

My name is Tim Basselin, and I've been on the preaching team here for about 6 years. I'm recording this in Michigan, which I drove up to this week in order to start a new job at Western Theological Seminary. I'm missing my family, so if you all don't mind – Hi Case!! Hi family! I love y'all. Case, give Karis a kiss and ask her to take you on a donut date after church is over. Ok. Sorry about that, everyone.

God chose the summer of 1996 to begin teaching me about spiritual disciplines. After my sophomore year of college, I moved across the country and worked at a national park. One of the two books I took with me was Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*, which has a chapter for 12 different disciplines. I had read the book for a class, but it wasn't the kind of book that works well in a classroom setting. I wanted to not just understand the disciplines, but to begin making them habits in my life. So I decided to give each discipline plenty of space to breathe. I wanted to read one chapter and then practice that discipline until it became a habit before I moved on to the next chapter. I didn't have a lot else to do, so I thought spending 10, 15, 20 hours a week practicing a discipline would be enough to make a habit. So at about a week per chapter for 12 weeks, I should be able to finish the book that summer And be a very holy man by the end.

Well, mastering a spiritual discipline isn't possible to do in a week. It's also not really the point. I ended up spending 3-4 weeks on each discipline just to get a feel for it becoming like a habit. By the end of the summer I'd only made it through the first three chapters: meditation, prayer, and fasting. But coming to know those as some form of habit has been very significant in my life

We're going to talk about spiritual disciplines today and how they help train us to breathe deeply, taking in the oxygen of God's good desires for the world. As we begin, please join with us in worshipping this God who is as close to us as the air we breathe.

WORSHIP

I've always found it fascinating that the first chapter in that book I mentioned, *Celebration of Discipline*, is not prayer or Bible reading, which are the two dominant disciplines pretty much ALL churches encourage, but instead meditation, which he also refers to as contemplation. I've pondered that for about 25 years now, and I'm beginning to come to some elementary understandings about it. In this case, looking at where the word contemplation comes from helps with understanding some of the significance.

The etymology of contemplation goes back to Latin, and even Greek before that. It's a combination of two words – con, meaning “with,” just as it does in prefixes like - conspire or conflate. And the other Latin word is templum, from which we get the word temple. Con-Temple-Ation. For the Romans, the word “templum” seems to have originally meant a space of sky or ground set aside for *observance*.

Now, when we contemplate, we usually whittle our way down to something like “I think therefore I am.” Our contemplation is primarily mental, as we try to solve a problem. Our modern brains want an answer

we can own and apply and control the outcome. But the purpose of Roman contemplations was to observe, to listen, to see, to take note of something outside of the self. The assumption of this practice was that humans do not hold all truth within themselves, but truth is in the weather patterns, or the stars, or the way fire dances.

The person who did the observation was called an auger, and they would sit and observe looking for the larger truth of reality and would then consider how they could align their inner self with this larger reality that existed beyond their limits. The way I think about this is rather than contemplation being about solving a problem, it is space to push into mystery, because our central reality of existence is not comprehensible. God is greater than we are. The poet Malcolm Guite distinguishes between comprehending, which assumes we can grasp a truth comprehensively, and apprehending, which reaches for a truth that is ultimately beyond our grasp. This small touch of humility makes a huge difference. When the auger contemplates, they aren't looking to impose their personal truth on the world around them. They accept the truth of the world outside of them and submit themselves to it. When we practice contemplation we become people trained to recognize Truth, with a capital T, that is bigger than ourselves, and as importantly, we become a people whose *reflex* is to submit to Truth that's outside ourselves. This is an important thing to learn even before we begin to pray or do the other disciplines.

An auger would sometimes take an object into the space – like a chicken, perhaps - and just watch it closely. Imagine a space in front of wherever you are, and imagine a chicken there, and just observe.

Silence.

It's not dissimilar from this quote by C.S. Lewis that you may have heard– “The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.”

Now – some of y'all are thinking, yeah, that's what looking at art feels like, like sitting and watching a chicken. First, off – That's not nice. But second – you're not wrong. Maybe they are connected. And I'd suggest, maybe they're both connected in Christ. John begins his gospel by saying “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And then says, “All things were created by him, and apart from him was not one thing created that has been created.” And Colossians says Christ is “before all things and ALL things hold together in him.” Ps 19 – “The heavens declare the glory of God.” We could go on and on. Maybe the chickens also declare God's glory.

Lewis makes that point about art in a small book called *An Experiment in Criticism*, which begins with the argument that there aren't good books and bad books so much as there are good readers and bad readers. Bad readers want to use the text for their purposes, and so they tend toward proof-texting, picking out what suits them and applying it elsewhere. Good readers know how to listen and receive, how to surrender to the text so that it can do its work on them. Augers make good readers. And they make good prayers.

Our text today is Jeremiah 17:5-10, if you want to look up that passage. In it we see people who trust in themselves are like shrubs in a desert valley. They have no roots, they're not connected to a larger life. But those who trust in God are like a tree planted near a stream. Not even the changing seasons affect them. Let's begin with vs 5-8.

⁵This is what the Lord says:

“Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans,
who rely on human strength
and turn their hearts away from the Lord.

⁶They are like stunted shrubs in the desert,
with no hope for the future.

They will live in the barren wilderness,
in an uninhabited salty land.

⁷“But blessed are those who trust in the Lord
and have made the Lord their hope and confidence.

⁸They are like trees planted along a riverbank,
with roots that reach deep into the water.

Such trees are not bothered by the heat
or worried by long months of drought.

Their leaves stay green,
and they never stop producing fruit.

