

Sermon – Mark 6:7-13

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I want to examine today's reading – sometimes called Jesus sending out the twelve or the mission of the disciples, as a **springboard** to reflect on the **role of and core of spiritual practice** in our daily lives as Christians. I speak not as an expert but as a novice in this area, a spiritual seeker like many of us.

I did what I may call the Camino lite last fall. A short 150 k pilgrimage from northern Portugal to Santiago de Compaestella, one of many pilgrimage routes to this city where pilgrims have headed for centuries. Some people walk 900 k, some 400, some 800.

During my walk this verse came to my mind – take nothing for the journey, no bread, no wallet, no money. Of course I did not have nothing, I used a service which carried my main bag, and I carried a day pack with lunch, snacks, water, money, my \$300 poles, passport and medications. I wore the latest costly merino wool socks and sweaters, advised as the best for this journey. Unlike many who just take a chance that they will find an albergue or hostel with a free bed each night I, with my friends, had lodgings pre-booked. Yet I was travelling with certainly less than I had ever had in my life, only allowed 20 k in my bag. And during the walks every day – usually from 15 to 25 k a day, this verse would occasionally come to mind – take nothing for the journey except a staff and sandals.

When I arrived in Santiago I attended a pilgrims mass. With no priest showing up a nun announced that the mass would not happen when suddenly a young man from the crowded pews volunteered and a few minutes later appeared in priestly garb and offered the Mass. From Mexico he had just walked the Camino from Madrid and in his sermon he said the Camino offered us the gift of joy and he suggested it was a metaphor for the Gospel life – to live simply, to greet and be greeted as brother and sister with good feelings- buen camino was the greeting , and like St. Francis, to be grateful for the discovery each day of the beauty of the trees, the streams, the rocks, the animals we passed as our brothers and sisters.

Simplicity,

Gratitude

Sisterhood and brotherhood- from Indigenous traditions we learn all the beings in non-human world are our relatives -

In the reading today Jesus asks his disciples to take nothing and to expect hospitality - Jewish hospitality at that time demanded that villagers receive and provide food and lodging for travelers. But Jesus was also inviting his followers into a state of trust - trust in an economy of grace- or a gift economy, an economic vision that permeates Jesus' teachings, where all share rather than capital accumulation by the few. Taking nothing requires an act of faith – it is almost beyond simplicity, trusting that God will provide the daily manna.

While some say the purpose of this “take nothing” command was to get the disciples to focus on mission rather than personal comfort, rather I would like to suggest this was the mission. **In order for them to have authority over unclean spirits they would have to live, be grounded, in the present moment** - not worrying about the future or regretting the past, not caught up in the distractions of a materialist culture, but living each day with gratitude, alive and connected to all beings as relatives , and trusting that each day would take of itself, and that this state informs their daily lives and whatever ministry they are called to.

In the spiritual traditions I am familiar with, Zen Buddhism and Christianity- being **in the present moment** is the core of spiritual practice - to be in the now – a moment which the Benedictine monk David Stendahl Rast calls a moment in and out of time -. He talks about living in the now as outside time – that the present moment allows glimpses of life beyond death, not after death –that the true present moment is the opposite of time and space- being in the now is being in the Great Self- Buddha nature or Christ ‘s self in me.

For Zen – to be with no judgements, no thoughts, just to see this present moment, **just as it is, without comparisons**, no delusions or illusions, **is enough-** in doing so one awakens to one’s true self – one’s Buddha nature

Christian spiritual practice varies – sometimes described as an experience of an encounter with Mystery –Christian meditation – teachings from the mystics- but

again the present is the moment when one experiences **the divine within self and around one**- one experiences a centered core, a **Source** that connects you to all.

I dislike facile comparisons between religions, but perhaps what is **common** here between Buddhism and mystical Christianity is that **the ego disappears**. As Stendhal Rast says this is a feeling of being part of the Great Self to which we all belong – the human and more than human world.

Several of us this week attended the workshop on **Living Fully as we Contemplate Death at Oak Bay United**. I am not sure all of us were aware we were engaging in a spiritual practice. St. Benedict said that the monk should have death before him at all times. In Buddhism meditation on death is central to the path of awakening. And in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius , a spiritual practice I have some limited familiarity with, the first task or exercise is the meditation on death. To be honest I only feel ready to address this part of spiritual practice now, which is why I am going to these workshops.

