

Ordinary Prayer: *Lectio divina*

Deuteronomy 6: 4-12

Luke 2: 15-20

November 9, 2008

Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I. Introduction

I usually read the newspaper in the morning; Jeannine reads it at night. And one of our rituals is that she'll ask me if I've read a particular article; and if I say "Yes," she'll follow up with, "But did you read the *whole* article?" She does this because she knows how I read the newspaper in the morning: we're usually running around getting children breakfasted and dressed and lunches made.

And the newspaper is generally read in between bites of cereal while all this is going on. I scan the headlines, jump into the articles that seem interesting or important, read enough to get the gist of the information and then move on to the next item. Almost never do I read an entire article.

Most of us have trained ourselves to read in this way. There's just not enough time to keep up on all the news, periodicals, professional journals, and books. And our education system trains us to read this way. We've got to anticipate what the material is about and judge whether or not it will be useful for us. We "acquire" information, just the way that we acquire the other things that populate our lives, and we acquire it for a reason. It's got to do something for us.

Now contrast that way of reading to acquire information with this: imagine getting a letter from a dear friend from whom you have not heard in a while, or a love letter, and how you would read that. You'd put away all the distractions; you might grab a cup of coffee and sit in some quiet space. You'd read it slowly, extracting every nuance from the words. Not only would you read it from beginning to end, but you'd probably re-read it, to make sure you didn't miss anything. That's the kind of reading that we're going to be talking about this morning.

We're in the middle of a series of sermons on prayer during our stewardship campaign this year, and one of these forms of prayer is a kind of meditative reading called *lectio divina*. *Lectio divina* is Latin for Holy or divine reading. And as opposed to the way we read the newspaper, the purpose of *lectio divina* is not information, but *formation*, and even *transformation*. Information is utilitarian – it serves another purpose; formation (and transformation) is an end in itself. In the process of collecting information, we're in control, making things happen. In the process of formation, God's in control.

II. St. Benedict and *Lectio*

Lectio divina is an ancient practice that we see as early as this wonderful passage from Deuteronomy. We looked at the *Shema* a couple of weeks ago, and that passage continues with these wonderful words:

“Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

You can hear in that language the idea in the mind of the writer that the repetition of the Holy words – the process of “keeping them in our hearts” – shapes and forms us into the individuals and the community that God wants us to be. Implicit in this understanding is the idea that the words of Holy Scripture have a unique power to do this shaping, that they are powerful tools for transforming our lives. In Hebrews, Paul tells us that “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12).” *Lectio divina* is a form of prayer that allows the word of God to form and shape us.

The term “*lectio divina*” comes to us from St. Benedict in the 6th century. Benedict’s Rule for the ordering of monastic life called for the monks to spend four hours a day in this type of meditative reading of Holy Scripture. Benedict believed that any passage of Scripture, even what appears to be the dullest and most obscure, has a word for us, a living word seeking to help shape our lives. And our call is to listen to that word and discern where it is seeking to speak to us.

Benedict called this process “rumination.” And I will admit up front that the visual on this analogy is not the most attractive, but it wonderfully captures his sense of what *lectio* is about. Ruminants, as many of you know, are a class of mammals that have four sections to their stomach – cows are an example. After eating they store their food in the first section, where it softens, and then they regurgitate it – sometimes several times -- to continue chewing before moving it on in the digestive process.

In *lectio divina*, after having spent some time with a passage of Scripture, Benedict wants us to continue to let it live in us throughout the day. And just like a cow with its cud, bring it up again and chew on it a little more, until we have squeezed all of the nutrients that it has for us. In *lectio*, we spend some time with a passage, or a verse, or a phrase, or even a word, turning it over and reflecting on it. And because it is *God’s Word* – living and active – it begins to shape and change us.

This process of *lectio divina* is not about *studying* Scripture. We love doing that here at Metropolitan. We love learning new things about the history and language, the socio-political context of a passage. And why is that? Because we’re still in control of the process. Amen? That’s not what *lectio divina* is about. *Lectio* is about letting God be in charge of the process. We are not reading to get solutions to problems. We’re not looking for the “right” meaning of a passage, the “real” meaning. There is no such thing. *Lectio* is about hearing the word that God

seeks to speak to us, in this very moment. It's about uncovering layers of meaning that every passage has.

III. The Process of *Lectio*

There is a structure to classic *lectio divina* that I want to run through with you this morning, and I have had the ushers pass out a small card for you laying this out. I have found it enormously helpful, and keep a copy of it pasted on the inside cover of all my Bibles. The structure has four phases that are traditionally known in their Latin forms: *Lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. (If you add "n's" to all those words, you get their basic meaning).

Lectio literally means "reading" (it's the source of our word "lectionary"). But again, this reading is not just plowing through a passage newspaper style. It is a process of reading a passage slowly, meditatively. Reading it like you would read a love letter; in this case, a love letter from God. It is reading with a sense of expectation: expecting a word from God all the way through. "What is God saying to me in this passage right now?"

Reading aloud is sometimes helpful. Let word meanings and associations arise in your mind. If a word or phrase seems significant to you, stay with it, turning it over in your mind. That leads to the next phase:

Meditatio is the process of reflecting on why did that word or phrase raise itself? What is it in your life that you need to hear this word for? It's worth noting here that the sense of the word "meditation" in this context is not the one understood commonly today: a quiet, imageless reflection. That usage is more common in Eastern traditions. In Christian tradition, "meditation" is reflection on the text. It may involve active imagination, if it's a narrative passage: vividly imagining the events of the story; asking, "Do I see myself in any of the characters?" It can involve asking questions: "Why is this passage or word here? What is its significance in the larger context? What does it make me feel?"

Now, please note, this is not about study, but reflection. Study is important, and has its place; but this is not it. Resist the urge to pull out your commentaries or study helps. This isn't about finding the "right meaning" of the passage; but rather, about discerning what God might be saying to *you* through the passage. It's a process of self-understanding. And in the words of Thomas á Kempis, "A humble knowledge of ourselves is a surer way to God than is the search for depth of learning."

The third phase, *Oratio*, simply means "prayer." It is the conversation that flows from our hearts as we read. As we reflect on the passage, what do we want to say to God? Do we feel called to speak words of gratitude, repentance, thanksgiving? Do we have questions? It's always appropriate to ask God what word God wants to speak to you.

The final phase, *contemplatio*, is more similar to the eastern sense of meditation. Once we have read and reflected and prayed, we can release the thoughts and reflections. We can relax into the quiet, silence, emptiness. We can just listen.

IV. Conclusion

In our Gospel reading this morning, after the angels and shepherds leave Mary and all of the craziness has quieted down, Luke tells us that she “pondered these things in her heart.” *Lectio divina* is an ancient way of learning to ponder the word of God, and in pondering it, to let the word shape and mold us. The purpose of *lectio* is to grow more and more into the mind and heart of Christ.

So let me encourage you this week to take half an hour in a quiet place and explore this wonderful discipline. It may not be immediately transformative, but live into it; let the Word grow within you and shape you. Over the next few weeks, you might use the passages from the stewardship devotional as the passages that you work with. After that, you may use the lectionary or perhaps the passage for next Sunday’s sermon.

Over time, you will find *lectio divina* an incredibly powerful tool for living into the word of God and inviting that word to live in us and to shape us into the people God would have us be.

Amen