As we return now to worship, consider the larger truths outside of yourselves, the truths we are submitting ourselves to.

WORSHIP

I have a friend who is a writer. She has also been an English teacher at times. She's a mom who just sent her last kid off to college last fall and whose other two kids just had their first babies, making her a grandma. She's also currently pursuing an MA in Analytic Theology at St. Andrews in Scotland. In December, she was back home in N Carolina for the Christmas break and life was... hectic. New babies, daughter home from college, taking care of a house after being away for months and about to leave for more months. In the midst of enjoying Christmas and family and all the love, she was missing that part of herself that writes. The slower life – contemplative, stare out at the snow and listen to the tiny birds that are hopping around. And she texted me to ask if I might have some encouragement for writing, though she didn't have time for writing.

I waited until I had some time, and I sat down and cleared my mind and I tried to imagine her situation – the joy, the frantic, the necessary preparations and cleaning up. And I prayed for her, and I tried to imagine what might work for the particular situation she was in. And then I texted this:

Encouragement for writing: before entering a new space, whether the kitchen or the car or wherever, stop and slow your mind to find one thick thing to focus on. Then take three long, deep breaths, breathing in that thing's fullness and breathing out all the minor things crowding your mind. Invite Ruach to participate in what enters and exits. Then, while you're in that space, allow your mind to follow through with that one thing. When you leave the space, stop for 1 minute and write down 2 or 3 sentences.

She replied: *I'm interested: is there lots to be said about the artist's "care of self" and making space for artistic endeavor?*

She then clarified that she was purposefully avoiding the phrase self-care, because something about it bothered her.

And **here** is the point of this story. I think she's right to speak cautiously about self-care. Because the end goal of self-care is the self, what I need. A great challenge we have in practicing spiritual disciplines is the ever-present danger of turning them into self-care.

Now, before I go on, I need to make a HUGE disclaimer. I am not saying self-care is bad. We live in a broken, messed up, painful world, and in the face of that pain, self-care is a necessary coping mechanism for the sake of survival. So, I don't judge others' self-care, because people are often just trying to stay alive. I often practice self-care. But, when the end of self-care is self Well, our chief end should be God. Or, to put it differently, being made in the image of God isn't about what we are in ourselves, it's about what we are together, in relationship, as the Trinity is relational. The end of spiritual disciplines should be restoration to that relationality.

So, here is how I replied to my friend's question about the artists' self-care and making space for writing:

I wouldn't talk about care of self or even specifics of being an artist. I would use language of sabbath, fasting and feasting, developing a sacramental imagination, participation, ritual, and liturgy. Things common to all. Things that are the structures of God's creation and God's work in the world.

I think artists being artists learn habits particular to some aspects of those structures of reality and can teach others how to ... slow down, listen, make sketches and iterations, etc, etc.

Artists are adept at listening to and feeling the world. And THEN wrestling a feeling or conception into physicality in some way. They practice incarnation, something all Christians need to ritualize.

We can practice the spiritual disciplines in a way that is self-care. We can also practice the spiritual disciplines in a way that invites us to be conformed to a reality larger than ourselves. I think we probably need both of these forms, but if we are only practicing self-care, then we are likely only ever attempting

to draw God into our limited perception of reality. We are like the first half of Ps 77 repeating me, me, I, me and we never move on to the 2nd half repeating You, You, Lord, You!

With that in mind, let's read the last couple verses of our Jeremiah text.

⁹ "The human heart is the most deceitful of all things,
and desperately wicked.

Who really knows how bad it is?

¹⁰ But I, the Lord, search all hearts
and examine secret motives.

I give all people their due rewards,
according to what their actions deserve."

Who really knows how bad the human heart is? We don't even know our own hearts. This is why the end goal of self-care can't be the self.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

You know that feeling when you're so anxious about something that you find you've been taking short, shallow breaths for a while? And sometimes, even if you try, it's difficult to take a deep breath? Some self-care is necessary to return to a normal breathing pattern. But it's not likely to keep you from experiencing that feeling again. I think the spiritual disciplines invite us to something else – more like that feeling you may have had at the beach after watching a sunset and the stars start coming out, and as far as you can see the ocean is in movement, the rhythm of waves lapping against the shore, in and out *and in* and out. And you feel small but somehow connected to this larger reality. The spiritual disciplines help us connect to that larger reality that isn't just about me.

These disciplines are not difficult, you simply have to make space for them. And there's a spiritual discipline that we at Catalyst have practiced together for years now. After the sermon most every week, we pause and practice a small examen. And then we have an invitation to the Lord's Supper. Sermon – **Examen** – Lord's Supper. The Examen is a space where we are invited to connect the truth we've heard proclaimed to our daily lived experiences. Sermon – Examen – **Lord's Supper**. Our consideration of our experience last week and in the week to come then gets connected, drawn into a central deepest reality of our faith – This is my body, take, eat. **Sermon – Examen – Lord's Supper**. Over time it becomes a habit. Sermon – **Examen** – Lord's Supper. Eventually, the spiritual practice of Examen becomes natural in other spaces. When I encounter truth elsewhere, anywhere, I'm more likely to stop, expand it out, consider its connection in my life, its possibility for the days ahead. Sermon – Examen – **Lord's Supper**. And that truth is not just something for me to own, something that makes me a better person. That truth, and its working out in my life, is always, necessarily connected with the deepest truths of the universe of who God is – Christ broken **for us**. In this way, the spiritual discipline of Examen helps us develop a sacramental imagination, over and over again helping us become aware of Christ's presence

amongst us, the Spirit's movement in our everyday lives. Week after week, the Examen helps form us into a people who habitually make connections between our lived experience and God's living with us.