

SUNDAY SERMON – July 2, 2006

THE SONG OF SURRENDER  
MATTHEW 4:10

Satan made a tactical error in the last temptation with which he attacked Jesus. It started out ok with Satan tempting Jesus with all the splendor of the world. Matthew says, “the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you.” (Matthew 4:8,9a) That’s a great temptation. You can have all the glittering toys the world offers. And what is so bad about that? In the great musical “Fiddler on the Roof,” Tevye asks God, “what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?” After all, as the song goes on

If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack  
To sit in the synagogue and pray.  
And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall.  
And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day.  
That would be the sweetest thing of all.

If I were a rich man,  
Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.  
All day long I'd biddy biddy bum.  
If I were a wealthy man.  
I wouldn't have to work hard.  
Ya ha deedle deedle, bubba bubba deedle deedle dum.  
If I were a biddy biddy rich,  
Yidle-diddle-didle-didle man.

It seems a relatively harmless temptation, kind of cute. We may find ourselves tempted from time to time to purchase a lottery ticket or to enjoy a little race track betting – who would be hurt?

But, then Satan crosses a line and seals his fate by pushing Jesus one step too far. Satan offers to give Jesus all the “splendor” of the world; but he attaches one condition to his promise - “All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.” At this suggestion, Jesus has had enough and finally dismisses his tormentor saying, “Away with you, Satan!” (Matthew 4:10)

The thing that tipped the balance was Satan’s condition that Jesus should “fall down” and “worship” him. The two Greek words here really mean the same thing. They both refer to prostration. Satan is asking Jesus to bow down before him, to prostrate himself. To prostrate yourself before someone means to fall down before them, touching your head to the ground at the person’s feet. Prostration is a universally recognized gesture of surrender and subordination.

Satan understands something about human beings that we often fail to comprehend. Satan understands that human beings were created for surrender. As human beings we fulfill our destiny by surrendering. This runs contrary to everything we are ever taught. We believe that we will fulfill our destiny by getting our way, by imposing our will upon the universe, by

making life turn out the way we want it to turn out. But Satan understands that the path to true humanity lies along the humiliating way of prostration. The problem of course is that Satan is tempting Jesus to prostrate himself in the wrong direction.

Jesus sees through Satan's deception immediately and replies saying "It is written, 'Worship (that is prostrate yourself before) the Lord your God and serve only him.'" (Matthew 4:10) We are designed to find our true nature through surrender but only through surrender to God. Surrender to God brings us into line with our true nature. Surrender to God aligns us with the heartbeat of the universe. It enables us to become that which we were created to be.

The word both Jesus and Satan use to describe this surrender is *proskuneo*; it is translated here as "worship." Our understanding of worship is often backwards. We think we come to worship as an expression of our faith. We think we worship because we believe. But, in fact, we worship in order to believe. Worship creates faith. Worship is practice in surrender. In the actions of our worship, we are teaching ourselves the fundamental Christian discipline of surrender. Belief is hard, not because it doesn't make sense, or is not intellectually credible. Belief is hard because we don't practice it enough. So we come to church and enter into corporate worship in order to learn surrender, to abandon ourselves to God, to open to God's Spirit, and to give back the gift of our lives to the Giver.

But corporate worship will only fulfill this function in our lives, if it is supported by personal practice. It is not enough to go through the motions of surrender Sunday by Sunday. If we pray the prayers that are assigned, hear the Scriptures, sing the songs, and kneel or stand at the altar rail and open our hands in an act of surrender to God but then leave church with the intention of reasserting our will upon the world, we might as well not have bothered. The surrender we practice in our formal act of worship needs to be backed up by a living discipline of surrender to God throughout our lives.

One of the essential practices in my life that I believe helps me develop this discipline of surrender is the practice of silent prayer. Particularly, for me, I follow a discipline of prayer known as Centering Prayer. Centering Prayer is a Christian form of meditative prayer that has as its sole aim training in surrender. Thomas Keating, one of the pioneers of Centering Prayer writes that, "Centering prayer is... the surrender of one's whole being to God."<sup>1</sup>

Think about what happens whenever you try to get quiet and remove the distractions, noise and clutter from your life for even a moment. Almost immediately you will find that your head is filled with a constant stream of thoughts. It never stops. The worries, anxieties, plans, doubts, uncertainties, confusions of life all clamour for attention. Our minds are filled with a multitude of competing voices each shouting for our attention. If you listen to what is going on inside your head, you will notice that the noise in your head never shuts off. There is never a moment of quiet, never a moment when the incessant stream of thinking falls silent.

What is all this noise about?

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Keating *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (New York: Continuum, 1994) p. 46

It is usually all about the same thing. The noise in our heads for the most part centres around our desire to gain control of life. In most of our thinking we tend to obsess about how we are going to make our lives work, how we are going to improve ourselves, make ourselves better people, fix all the problems of our lives and even of the world. We are always scheming, always planning, always trying to figure out ways to get the insanity and chaos of life under control. Our minds are filled with all of our own little visions, aspirations, goals, hopes, and dreams.

