

Centering Prayer Week 9

*“But while he was still far off,
his father saw him and was filled with compassion;
he ran and embraced him and kissed him.” Luke 15:20*

Embracing and Being Embraced (Audiobook Chapter 18, Book Chapter 15)

Resisting Self-Knowledge

Sometimes challenges and suffering arise in centering prayer. Learning how to embrace God in the challenges and how to be embraced by God in the suffering is essential for persevering. The obsessive thoughts, the waves of emotion, the storms of spiritual suffering that can come during centering prayer are sometimes overwhelming. You may want to do anything to flee from them – even impulsively abort your commitment to the practice. These situations are challenging because while they are happening, God seems like a fairy tale. Resistance and other psychological defenses, such as repression, denial, and projection, come up, in an effort to protect you from the pain of the human condition.

Unfortunately, these defenses also keep you from God. In the Christian tradition, the experience of the raw, existential depths of the human condition – in all its felt separation from God – is called *self-knowledge*. Centering prayer not only brings you into contact with this kind of self-knowledge, but also helps you avoid getting trapped there. You go through self-knowledge to come to the abiding knowledge of God.

Anger, fear, sadness – from the deep perspective of faith, God is in these “afflictive” emotions, acting through them to open you to your humanity. When you are open to your humanity, you can better show compassion to others. Compassion literally means “to suffer with.” Compassion means relating to others with your shared humanity, which includes your weakness, your challenges, your suffering, and your feelings. Joy, happiness, pleasure – God is in these “positive” emotions, moving through them to bring you to fullness of life, as you are freed from attachment to them. Boredom, listlessness, dryness – God is in these “neutral” emotions, moving through them to help you appreciate the wonder of ordinary life.

A Deep Embrace

Embracing is the opposite of resisting. Embracing is an active contemplative attitude that helps you shift into a deep perspective of faith. In this transformational process, emotional wounds from your past are brought to light in the healing relationship with God. Intense emotions – such as anger, fear, and sadness – that arise in times of practice, often without connection to your current life, are part of the Spirit’s healing and transforming action. They

are being brought to consciousness so you can be freed from them, and – even more importantly – freed in them. Being *freed* in feelings means being able to experience them as a part of your humanity without being trapped in them, without being identified with them, without letting them escalate into emotional states from which destructive behaviors come. *Feelings* are a gift, a part of human experience to be embraced.

God's Embrace

As contemplation deepens, your own practice of embracing God in suffering yields to being embraced by God. For someone following the Christian contemplative path, Christ's embrace of suffering and death is the mystery that embraces you when your own efforts come to an end. Your own practice of embracing God in suffering is done in the light of God's divine embrace of the human condition. In the light of God's embrace, the human condition, in its isolation and despair and emptiness, is transformed.

Christ experienced the depths of the human condition. When he was all alone praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, he knew he was about to experience extreme physical suffering; he was going to be crucified and die. Imagine for a moment the human emotions that passed through him. When scripture (Luke 22:44) says that he sweated blood, it only hints at what his inner experience might have been.

At some point, everyone confronts the mystery of suffering and death, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The thing that sustains a Christian practitioner encountering challenges and suffering on the contemplative path is surrendering, in *emptiness*, to Christ's embrace, to the gift of God's presence transforming suffering and death. Thomas Keating says, "Seeing the presence of Christ in the present moment is the way to transformation... Just say, 'Here he comes! I embrace him – hidden in this trial, in this dreadful person, in this stomachache, in this overwhelming joy.'"

The contemplative path humanizes us. Humility is the fruit of the process of becoming more human before God. We cannot truly serve others in a sustained way without humility. Becoming ever more human – opening to God's mercy and extending God's compassion to our own weakness – grounds our love for others in humility. The need to change your relationship with your experience of being a human being becomes evident when you sit through a few sessions of contemplative practice. You confront your own neurotic mind, your own wild emotions, your own broken heart. Find God in these and in all things. Then you can find all things in God.

This 10 week series is based on David Frenette's book and audio workshop on Centering Prayer.

- The Path to Centering Prayer: Deepening Your Experience of God, David Frenette, 2017.
- Centering Prayer Meditations: Effortless Contemplation to Deepen Your Experience of God, David Frenette (2014, Audiobook)