

Being an urban contemplative. A sermon preached on September 9, 2018 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: EXODUS 3:1-6

MATTHEW 7:1-5

Look at the picture on the bulletin cover!

Can you imagine what is going through the young man's mind?

Look at his body position

Look at his facial expression

I wonder what the girls in the background have said to him or are saying about him

I wonder if they are playing the well-known and nasty little game called 'Let's Label'

It is a game that requires no dice or little figures to move around a board.

And it's rules – very simple!

Find someone who is different.

He or she may look, sound or think differently than you

It works particularly well if the person holds different opinions and or/ reacts in a different way than the 'norm' or the acceptable to you manner or your religious group view as 'norm'

This game is particularly effective if someone has a mark on his or her past record that your group

consider worth discussing – even if it happened a long time ago,
 Has been fully forgiven and is actually none of your business – which by the way is true over 95% of the time.

Here's how you play

1. Find something you do not like about the person
2. Examine the externals – you have to do this since there is no way to know the internals
3. Form negative and critical opinions
4. Jump to several inaccurate conclusions. This will not be hard for many – as there is always an inability to know ALL the facts
5. Mentally stick a label on the person in question.

I wonder what labels the girls have already stuck on the young man in the picture – loser, wierdo, dweeb, odd, peculiar.

I wonder if one of the labels is about his supposed sexual orientation or related to some sort of speech impediment

Labels of course save time...keep you from having to verify all the detail

6 Freely share all findings and identifying labels with others...so everyone, especially in church settings can 'pray more intelligently'.

I identify greatly with the young man in the picture – more than you will ever know!

Regretfully, I have also sat where the girls sat and labelled others

We know the “let’s label” by another word –
JUDGING.

This morning’s lesson from the Sermon on the Mount gives Jesus’ clear two one syllable words answer, STOP IT!

STOP IT because we never know all the facts

STOP IT because we are unable to read
another’s motive

STOP IT because we have built in prejudices
and therefore can never be completely objective

STOP IT because in judging we put ourselves
in a position we are not qualified to fill – namely –
WE PLAY GOD.

Most of us are so unaware of these things that
we overlook our limitations.

We think we know more than we do – hence
judging continues out of habit

Because of this we jump to false conclusions!

Well STOP IT says Jesus

And he gives to us his readers a bit of hyperbole or
exaggeration about specks in the eyes of others who
are trying to be removed by those who have logs in
their eyes.

Jesus leaves no wiggle room

Do not judge

No one reading this particular section can honestly
say – I don’t understand.

Jesus gives a clear image answer!

Now know this – Jesus is not telling his followers to stop being people of discernment. We are never to suspect our critical faculties or turn a deaf ear or close our eyes to error.

What Jesus IS saying is – do not conduct your life with a judgmental or negative attitude.

Do not be censorious.

For when we assess others suspiciously, find petty faults continually,

Seek out and centre upon only periodic weaknesses and failures, we not only feed a critical and negative spirit,

We also presume a position of enormous arrogance.

Judging others are pure and simply hypocrisy
Jesus uses that very word in verse 5

You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbours' eye

Playing the “let’s Label game can be so addictive – beguiling

What is needed most of all – is that we stop it!

Okay, how do we do that?

Where do we begin?

We need to draw closer to God

Examine ourselves in the cleansing light of God’s mercy, forgiveness, grace and provision

So, how do we do this self-examination in a way that does not degenerate into some sort of navel gazing?

One way I suggest is that we work on a set of skills or tried and tested methods of historic Christianity. We become as one author suggest -urban contemplatives.

Say what? Urban contemplatives
Sounds like navel gazing to you you say
Well, I can assure you being an urban contemplative is anything but.

Let me explain.

Traditionally, spirituality and contemplation have been for monasteries and convents, for monks and nuns.\

Such places remain spiritually invaluable for rest and discernment.

But most of us live and spend the bulk of our lives far away – physically and psychically from monasteries

That does not mean thought that we cannot adapt some contemplative practices to our everyday lives!

As God's people it remains crucial that we not lose touch or take for granted that eternal life is to know the one true God.

Hear that wise counsel from Ecclesiastes again

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every

**deed into judgement, including every secret thing,
whether good or evil (12:13-14)**

As this pertains to the “let’s label” game (?) –do I welcome each person as God would welcome him/her?

Look,

The presence of Jesus in us is a compelling force and power

Without being icky religious or repellently self-righteous and judgmental how can we live as Jesus desires all of us to live?

How can we acknowledge the presence of the sacred in all we meet and see?

Develop some skills and methods of being an urban contemplative.

Over the next few weeks, I want to lift up and either introduce some of these skills and methods or to encourage you in your continuing practice of them.