Now Ignatius of Loyola was very goal oriented in that the purpose of the spiritual exercises was what he called a state **of spiritual indifference** – facing life as it is – which he described “*as not to prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honour to dishonour, long life to short life,’ but rather to do what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.*” This meant not to get caught up with the joys and sorrows of life – For Ignatius for him the end was to praise , reverence and to serve God. That language does not resonate with many today and more contemporary versions of the Ignatian exercises describe the goal of a spiritual practice is to acknowledge whatever we encounter in daily life as holy, and to act out of compassion and seeing that needs of all are met is to serve the holy one.

In Zen, calming the mind, sitting in stillness, trains one to come to daily life from a *space of no reaction, no judgement – to reach a peace of mind or equanimity in the face of difficulties, joys and sorrows.* - the term equanimity I find more useful than spiritual indifference – an inner peace. At a less exalted level it offers a training to be more present throughout the day- whether brushing your teeth, walking the dog or drinking tea. At another level it trains us to come to conflict and anxiety with some inner resources. This week I was at a meditation practice at the Multifaith chapel at UVic where several students who were going to the Legislature to form a

human chain around the Indigenous youth in lockdown there were encouraged by the chaplain to use the skills of meditation to stay calm and connected to the Source. Or when waiting for a medical diagnosis or receiving an unfavourable one training in equanimity is helpful.

To do this one needs **spiritual discipline** – which are what spiritual practices are based in. Discipline means repetition and commitment over the long term – monastic life, a commitment, is directed toward living in the present moment – without children, material trappings, partners, many distractions, and so it offers a way of living simply in the present. The daily walk of the camino requires discipline- you could only be in the present as the day got longer. For others the trusting in finding a lodging every night is a spiritual discipline. Sitting meditation is a discipline. Fasting is a discipline. The Ignatian exercises can involve an 8 day, 30 day retreat or 32 weeks of prayer and reflection daily. I do not want to romanticize any of the practices I am talking about, as they are all difficult and not easy. With discipline there is the opportunity and space to observe and feel one's reactions and responses to the present moment and to see all that flows through your mind ,and then to follow your breath and return to the present. They all promise some form of equanimity or inner peace as well as the ability to be more compassionate as one views oneself with more compassion.

So let us go back to our text- a friend of mine once critiqued the language of discipleship because it smacks of elitism – only 12 in Mark – 70 in Luke. Are the disciples just an elite cadre whom we can never measure up to? Or are they a metaphor for all of us. Perhaps the invitation here was for his followers to be like Jesus – **live simply, trust that we can build and model a gift economy, be grateful in one's aliveness to the present moment and to use that energy to embody peace in order to overcome unclean spirits both within and without. We can define unclean spirits in multiple ways** –, the evils of capitalism, our own racism, sexism, you name it. Spiritual practice gives us the inner resources to face these evils.

I want to hold up one example. Right now I am reading a book called *Mindful of Race* by African American Ruth King who practices Insight meditation, which is a form of Vipassana Buddhism. This is an example of a spiritual practice at work in the context of racism and what is called Afrophobia, a fear of blackness and a

sense of superiority over all people who come from the African continent. The discipline of observing one's feelings and bodily sensations in meditation, to become mindful of racist thoughts or feelings in the moment, whether you have them or are the target of them is an example of how spiritual practice can be used to either bear witness to racial suffering or to heal from it. The practice allows us to be more awake and aware of the world around us and to develop kindness and compassion for self and other as we engage with a broken world.

To conclude, we remember that Jesus informed his ministry with constant spiritual practice and discipline— always disappearing to pray for nights and days, his 40 days in the desert, etc. **Jesus' call to radical discipleship includes to become more alive and awake in the present, to let go of distractions, and, as one catches one's reactions and possible negative beliefs, to develop some compassion for self and others, and hopefully to embody an inner peace that resonates out into the world.**

For some of us that awakeness might mean challenging injustice, for others offering gratitude for the gifts of the day, and, as our brothers and sisters are everywhere- a kind word, a prayer, hospitality and acknowledging with awe the holy in our world, , still offers some glue to the fabric of creation. In other words **discipleship does not have to be heroic – to live like an ascetic preaching, teaching and healing - it is an invitation to trust and to a spiritual practice that can inform everything we do or be.**