

SLD08.20.06 20th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Psalm 46, I Kings 19:9-13
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Resting in God – Father Thomas Keating”

So we're on the last of our saints this morning. All summer you and I have been exploring the lives of various holy and not-so-holy ones whose lives witness to ways that the gospel can be lived. Next week, by way of a closing sermon on this summer series, I shall summarize some of the more important insights offered by each of these radical examples of Christian discipleship. But today we'll meet one final exemplar of Christian witness.

But before we do, let me explain that every year during my summer sermon series on saints, as I play Popette and choose each week whom I feel like canonizing, I genuinely try to tap a diverse mix of Christian witnesses: alternating gender, the quick and the dead, race, nationality, denomination, millennia, that sort of thing. And whereas I've managed a pretty good mix of gender, nationality and century so far, I have to confess I've tended to short-change the living. So what I was really looking for this week was a living guy who, you know, qualified for a series on “saints.”

But I had a hard time coming up with anybody! I asked around, too. And, you know, I didn't have all that much time because Elise, who's always way ahead of me on the calendar, has to plan the music and whatnot. So I thought to myself, darn, where's a good male saint when you need one! One that's still around, that is. Everybody seems to get holier once they die.

Finally, in a fit of impatience to complete the list, I considered, okay, what man still living has had the most impact on my personal spirituality during these ripe middle

years of my life? And I *still* couldn't think of anybody. So then I thought, all right, so what's the most grounding spiritual practice I have personally that helps me stay grounded and sane and occasionally, faithful?

And that was easy, because I only have one. On my good days. When conditions are right. When the stars align and the kid's not home and the neighborhood's quiet and I have a minute...in those precious moments the one, single, most grounding spiritual prayer practice to which I'm committed is centering prayer.

And the person who's responsible for my exposure to and experience of centering prayer is Trappist priest, contemplative teacher, and terminally cute old guy - Father Thomas Keating. "Uncle Tommy," to me.

Of course, Keating is not really my uncle. He's just this tall, lanky, avuncular sort of fellow with unruly wisps of fine hair atop his nearly bald pate who's made it his life work to teach people all over the country about centering prayer. Nor did Keating actually teach me directly about centering prayer. He just wrote the books about centering prayer that I study over and over and over again, and featured in all the videos I watched during this one-weekend-a-month-for-nine-months centering prayer program I went through 5 or 6 years ago at my retreat center, Green Bough House of Prayer.

Indeed, to thousands and thousands of Christians seeking a contemplative prayer practice, Keating's pretty much become the national centering prayer "guru" and its most prominent figurehead today. Add to that the fact that he's a guy, *and*,

conveniently, living, it is to Father Thomas Keating I would like to introduce you this morning.¹

Born to a wealthy but not particularly religious Park Avenue family, Keating became a student at Yale in the early 1940s. There, a freshman philosophy class challenged his Roman Catholic worldview sufficiently to spur him seriously to investigate the roots of his faith. While in the library reading Thomas Aquinas, Keating experienced a profound conversion during which he deeply grasped the fact that Christianity was a contemplative religion. What he realized was that the spiritual sense of the Scripture was much more important than the literal sense, and that union with the Divine was not only possible but available to all. The seed of this insight about the accessibility to all persons of an intimate union with God grows throughout Keating's life, ultimately determining his vocation during the latter half of his life.

In 1943, after graduating from Fordham University, and despite strong parental objections (notice a theme here?) Keating joined an austere monastic community to develop his own spiritual life. Rising through the Trappist ranks from novice master to superior for three years at the then-embryonic community in Snowmass, Colorado, Keating then moves on for a 20-year stint as the progressive abbot of St. Joseph's Abbey, the Trappist motherhouse, in Spencer, Massachusetts.

In 1971 Keating attended a meeting of Trappist superiors in Rome, during which the late Pope Paul VI invoked the spirit of Vatican II, which called for a spiritual renewal among all Catholics. But, the Pontiff declared, unless the Church rediscovered its own Christian contemplative tradition, spiritual renewal could never take place. Pope Paul

¹ The following biography is lifted directly from "Resting in God...An Interview with Fr. Thomas Keating, OSCO" by Anne A. Simpson, found on www.rosaries.org/interview.htm

called specifically upon monastics who were already living the contemplative life to get out there and help the laity and those in other religious orders to bring the contemplative dimension into their lives as well.

Keating came away from that meeting determined to follow the Pope's mandate. Back at his own monastery, he asked the monks at St. Joseph's to search for some method rooted in Christian tradition that would make contemplative prayer more accessible to people outside the monastery. St. Joseph's novice master at the time, William Meninger, found in the 14th-century English classic The Cloud of Unknowing, a simple technique for contemplative prayer. After the book, Meninger called the method "The Prayer of the Cloud" and began teaching it to retreatants and other visitors who stayed at the abbey guesthouse.