It is a given that all of us live busy lives.

We all work on some form of “to do” list.

And how many of us tend to overbook or over commit on most days.

All skills I want to lift are not going to take hours of daily time.

Though the wise bit of counsel holds – if we are too busy to pray – we are too busy!

This morning, I begin with the EXAMEN – a new word for many of you and perhaps a new practice introduced

One of the inserts this morning outlines the practice – come back to that sheet in a moment – so keep it handy please!

The Examen was developed some 500 years ago by St. Ignatius Loyola – a soldier turned monk and founder of the Jesuit order within Catholic Church.

Ignatius wanted to sustain and extend the experience of conversion to the cause of Christ that he had had, so he wrote “The Spiritual Exercises’

Ignatius saw the Examen as a way to develop a reflective habit of mind that is constantly attuned to *God’s presence and responsive to God’s leading.*

The Examen remains one of the foundations of Ignatian prayer.

At one point, St. Ignatius once said, if you prayed no other prayer, you should at least pray the Examen once a day.

Both Katharine and I were first exposed to this Ignatian based way of prayer when we went on separate retreats to the Sisters of St, Martha Retreat House in Prince Edward Island

The instructions on How to do the Examen are very clear

The real challenge is DOING IT and DOING IT on a regular (daily) basis.

Most practioners of the Examen say it is best prayed
at the end of the day

This way, you are given a chance to reflect on the
day with God

For each new day is gift is it not?

Comeback to the insert – ‘The Examen’

...it usually takes 15-20 minutes.

When you start, you might make it to only 5
minutes before becoming too distracted.

And we are all so distractible!

Especially when it is quiet and we are still!

I find what is personally helpful is to have an extra
piece of paper and pencil close by upon which I
have written “later” and “after”.

An extraneous thought comes up that has nothing
to do with the Examen – I jot it down in point form
and then deal with it “later” or “after”

Do not push beyond the 20 minutes – the Examen is
not a life confession!

1. *Ask God for light.*

Do you realize that God is present all around us?
Busyness, noise and hurry so often dull our minds
to acknowledge this.

Yet if we attune ourselves to look and listen, we
find God present within us, all around us, and
speaking to us

Like Moses, before the burning bush, this first step
of the Examen serves to focus and remind us that
we live and work and stand in a holy place – a

“world charged with the grandeur of God” as others have put it.

2. *Give thanks*

Sounds simple and easy – yes, Yet how often have you seen and been confronted by the sad fact that gratitude for what we are given runs counter to the competitive nature of our culture.

Often from infancy we are taught to compare ourselves with others in terms of talent or looks

We therefore need to pray regularly and often for gratitude to God for who we are.

What a great relief and freedom it would be if we could believe Jesus makes no comparisons but loves each of us as we are

And wants the best for each of us.

3. *Review the day...being guided by the Holy Spirit.*

Very important guiding principle. For if any of us think we have arrived, we have gone down a cul de sac!

Look for the good in the day.

How was God present to you in people, places and things?

Pay attention to the small things.

God is in the details, God is in all things.

4. *Face your shortcomings*

The rubric is no nonsense.

Look, each of us have not always made choices that lead us to praise, honour and serve God

Each of us has not always acted as if we believed that we are loved.

Each of us has not always treated everything in our lives as gift.

Pay attention to your emotions, your reactions to the day's events

What were your feelings this day? Happiness? Sadness? Boredom? Anger/ Frustration? Despair? Confidence?

What do YOU think God is saying through these feelings?

We live in a world where rationalization and passing the buck are both very strong, Where saying and meaning "I'm sorry. It's my fault are too rarely heard

The Examen is between you and God
So put your big boy or big girl pants on and 'fess up
God is not going to cast you into the outer darkness.
Don't you think God knows already – he wants you to acknowledge your shortcomings

5. Look forward to the day to come.

Ask God to give you light for tomorrow's challenges.

Seek God's guidance, help and understanding.

Pray for hope resting on God's promises.

The Examen remains an excellent way to be honest in prayer.

For we review OUR day in the loving light of Jesus precisely to strip away facades or masks and to correct self-delusions.

It helps us say, "Here I am Lord, warts, imperfections and all"

To be an urban contemplative

To do all the Examen asks in 15-20 minutes will not come automatically or first time.

Saint Ignatius was not under any illusion that it would,

And neither should any of us be under a similar illusion.

But of its significance to see God in what we think, do and feel,

In life with family colleagues and casual acquaintances

In our busyness and our rest

That is what the Examen helps its practitioners do!

Of this, St. Ignatius and the practitioners of the Examen are adamant.