

**"Your Ways"**

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 25

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

When she died in 2019, Mary Oliver was America's most beloved contemporary poet. The question she had asked at the end of her poem "The Summer Day" had become a staple of dorm room walls and internet memes—"Tell me, what it is you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

It is a great question. One that can launch us into deep exploration of purpose, meaning, and spirituality.

The core of that poem is about a grasshopper. One that had leapt onto her hand. Mary Oliver examines it carefully, watching its movements, describing its look. Then the grasshopper floats away, prompting the poet to say, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention."

That's actually the key to the poem, and probably key to Mary Oliver's entire corpus—learning to pay attention as an act of prayer, a practice of spirituality. She said as much in her essay collection *Upstream* when she wrote, "Attention is the beginning of devotion."

We see this focus throughout her work. In the poem "Deep Summer" she listens to a mockingbird singing, which leads her into reflections on the sheer joy of being alive.

Or in "Almost a Conversation" where she watches an otter and ends the poem "He wonders, morning after morning, that the river is so cold and fresh and alive, and still I don't jump in."

In "At the River Clarion" grief and loss are her themes, as she sits in a river. The poem begins:

I don't know who God is exactly.  
But I'll tell you this.

I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a water splashed stone  
and all afternoon I listened to the voices of the river talking. . . .

Said the river: I am part of holiness.  
And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered the moss beneath the water.

The petitionary prayer of the psalmist is to learn the ways of God:

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;

teach me your paths.  
 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
 for you are the God of my salvation;  
 for you I wait all day long.

If we are curious to discover the ways of God, the wisest and most astute among us, have long told us to pay attention. That attending to ourselves, other people, and the world around us is the first, easiest, and best way to begin paying attention to God.

This autumn we've been talking about the experience of awe and the various ways it connects to our worship, music, understanding of God, etc. And each Sunday I've given some practical ideas on how to cultivate our sense of awe of wonder in our everyday lives. Key to pretty much all of those practices is learning to be more open and attentive, so that we might be captured by wonder and delight, experiencing the blessings of joy and glory that God desires for us.

Three wonderful events will occur here this afternoon. After worship, Julia will lead a session on the labyrinth down in the Great Hall. Teaching us about this ancient spiritual practice, one that I've treasured since my early adulthood.

Another event is The Singers concert, where you can hear one of the greatest pieces of music Bach ever composed, along with other glorious music. A chance to sit here in this beautiful space and attune yourself to beauty and the sublime.

You can also come to our park, where a naturalist will be leading folks in an exploration of what all lives in that space—the trees, plants, insects, fungi, birds, and other animals that make that place their home. A delightful opportunity in slowing down, opening our eyes and ears, and truly paying attention to what is around us. This is spiritual practice. This is one of the methods by which God teaches us God's ways.

The great Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann proclaimed in his good book *The Spirit of Hope* that spirituality awakens our senses and our vitality. He wrote, "One who seeks God must want to live; one who finds God awakens to the fullness of life. When the divine Spirit takes hold of someone, it opens that person's senses to the miracle of life. We become attentive and alert."

So, today, beyond our time of worship together, come awaken your senses and feel more alive by listening to Bach's *Magnificat* or watching the squirrels play in the trees at the park or quietly and prayerfully walking the labyrinth.

Our spiritual practices are used by God to form us into the people God needs us to be in order to fulfill God's mission on the earth.

There are the obvious spiritual practices—prayer, meditation, bible reading or study, singing, worship.

But the mature spiritual life is one in which we view all of our human activities as ways to connect with God. The Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, “Anything can become a spiritual practice once you are willing to approach it that way.” Gardening, cooking, housekeeping, dancing, knitting, running, caring for the sick, parenting—all of these can be spiritual practices. And the list can go on indefinitely. Once we learn how to practice God’s presence, we can do it through pretty much any activity. I’ve often found weeding my flowerbeds to function this way. How to take a mundane, and mildly obnoxious chore, and turn it into an occasion for reflection, prayer, and opening oneself to God.

Even back as a freshman in college, I worked twice a week washing dishes in the university cafeteria. There were four positions in the dishroom and I always had the first position—when the trays piled with all sorts of food mess would come down the conveyor belt and my job was to rinse them off in the trough I standing in front of. A truly unpleasant activity. But it became routine, and I’d zone out, and use that time to ponder what I was learning in class or compose papers in my head or even use that time to silently pray.

