

Acts 4:32-35
Psalm 133
1 John 1:1-2:2
John 20:19-31

Sermon for April 7, 2024

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: So that with the eyes of our hearts enlightened

Let me reread to you the final three verses of our Gospel reading for today:

29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

These are the concluding verses of chapter twenty of John, and most Bible scholars believe that chapter twenty was the last chapter, as John originally wrote his Gospel, and that chapter twenty-one was a sort of postscript added at a later date. That's also what I believe, and if so, it adds special poignancy and force to verse twenty-nine, in which John offers what would be the last words of Jesus recorded by his beloved disciple: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

This is now the year 2024 of the Christian era, and using the most likely date of the crucifixion and resurrection, that means that it was exactly one thousand nine hundred and ninety-one years since Jesus uttered those words. Right from the

very beginning, that is to say, it was Christ's own most pressing concern, looking ahead to the years and decades and centuries and millennia to come, that people come to know him with the same intimacy and the same conviction that resulted from the personal acquaintance of those friends and disciples who knew him face to face.

That of course is the basic problem created by human mortality. I knew my grandparents face to face; I knew them in their living, breathing reality. But once I along with my few remaining cousins have passed from this earthly existence, there will be no one left who knew my grandparents the way we did, as one human knows another. When my cousins and I are gone, my grandparents will have passed from human memory. That's the way the world is.

But we must always remember that Jesus did not come to teach us how the world is; He came to teach us how heaven is; and in this present regard, what that means is that he came to show us, among many other things, how we can, using the spiritual laws of heaven, create and deepen our personal relationship with his heavenly reality, how we can know him, as we know our friends and parents and grandparents.

It's those laws of heavenly knowledge that I'd like us to think about this morning. And I'll begin by reminding us that the laws of the world, while different from those of heaven, are often the shadows of those laws, shadows cast by the heavenly light upon the material world.

So what we're going to do today is compare, with a sort of semi-serious illustration, four ways in which we come to know something in its earthly reality with what we can find in Scripture about how we can come to know our Lord in His heavenly reality. And the homely example I'll use is the Law of gravity. How does a student, a physics student, say, become acquainted with the law of gravity?

Well, the first thing a student will do, of course, is to read material from a textbook, a textbook written by someone who already knows about gravity.

And lo and behold, what do we find when we turn to our gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus? What we find are, essentially, textbooks, written about

Jesus by authors who knew a lot about him, in some cases, who actually knew him face-to-face.

Return again to our Gospel selection for today, written by or at least containing the witness of John, the beloved disciple, the man who knew Jesus personally, perhaps better than anyone else. And how does John conclude his textbook? Let's read it again:

31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Under divine inspiration, John teaches us that the first spiritual step in establishing a personal relationship with Jesus is to read about him, to learn about him, about what he said and what he did. That was what the other gospel writers were doing as well, making us acquainted with Jesus by passing on to us their own memories and knowledge.

So what we are all doing when we read our Bible, or come to church and hear the word proclaimed, or attend Bible study...we are familiarizing ourselves with their textbooks. Even if, in human weakness, we forget what we read or hear, or if we cannot make much sense of it, even if we fall asleep sometimes...the spiritual law of becoming acquainted with Jesus is being accomplished in us. Our spirits are coming to know Jesus, regardless of what's going on in our human brains.

Let's return to our physics student. After having read the textbook, what does he do? Why, he goes to class, and shares fellowship with other students and their instructor.

The selection from Acts we read this morning reminds us that the early Christian life was a life lived in community with other believers. And the Psalmist, writing long before that time, shows us that the same spiritual law was foreshadowed in those earlier days:

133:1 Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

Getting together with other Christians in the context of shared worship is a way of knowing Jesus? Why, I don't even like that Duane two pews down, Gloria across

the aisle owes me money, and Freddie by the door laughs like a wounded hyena! How could sharing time with them possibly bring me closer to Christ?

In human terms, it couldn't. But remember, we're not talking about human terms: we're talking about Christ's terms. And what does Christ say. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Back to our physics student. He has studied the texts, he has shared the learning experience with others; what does he do next? Well, he goes into the lab and starts doing his own experiments: by dropping balls and measuring their velocity, by using electron microscopes to observe interactions between teeny electrons and giant protons, and other experiments of that sort. In other words, he puts his theoretical knowledge into practical application: he uses what he's learned.

And isn't that exactly what prayer is? Always remember, prayer isn't primarily a way of getting things from God. It's first and foremost the way of making our desires known to God, and then placing them in His hands, entrusting them to His providence, to His all-knowing love. When Jesus says, *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."* ⁸ *For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened,* (Matthew 7: 7-8), he's not guaranteeing that our desires will be satisfied; he's guaranteeing something else, something entirely spiritual in nature: that we will become closer and closer to Jesus. **That's** what's guaranteed when we pray. As Paul expresses it to the Ephesians, his own prayer is that God might give them the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so they may come to know Jesus better and better.

And a last time we return to our physics student. Is he now fully acquainted with the law of gravity? Not quite. One thing remains. What does he do? He climbs on his chair there in the physics lab...and he jumps off. Now, and only now, he really knows gravity, because now, he has really experienced it for himself.

On that same occasion, one thousand nine hundred and ninety-one years ago today, Jesus told his disciples and us how to share his own experience. Having breathed his own Holy Spirit into them, he said: *If you forgive the sins of others, they are forgiven.*

The spiritual essence of Jesus is the spirit of forgiveness. He died for the forgiveness of our sins. Because he forgave us all, God Himself forgives us all. That is the gospel, that is the good news of Christ.

You can learn everything there is to know about jumping out of an airplane. But there is one, and only one, way to really know what it is to jump out of an airplane. And that is, to jump out of an airplane.

In accordance with the laws of heaven, in our earthly lives we can accomplish the heavenly project of getting closer and closer to Jesus in his heavenly reality by reading and studying our Bible, by communing with others in worship, by spending our earthly time in private prayer... and most of all, by forgiveness, in which we here and now, in our mortal lives, share his immortal essence.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is that you strengthen and encourage us in our study, in our worship, in our meditation, and in our forgiveness of each other, as we seek through these heavenly practices to come to know your dearly Beloved Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

There is another means that Our Lord provided us to come to know him, and it is not so much a means in addition to these others that we talked about, so much as it is the spiritual nourishment for them, the way of keeping our earthly spirits alive and responsive, able to receive their unfathomable heavenly blessing. And that is what we find on our Lord's table. So let's now gather at that table together.