – between the lectures and the prayer times, during lunch with the nuns, over coffee with Ellen in the morning, processing with Jody (and now Debbie) in the car on the way home. The most important work for me happens in the conversations – in the context of the community we're creating as we walk this SoulJourney together.

And that's fitting, since spiritual direction itself is an art that historically has evolved in the context of community. As tempting as it may be to think that we need to escape our mundane lives to be spiritual, the real learning about where God is working in the world happens in the everyday-ness of our living – in being curious about our neighbors, our family, our coworkers, and sometimes in our being curious about a stranger . . . these are our teachers.

Jody:

When we started Souljourners, I was curious about the nuns and what it would be like to stay at a monastery. I really didn't know what to expect. Two things seem to characterize the Benedictines: Prayer and hospitality. Joanie mentioned at the beginning that we have learned so much about hospitality from the sisters. There is a sign in the entry way of the Sophia Center where we meet that says, "The staff of Sophia Center welcomes you as Christ." They observe daily prayers together 3 times a day, and we are encouraged to pray with the sisters in the morning and evening. I realize that over the last year I have been affected, maybe changed, by the experience of participating in their practice of daily community prayer. My heart is being opened.

It is human nature to want to divide things that really are one. We talk about the inward journey and the outward journey as if they are separate. We are only on one journey—the journey of our lives. The name of Richard Rohr’s retreat center is Center for Contemplation and Action. Prayer is where our hearts can be converted to being open to love and act like Jesus.

I realize that my reluctance to pray is not because I don’t have time, or because I “don’t believe in prayer,” whatever that means. It is because I know the tenderizing affect of prayer, and my heart is guarded.

When I expressed some of this to Sr. Marcia at the Mount, she loaned me a little book by Henri Nouwen, entitled *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*. In it he writes, “To pray for all these people [lists of people] is not a futile effort to influence God’s will, but a hospitable gesture by which we invite our neighbors into the center of our hearts. To pray for others means to make them part of ourselves. To pray for others means to allow their pains and sufferings, their anxieties and loneliness, their confusion and fears to resound on our innermost selves.”

Prayer is an act of hospitality and welcome. In community prayer, when we take time to name the persons we want to remember in prayer, or to lift up situations we feel concerned about, we are practicing hospitality. They become present to us and they have the power to affect us. We have the opportunity to respond to them in the presence of one another and of God. And God has the opportunity to speak to us regarding them. It is no small thing.

The curious life, the open life is receptive and responsive to hearing God’s call to action. Let’s continue in prayer, with another song.

Congregation joins in singing: “Listen, Listen, Listen”

Listen, listen, listen to my heart song.

Listen, listen, listen to my heart song.

I will never forget you. I will never forsake you.

I will never forget you. I will never forsake you.

Prayers of the People

Closing with “our Common Prayer” – The Lord’s Prayer

Jody:

I found Souljourners and spiritual direction because I wanted to know more about the spiritual practices. I wanted encouragement, instruction, accountability, and a place to talk about my experiences. To live fully takes our concentration because there are so many ways we have of deceiving ourselves, of being unconscious, of losing our curiosity.

Joanie:

So be curious . . . stay curious . . . and remember that staying curious *is* about asking questions, but more than that, it’s about staying open and ready to respond to the God who loves us.