Anything can become a spiritual practice once we learn to view it that way.

By the way, if you are looking for a good introductory and practical text to Christian spiritual practice, Barbara Brown Taylor’s book *An Altar in the World* is a great place to begin.

One of the reasons we can turn anything into a spiritual practice is because Christianity is truly a way of life, not a system of beliefs.

The theologian Kevin Hector, who is a professor at the University of Chicago, wrote a one volume systematic theology entitled *Christianity as a Way of Life* in which he explores the doctrines of the Christian church not through the standard list of topics like soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, etc., but instead through spiritual practices, including friendship, congregational singing, laughter, lament, forgiveness, and wonder.

The practices of the Christian way of life, according to Kevin Hector are “designed to transform one’s way of perceiving and being in the world.” The Christian spiritual practices help us to see and experience the world in new ways. Giving us tools for interpreting and making sense of what happens to us. Providing a sense of identity, of who we are and what our roles are. And guiding us on the path to human flourishing with habits that cultivate our character.

Hector breaks these Christian spiritual practices down into three broad categories. The first are those which reorient us away from the world and its way of doing things and instead toward who God is. In this category he includes congregational singing and worship, cultivating friendships, and trying to imitate God because of our admiration for who God is.

Cultural, economic, and political forces of this world work overtime to shape us to be compliant consumers. Our spiritual practices, then, must work to undo much of what we learn elsewhere in order to then reorient us to the mission of God.

The second broad category are those practices designed to transform our way of being in the world. This is where Hector includes paying attention, wonder, laughter, lament, and the discernment of our vocational calling.

He also includes prayer in this category. Prayer, he writes, is “a practice that transforms our relation to things we care about, . . . insofar as it positions us to experience their goodness and well-being as a gift.” Through prayer, we come to realize that everything we have is a gift from God. From this realization, gratitude is born. And over time, the more we cultivate gratitude in our lives, the more joy we experience. Prayer, Hector believes, can over time make us more joyful people. Prayer leads to the good life.

His final broad category of spiritual practices is those that cultivate within us “an increasingly loving disposition toward others.” These include practices of beneficence, overcoming our biases and treating all with dignity and respect, and forgiving.

The more we cultivate the habits of these spiritual gifts, the more we transform our very selves. We become more like Christ. And we live the life of flourishing that God has always dreamed for us.

Take some time to consider your own spiritual life. Are you cultivating spiritual practice in each of these areas—reorienting away from the world and towards God, transforming our way of being in the world, and cultivating an increasingly loving disposition. What might you do today or this week to grow spiritually in each of these areas?

But there’s one more important aspect that we should understand about spiritual practices—they exist not only for us individually to live the good life, but for the good of God’s creation.

Back in 2022 I took my most recent sabbatical and decided that the theme of my reading that summer would be what the church needs to know and to do in order to be resilient given the dramatic changes in the climate and how that is affecting society. Little did I know that our summer plans to travel to Yellowstone National Park would be brought into question by the catastrophic flooding there, making very real the subject of my theological focus.

One book that I read that summer was by the British theologian Timothy Gorringer entitled *The World Made Otherwise: Sustaining Humanity in a Threatened World*. It is from him that I got this idea that churches in our time must be resilient communities that uphold and sustain our spiritual and humane values. Which has become a regular theme in my preaching and a guiding vision for my pastoral ministry.

Gorringer argues that engaging in the spiritual practices and developing the Christian virtues are essential for the good of our communities and for wider humanity. But he rightly points out that there is nothing radically new in this notion. He views the entire biblical story as “the attempt to form and to sustain a community that lives on the principles of generosity and . . . distributive justice.” The kind of life we hope every person of faith will live is one that understands “all reality as gift” and that our lives should be shaped in response to that gift.

In other words, in response to God’s grace.

Gorringer writes that our aim should be “a balanced, whole, and just life held in common.” Our spiritual practices aren’t only for our own good—but for the good of all creation and the fulfillment of God’s mission. We must cultivate resilient communities of care and belonging to help the whole world in these difficult times.

Which resonates with the psalmist when they pray for God to make known God's ways, to teach us and lead us, so that we might be saved. We are agents of God's salvation for the whole world. That's the high purpose of our wild and precious life.

So, this week, open yourself to the ways of God. Be attentive to how God is present to you and around you and even within you. We want to awaken to the fullness of life by learning the ways of God.