

Say Your Devotions
Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
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I titled this sermon, "say your devotions."

That was a mistake.

Not the word devotion.

That's a good word, and we'll get to what it is and what it means.

No, I mean the word "say."

"Say." "Speak."

I mean, sure, sometimes you should speak them.

Speak your gratitude, your intention, your wonder, your love, your commitment - your devotion to a cause and a power worthy of your devotion, of your heart.

Speak it, say it. Sure. Sometimes.

But as I was thinking and praying and reading and listening,

I realized that "say" is the wrong word.

Let's make it "do" your devotions.

Do - a wider verb.

Sometimes there are no words to use, no words needed, and no words that capture it.

Do your devotions.

It could be a motion, an activity, a walk, a dance, a way of living.

Maybe.

When you look up devotions, you get a bunch of books,

daily devotions.

I asked my friends and colleagues if they had any of those lying around,

you know the ones,

with 365 readings, one for each day,

to help you center yourself.

You read it in the morning, perhaps,

and then you reflect on it through your day.

A daily devotional.

It used to be that this would be a biblical verse, of course,

but nowadays you can get devotions from and for anything.

The workaholics daily devotional.

The teen's daily devotional.

The parent's devotional.

Devotionals that feature this or that poet or author.

It's great, you find one you like, and get to do that for a while.

Then you can mix it up next year.

I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to see what folks have in their various books for Feb. 1st?

Leslie Mills - a member of this church and now studying for the ministry in the Twin Cities -

shared that, for Feb. 1st in her book, there was a daily devotional from Henry David Thoreau.

Here it is, in part:

"After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what -- how -- when -- where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips. I awoke to an unanswered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward! Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask. She has long ago taken her resolution."

Isn't that just lovely?
No questions and no answers.

Just be present in nature.
Maybe even the word "do" is too narrow.
Maybe I don't even want to say, "do your devotions."
Maybe I want to say, "be your devotions."
And maybe I don't want to say, be your devotions, plural.
Maybe I want to say, "be your devotion."
Singular.

Be it.
Be your love, your intention, your commitment.
Embody it.
Wordlessly, without questions or answers.
The way a tree reaches for the sky, the way a river
dances,

the way we ask for help in times of need, and sometimes,
when we are still,
when we can be still,
we feel connected and at peace again.
When we can be still.

The transcendentalists, Henry David Thoreau, and the
rest,
took their clue for the holy from nature,
and I want to take that clue, too - that sense that
devotional time
is awareness time.
To notice, to be still, to reflect.
To see wonder and know ourselves as part of it.

Another one of the daily devotionals shared with me, this
one by a friend from college, was from Rabindranath
Tagore:

"Do we still not know that the appearance of a seed is in
direct contradiction to its true nature? If you submit the
seed to a chemical analysis, you would find in it perhaps
some carbon, proteins, and many other things, but never
the hint of the leaf of a tree."

That's also for Feb. 1st.

Coincidence?

Maybe. Maybe not.

We're almost halfway between the winter solstice and the
spring equinox - that's tomorrow,

which means, yes, my friends, winter is half over already.
Believe it or not. Time flies.

It's ok to think again about seeds and life,
though we remain, obviously, in winter.

A daily devotional, a devotional practice,
is so often about noticing.

About being still and noticing - the world, your life,
nature, the presence of the holy.

The words of our anthem this morning are all about that.
The granddad in the story by Douglas Wood says the
same thing

as the poet whose words are put to music.

That the trees and the wind and the water and the eagle
and all that is

is praying, is sacred,

an invitation to stillness and awareness.

Be still and listen.

*I listen to the forest in cathedrals made of trees, And to
the twilight vespers as the sun falls to its knees. I listen
to the echoes of the ageless canyon walls, And to the
stained-glass worship of the rainbow as it calls: "Be still
and know, be still and know, be still and know that I am
God." I listen to the whisper of the river as it flows And to
the swirling ballet of a thousand flakes of snow. And
when I hear the eagle's wings repeat a soaring prayer,
And when the falling stars cry out, I know that God is
there. "Be still and know, be still and know, be still and*

know that I am God." Each of these a silent choir, a wordless hymn of praise; the language is unspoken yet heard in many ways. A soundless sanctuary where I am free to go, to meet God in the silence, to just be still and know: "Be still and know, be still and know, be still and know that I am God."

This is a transcendentalist approach to the devotional life. And I want to suggest to you, as we begin this month - a month of asking, what does it mean to be a people of devotion? - I want to suggest to you that you practice a daily devotional ritual.

Say it.

Do it.

Be it.

Like Thoreau, don't come asking questions and looking for answers. Just notice the world.

Like Tagore, look past appearances to the heart of things.

How you do it will vary.

There are lots of options.

I want to give you some examples, this morning.

A few vignettes.

Most evenings, before she goes to bed,

Susan lets the dog out.

The back yard is fenced.

They live a bit out of town,
Joan and her,
and one night, years ago now,
she stepped on the porch while she waited for the dog to
come on back.
Needed the fresh air.
Breathed in, deeply.
And happened to glance up at the sky.
The stars were out that night, it was a clear and
moonless night.
And she trembled.
With awe and wonder.
The dog returned, but she just stared.
Eventually, feeling both overwhelming wonder and deep
peace,
she came inside, crawled into bed, and went to sleep.
More soundly than usual.

The next night, she did it again.
And the next.
And the next.

And almost every night in the last four years.
When it's too cold, she looks out the window.
But even at this temperature, she steps out for a minute.
Breathes.
Looks.
Some nights are cloudy, and no stars are seen.
But the wonder is no less, for clouds have their own
power and majesty.