Another St. Joseph's monk, Basil Pennington, (who became, for many years, the abbot of the Monastery of the Holy Spirit out here in Conyers) also began teaching this "prayer of the cloud," frequently quoting his friend and correspondent, Thomas Merton, who, when writing about this type of prayer, would use the term "center." It wasn't long before the participants of Pennington's first workshop began referring to the technique as "centering prayer."

Enter Thomas Keating, who, you recall, was the abbot superior of Meninger's and Pennington's abby. Well read in both philosophy and psychology, Keating devised a system that details the journey catalyzed by the practice of centering prayer, and took it on the road. Eventually Keating became a kind of Johnny Appleseed of the soul who, along with a cadre of clergy and lay people, began sowing the seeds of centering prayer and Christian contemplation all across the country.

Today, intensive workshops on centering prayer are frequent and common, offered through a variety of churches and denominations. Keating's books, in particular, Open Mind, Open Heart and Invitation to Love, are readily available in most bookstores. Our own Presbytery resource center is in the process of ordering the 25 video tape series of Keating teaching his insights and principles about centering prayer. The Boulder-based audio-cassette company, Sounds True, recently released a 24-cassette series of lectures by Keating on "The Contemplative Journey."

Broad interest in centering prayer spawned two organizations, Contemplative Outreach, which Keating co-founded and leads, and the Mastery Foundation, with which Pennington is associated, both dedicated to teaching the method among lay and ordained people alike. The promulgation of the practice of Centering Prayer has become quite a movement!

But why all the hoopla? Just what exactly *is* centering prayer? I'm tempted to say, "why don't you just come to our Wednesday night supper this week and find out!" Because, as I mentioned during announcements, I'll be talking a little more than about the centering prayer method, and we'll watch together part of a tape of Uncle Tommy, and perhaps experience a little centering prayer as well. But to tell the truth, there's really not all that much to the method of centering prayer; it's the discipline of *doing* it on some regular basis that's the challenge. And I'm talking about Uncle T. says anybody's who's been at it for less than ten years is still a beginner.

But here's the official definition of Centering Prayer, which you, too, can read at www.centeringprayer.com:

Centering Prayer is a method of contemplative prayer which prepares us to receive the gift of God's presence. It consists of responding to the Spirit of Christ by consenting to God's presence and action within. It's technique is

designed to) quiet our faculties to help us ‘rest in God.’ It is Trinitarian in its source, Christ-centered in its focus, and ecclesial in its effects; that is, it builds communities of faith.

Drawn from ancient prayer practices of the Christian contemplative heritage, notably the Mothers and Fathers of the Desert, Lectio Divina (which is praying the scriptures), The Cloud of Unknowing, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, Centering Prayer is an attempt to present the teaching of these earlier in an updated form, and to put a certain order and regularity into it. It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; it simply puts other kinds of prayer into a new and fuller perspective.

Centering prayer emphasizes prayer as a personal relationship with God. At the same time, it is a discipline to foster and serve this relationship by regular, daily practice of prayer. During the time of prayer we consent to God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence everywhere.

So that’s what centering prayer is – just an updated method of ancient Christian contemplative practices intended to help us commune with, or rest in, God, through the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Usually we think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But that’s just one way of praying. Centering Prayer is the opening of our mind and heart – of our whole being - to God, beyond thoughts, beyond words, beyond emotions. It’s a way of opening ourselves to the divine Presence, whom, we know by faith in Jesus Christ, is within us, closer than breathing, closer than thinking, closer than choosing - closer even than consciousness itself.²

Keating says that as we open ourselves to God and consent to God’s presence in us and to God’s actions with us. ...it is like "two friends sitting in silence, simply being in each other's presence."

The method itself couldn’t be more simple:

²www.rosaries.org/centeringprayer.htm “Centering Prayer and the Transformation of Divine Love” TK

1. **Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.**
2. **Sit comfortably with your 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 you become aware of thoughts, 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.** (Myself, I like to close with the Lord's Prayer.)

That's pretty much it. Like I said, there's not much to the method of centering prayer. It's the *intention* that's everything; the showing up and shutting up long enough to be present to ...sometimes the Word...but most times the silence...of God. That's our part. God's part, well, we pretty much have to leave that to God.

But Keating says that in contemplative prayer, God can do anything. That to move into that realm is the greatest adventure, because to be open to the Infinite is to be open to infinite possibilities. That in centering prayer our private, self-made worlds come to an end, a new world appears within and around us, and the impossible becomes an everyday experience.³

The way Keating sees it, the ultimate purpose of every kind of prayer is to give ourselves to God, and to make it possible for God to do what God always wanted to do in the first place, which is to give us the divine life. Uncle T, he'd say that's what we were created for in the first place - to become one with God. Me, I just know I get weary a lot. And, quite simply, there's no place I'd rather rest than in God.

To the glory of God. Amen.

³ Open Mind, Open Heart, The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel, The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., New York, New York. 2005, p. 13.