

### ***Walking in contemplative prayer***

Good morning, all. I'd like to offer some words this morning to help you become familiar with contemplative prayer walking.

My name is Joe Bradley. I am a retired UCC Minister and a member of our church prayer team.

You won't be a master of contemplative prayer based on this morning's message, but you will have a feel for it, to help you get started.

The church prayer team has been formed specifically to support the visioning team that – with the help of God – will shine a light on a future path for our First Congregational Church of Milton.

As you know, the prayer team, and every member of the church has been invited to participate in contemplative walking prayer as a way of knowing our neighborhoods– knowing our neighborhood in a different, prayer based way. And guess what? It's a way of praying without using words.

Instead of words we pray by walking in silence with our hearts and minds open to the Holy Spirit, in a way as described by St. Paul in today's scripture reading from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi.

In that letter, you will recall how Paul describes to us how Jesus prepared himself for his time ministering on earth: by humbling himself and emptying himself of his rights to divinity, to godliness.

Following worship this morning, after the benediction i will invite you to join me for a brief contemplative walk this morning outside of the church.

We will look to Jesus' own preparations for his earthly ministry, to help prepare ourselves for this form of wordless prayer.

In the reading Jesus does three things to prepare himself. 1) he refuses *to cling* to his divinity, and 2) he *emptied himself* and 3) he *let go* of all of his divine privileges, and became a humble servant and a human like us.

Now, contemplative praye has been a part of the Christian prayer tradition for about 1700 years.

It has been largely a monastic practice since the 4th century when the Desert Father's and Mother's went into the wilderness to pray without distraction.

So, you may ask how does a minister in the United Church of Christ, from our Congregationalist tradition, become aware of Contemplative Prayer.

Tell the story.

Contemplative Prayer has become a modern day practice beyond the monasteries in the last 50 or so years.

But contemplative prayer is nothing new.

For example there is reference to wordless prayer in the Hebrew Scripture in Psalm 46:10 , 'Be still and know that I am God.'

But to be clear, Contemplative Prayer doesn't edge out our traditional word prayers like The Lord's Prayer, or the doxology, or the prayers you say in the moment.

In fact one of the most powerful word prayers I frequently prayed as a clinical chaplain when I got a code or a stat page was simply, "Come Holy Spirit, come!"

The Franciscan priest Richard Rohr offers a modern day summary of what contemplative prayer 101 is in general:

"(Contemplative) prayer is looking out with a different set of eyes, which are not comparing, competing, judging, labeling or analyzing, but receiving the moment in it's present wholeness or even unwholeness."

Basically, we prepare for contemplative prayer by emptying ourselves, letting go of all our worries, thoughts and concerns. We take on a quieted, humble attitude, we do not cling to our usual privileged prayer attitude of asking God for something, some petition or favor.

We let go of our preconceptions, perhaps formed by earlier walks in our neighborhood. So that with freshly opened minds and hearts we can discern what the Spirit is sharing with us, and then we will consider that sharing after our walk in quiet reflection.

We become holy observers. We allow what we see, hear, and smell – yes, be alert to aromas and fragrances like freshly cut grass, flowers, shrubs, even cooking in your neighborhood.

Remember, we are not collecting data points for formal analysis. If you see something you would normally become concerned about and want to report, like a crack in the sidewalk, or an unkempt neighbor's yard, don't focus on it, let it flow through you. You can take care of it later, if it remains a serious concern.

Before stepping out, pray for God to guide your steps and your observations and to have an open mind and heart.

During your walk remember to walk slowly, just stroll. Listen to the Spirit, and observe what you see: stores, houses, for sale signs, etc.

In a moment all of you who wish to take part in this Introduction to Contemplative Prayer Walking, please follow me:

We will go out of the sanctuary, through the narthex, to the driveway outside. We will go down the driveway to our left, turn right up the sidewalk, and right again up the driveway past Town Hall, by the fire station, and then to coffee and refreshments out on the lawn.

First let us prepare ourselves in prayer:

O, God, prepare us now for a time of wordless prayer as we walk in quiet contemplation. Guide our steps and open our hearts and minds, as the First Congregational Church of Milton seeks to do your loving will in our community. Amen