We are like Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof,” carrying on a little dialogue in our heads about how we can get life to turn out the way we want it to turn out. God, “what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?” And we scheme and rationalize and try to figure out ways to convince life that it should go the way we want. “If I were rich, I’d have the time that I lack/ To sit in the synagogue and pray. / And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall./ And I’d discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day.” Richard Rohr calls this “the calculating mind,” always trying to do a deal with life, always trying to figure out the angles. “Calculating mind” wants to know how things work so that it can work the system to its best advantage. Our brains are tireless in their pursuit of the goal of control.

What we do in Centering Prayer is we sit down in silence with only one intention in our hearts. Our intention is to open to God and to surrender all of the obsessions, plans, thoughts, and emotions of our lives to God. Over and over in the twenty minute prayer period that is prescribed for Centering Prayer, every time we become conscious of our little monkey mind running around in circles, we use a small one or two syllable word to express our intention to return to God, to give our lives back to God, to let go of our obsessive need for control, and instead to consent to God’s presence and action in our lives just as they are.

In Centering Prayer we are not trying to empty ourselves – we couldn’t even if we tried. It is not possible to stop the endless parade of busy thoughts in our minds. We are not trying to create some peaceful state of bliss. We are simply practicing the central gesture of Christian faith. We are practicing *proskuneo* before God; we are prostrating ourselves before the Divine Reality at the centre of all of life. We are exercising the discipline of surrender, expressing our desire to worship nothing but God known to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

In Centering Prayer we are training ourselves to respond to life in a new way. So often our instinctual response is to grasp, hold on, try to control, try to be in charge. We want to fix everything, to tidy up the mess so that we don’t have to feel the pain any more. Our immediate reaction is so often to fight back, to defend our own territory, to try to look after number one. We instinctively approach life with resistance. We enter situations and encounter other people from a braced position, as if there is some malevolent force at work in the world that is out to get us. In Centering Prayer we are patterning into our lives a whole new way of being. We are learning a new response to the realities of life as we encounter them. We are laying down a new road map for our lives. We are practicing taking up our cross and following Jesus, letting go of absolutely everything else.

In this prayer practice we are telling ourselves that there is nothing more important in our lives than simply being in God’s presence. There are no thoughts, or schemes, or plans, or strategies that are more important than taking the place that Mary the sister of Lazarus took when she “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.” (Luke 10:39) This is the

starting place for life. Everything in the Christian life begins here. We must start by sitting at Jesus' feet.

Every day from Monday to Thursday in the church where I work, we begin the day by sitting at Jesus' feet. The staff and a few other individuals gather in the church. At 8:30 a bell rings and we sit for twenty minutes. After twenty minutes, the bell rings again. Then we get up and we go on with the business of our day. We don't stay sitting in silence. We don't hide from the world. But we know that we have started in the right place. We have started by saying we want to "Worship the Lord our God, and serve only him." We have done the most important thing first.

It is interesting that, in his response to Satan, Jesus changes one of the words Satan uses. Satan tempts Jesus to *pipto* and *proskuneo* him. These are really synonyms for fall down, or prostrate yourself. Jesus keeps the word *proskuneo* but in the Deuteronomy 6:13 passage that Jesus quotes, the word *pipto* does not appear. Instead, the second word is *latreuo* – "It is written, 'Worship (prostrate yourself to, surrender to) the Lord your God, and *latreuo* (serve) him only.'"

Whatever you prostrate yourself to you will end up serving. That is why it is so important to start everything by prostrating yourself to God. The only true service of God is the service that emerges from surrender. We can only truly serve God and live the life for which we were created when we have let go of our agendas, laid down our needs, demands, wants, and desires.

This is the problem with Teyve's cute song. It is all his agenda, all his longings, his desires, his plans. It is not a song of surrender. It is a song of the self. Teyve sings of his longing to make a big impression on the world. He wants to be seen to be an important man in the affairs of his village. He wants to be envied and looked up to by others. He wants to live a life of ease and comfort. This is the anthem of the noise in our heads, the song of the ego. This is not a song of *proskuneo* and it does not lead to *latreuo* of God.

We must learn to sing the song of surrender. It doesn't matter how we learn this song. We may learn the song of surrender through a daily practice of Centering Prayer; we may learn it through bible study, corporate worship, or deep conversational prayer with God. The important thing is that we have some practice in our lives the only goal of which is to enable us to surrender our agendas for life and open to an awareness deep in our beings that our only true desire is to know the reality of God's presence at the centre of our being.

It is the song of surrender that leads us to fulfill our true human nature. The song of surrender is the source of a life that is lived in service to God rather than self. It doesn't matter how we learn to sing this song. It only matters that the practice of surrender becomes our first and most instinctive response to all of life. To surrender is to "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."