



Grain

“Future historians will consider the meeting of Buddhism and Christianity at their deepest levels as the most significant event of the twentieth century.” –Arnold Toynbee

Field

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.” Matthew 16:24-27

Thoughts

“Sit in silence and take deep breaths. Center yourself.” When did these lines become common in our Lutheran vocabulary? Recently, when I was at an ELCA training, two members who led us in devotions on different days, sat up straight in their chairs and invited us to center ourselves. They each asked us to pay attention to our breath in silence for a few moments. In a separate training for supervisors, the person leading began with a centering exercise as well.

As an intern many moons ago, after leading a centering prayer exercise as part of a workshop, a pastor commented that I needed to be careful to give the message that we’re saved by grace and not by climbing a spiritual ladder. He was right, and I love our healthy theology surrounding that topic. But we don’t want warnings about not depending on God’s grace to overshadow exploring forms of prayer or working for justice. What if people drawn to meditation are left with questions about how to pray? Many cannot imagine prayer without singing or speaking out loud. Some find reading devotions to be a significant way to pray outside of corporate worship. Being silent in prayer and physically noticing your breath to center is another approach, one not only reserved for contemplatives in cloistered communities.

I read the historian Toynbee’s words about Buddhism and Christianity also many moons ago. Such a compelling line. Whether his prediction will prove completely accurate or not, we get glimpses into influences between religions. The way Christians, especially Catholics, have benefitted from eastern forms of meditation has gradually reminded us of our own contemplative history. Today, we may be influenced by the East without thinking about it or fearing syncretism.

Dialogue between religions can also help us to delve deeper into our own faith and refine how we understand it. Zen Buddhists teach about emptiness and detachment. That sounds cold. But what if at the teaching’s core is a common search to live in reality? Isn’t that what Jesus was asking of his disciples when he said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it...” Salvation is not about building upon the illusions of what saves – our wealth, our negative or exaggerated false self-images, or systems that seduce us into false promises. Let go and die to those illusions and all that we cannot control. That can hurt, or when letting go and naming reality is not received well, others and even entire systems can be hurtful. But “those who lose their life will find it.” What does this mean? I think I’ll sit quietly, breathe, and try to listen, while never knowing when the breath of God will grace us. Happy Monday!

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Many blessings upon you,
Pastor Cindy