

Weekly Devotions
South Holburn Church
26th January 2021

READINGS

Have you ever heard that if you do something regularly for at least 21 days you have begun to form a habit? Obviously, the longer you do it the more ingrained it becomes in your life. Now that we are over 40 weeks into this pandemic, I wonder what our habits have become? Some of them have perhaps changed a bit with restrictions tightening and loosening over the past few months and certainly in recent weeks as our mobility has been more limited.

I have been wondering what our Sunday morning routines have become now that we do not meet in person for worship. It is easy to slip out of the habit of "meeting together" when no one will know if we tune in or skip a few Sunday mornings. The great part of our worship recording is that you can watch it at any time that suits you! However, for our family we have made a habit of watching it around 10:30 a.m. on Sundays when worship would normally take place.

We have also made a Sunday habit of making a big breakfast together before we worship. That is one habit I might miss when we return to normal! I quite like having a leisurely breakfast with my family before we worship together. As you can imagine, Sunday mornings during normal times are usually not too leisurely around our house! Six people (1 baby and 3 teenagers) preparing to leave our home first thing in the morning and arrive at church early does usually make for a quick breakfast of grabbing whatever one finds in the fridge or cupboard.

'Meeting together' and times of family gathering are important for community and for accountability. Evenings have always been a good time in our house to catch up on our day with one another and to sit around a table together. As Christians, right now sitting around a table with other Christians from other households is not something we can do because of restrictions. But we can create habits that do make space in our lives for one another. Consider this passage from Hebrews, chapter ten:

²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (NRSVA)

The letter of the Hebrews is likely written to Jewish Christ-followers, possibly those staying in Rome. We know that the Christians in Rome did face persecution, and this letter seems to indicate that the audience is going through a time of struggle and stress. In chapter ten they are exhorted to draw near to God, hold fast to their faith, to provoke each other (the Greek word used here for 'provoke' means to provide an 'irritant' that cannot be pushed aside but must be dealt with swiftly) to love and service, and to keep encouraging one another. In the midst of this text there is the admonishment to not give up meeting together because some had apparently already started to do so. 'The Day approaching' phrase might suggest that their thoughts should turn toward the second coming of Jesus as they waited expectantly during this time of persecution.

REFLECTION

This text may seem to have been written in such a different time – indeed it was 2,000 years ago – and in a completely different culture than our own. However, the early Christian church was encouraged to stay together as family and to not give up on those routines that bound them together. Sometimes routines can be boring, and they can hold us back from important and needed changes in our life. However, routines form the very fabric of our lives.

It is important that even though we are prevented from meeting together due to restrictions, we continue to create space in our lives for our brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Why not consider adding some spiritual practices or routines to your life that will keep you connected with God's people at South Holburn? Perhaps pick a friend from church that you phone regularly. You could share prayer requests and encourage one another as the passage in Hebrews reminds us. You might even want to pick a different person each week to add to your phone calls, that way you would stay connected with more than just one person.

You might want to pick a regular time to watch the worship service. I am not sure why, but it helps me to know the time we are going to watch it and to do so with the whole family. If there are parts of the service you have a question about or particularly appreciate, you could send David or me an email or post your comment on the South Holburn Church Facebook page. In this way you would be interacting with the worship as it happens and with others who are watching it as well. Hopefully, you have been able to join us for the Zoom coffee hour with Ferryhill Church while Peter is away. There is one more week of it on Sundays from 1-2 p.m. If we like doing it, maybe we will want to make a habit of it!

There are many spiritual practices that can become good habits in our lives during this challenging time. Prayer is one area that might help us to feel less alone and to grow deeper in our faith and walk with the Lord. Prayer habits can be developed through the daily examen that was taught by St. Ignatius.

This is a version of the five-step Daily Examen that St. Ignatius practiced.

Become aware of God's presence.

Review the day with gratitude.

Pay attention to your emotions.

Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.

Look toward tomorrow.'

(from www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/)

Examining our lives for ways in which we see God at work and feel the Lord's presence help us to keep moving forward in difficult times. Listening to God can be a challenge as we do not often know how to sit quietly and are minds and lives are usually full to capacity with too many other concerns. During this time of isolation and restrictions, why not consider listening to God in a new way?

These quotes by Dennis Hamm help us to contemplate how we can find God in our everyday lives:

The phrase, 'If today you hear his voice,' implies that the divine voice must somehow be accessible in our daily experience, for we are creatures who live one day at a time. If God wants to communicate with us, it has to happen in the course of a 24-hour day, for we live in no other time. And how do we go about this kind of listening? Long tradition has provided a helpful tool, which we call the "examination of consciousness" today. 'Rummaging for God' is an expression that suggests going through a drawer full of stuff, feeling around, looking for something that you are sure must be in there somewhere. I think that image catches some of the feel of what is classically known in church language as the prayer of 'examen'.

The examen, or examination, of conscience is an ancient practice in the church...the examen was a matter of examining one's life in terms of the Ten Commandments to see how daily behavior stacked up against those divine criteria. St. Ignatius includes it as one of the exercises in his manual *The Spiritual Exercises*.

<http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/rummaging-for-god-praying-backward-through-your-day/> (author, Dennis Hamm)

'Rummaging for God' is something we can all practice as we seek to continue our spiritual journey and grow closer to God. We can share what we learn with one another even if right now we cannot meet in a traditional space together. How much more rich and deep will our 'meeting together' in person be when we bring all that we have learned during this time?!

My hope is that we will keep growing in our faith, encouraging one another, and developing the habits of 'meeting together' over the phone, email, Zoom, or even traditional letter writing (or snail mail as it is sometimes called!). Feel free to reach out to either David or me and share with us all you are learning and how we can pray for you! My email is jpizzuto-pomaco@churchofscotland.org.uk.

PRAYER

Loving God,
We long for light and hope,
We know only you can bring that peace.
Give us strength to stay strong during these difficult times.
Give us persistence as we create new habits in this unprecedented time.
Give us creativity and a desire to hear your voice in our everyday lives.
Help us to not give up "meeting together",
Help us to find ways to continue to connect with Christian community.
Thank you, Lord that you will give us strength to grow closer to you and to one another during this challenging time.
In Jesus' Name, Amen.