Some nights, not much is felt.

It's ho-hum.

But she does the ritual because she doesn't know which nights those will be,

and which nights will just about swallow her up in a net of stars,

held in the embrace of cosmic love.

No words are spoken and no motions performed.

No creed is implied, and very little belief or even cognition is at stake.

It's just the feeling of, yes, I stand here on this spinning marble,

and am the dust of stars, and those shining lights, those are my kin.

That's enough.

That's more than enough.

In doing her devotion at the end of the day, Susan is in good company.

Many take that time to give thanks, to make requests, to calm their anxious minds.

Be it prayer or meditation or just unnamed silence, the end of the day is a good time to remind oneself of

ones devotion,

of your love and intent and place in the universe.

The beginning of the day works too.

The beginning of the day is a good time to set your intention for the day.

Arise and greet the day,

open your eyes to see that life abounds.

Here's another example of a morning devotion,
a way of being, doing, noticing, listening, coming into
love and joy and truth.

This example isn't a mostly-true story from me,
it's a poem, by Anne Sexton. Welcome Morning.

There is joy
in all:
in the hair I brush each morning,
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
that I rub my body with each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook
each morning,
in the outcry from the kettle
that heats my coffee
each morning,
in the spoon and the chair
that cry "hello there, Anne"
each morning,
in the godhead of the table
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
each morning.

All this is God,
right here in my pea-green house
each morning

and I mean,
though often forget,
to give thanks,
to faint down by the kitchen table
in a prayer of rejoicing
as the holy birds at the kitchen window
peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter of the morning,
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
dies young.

This is how it is.
All this is joy, all this is sacred, right here in my pea-
green house,
each morning,
but sometimes we forget.
To give thanks.
To center ourselves.
To be ourselves.
To be our devotion, to align our life with our values.
Sometimes we forget.
So while we think of it,
paint a thank-you on your palm,
for this, this joy.

I'm a fan of the theology, popularized by folks like the radical feminist Mary Daly, as well as process theists, that God should be a verb, not a noun.

A thing that happens, not a being somewhere in the universe.

Likewise, I think that love is a verb, not a noun, a something-that-is-enacted, a thing you do, that it describes actions, not a state of being.

And so it makes sense to me to think as devotionals, as devotion, as verb.

Not a thing you say.

Not a thing you memorize.

As a way of being in the world.

Of noticing.

Of being thankful.

Be your devotion.

Saying it can help with this.

In addition to being halfway through winter,

Feb. 1st is St. Bridget's day,

and a lot of my friends who shared daily devotionals from their various books had ones from her,

or from the Celtic tradition that she came from.

Here's a traditional Celtic devotional that I thought was particularly great for today.

This morning, as I kindle the fire upon my hearth, I pray that the flame of God's love may burn in my heart, and in the hearts of all I meet today.

I pray that no envy and malice, no hatred or fear, may smother the flame.

I pray that indifference and apathy, contempt and pride, may not pour like cold water on the fire.

Instead, may the spark of God's love light the love in my heart, that it may burn brightly through the day.

And may I warm those that are lonely, whose hearts are cold and lifeless, so that all may know the comfort of God's love.

I love the way this isn't just about the one who prays.

May I warm those that are lonely.

May the flame of God's love burn in the hearts of all I meet.

A daily devotional can go through our heart to the hearts of others,

so we do see amazing grace on the faces of one another.

Here's the truth:

There are an infinite number of ways to be devotional. To pray, or not, if you will.

An infinite number of ways to be spiritually grounded and alive.

This is Unitarian Universalism, friends!

This is our core message:

the world we share together is both beautiful and unjust, and there are billions of ways, one for each person, to notice the beauty and serve the cause of love and justice,

a different way for each person, but yet, we learn from other's ways.

So, examples of the devotional life might inspire us - not to follow their method, although sometimes it is good to walk the road already proven to get somewhere, but more that we'll be inspired to find a way that works for us.

I re-learned a simple one yesterday (Erika's motions)

Here's another example:

mine.

I have changed my devotional practice many times over the years.

There was a little while when I'd write in a journal most days.

I tried the sitting still and meditating thing, not so much for me,

though it works great for many people.

I'd stop in the middle of the day and say a little prayer, sometimes.

A walk around the block, noticing the trees and the wind, that's one that I still love.

What I'm doing now is really working for me:

while my tea cools in the morning,

I listen.

Listen to that still small voice within,

to the spirit of life; wait, listen.

For a word for the day.
And it usually comes right away.

Compassion.

Honesty.

Forgive.

Learn.

Reach.

Take it easy.

Be loving.

Chill.

Push it further.

These are the kinds of words that come to me in these moments,

and I try to guide my day with these instructions.

It's been really good - simple, but powerful, and the word is often exactly what I need to do that day.

To have some daily spiritual practice,
even a short and simple and wordless one,
this is so helpful in centering your being.

In reminding yourself,
amidst the storms of life,
of who you are.

It places your heart in a holy place,
so that you can notice the wonder of the world
and then live the way you want to live.

So I invite you, this month, to try it out.

If you don't already have a daily devotional practice,
try one of these examples.

You don't need to buy a book, but you can.
Or go online and find a collection you like,
from your favorite poet, ancient or modern path,
whatever you like.
Or listen in silence.
Or step outside for a minute and see the stars.
Listen to the trees reach for the sky and the water dance.
Whatever works for you,
try it out.
It won't work every day.
But some days, I promise you, it will be the best few
minutes of your life.
See if you can find a stillness,
and let the stillness carry you through the day,
through the week,
through your life, into what you may be and become.
Let us sing.