

DAILY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God. The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here. **PREPARING** Spend a few moments in silence. Get comfortable and ground yourself in your body. Slow and deepen your breathing and focus on your breath entering and leaving your body. If any thoughts come up, notice them and then let them go. If you need to make a note of anything so that you can return to it later, then do that. When you're ready, light all your Advent candles and this time include the fifth candle, the white Christ Candle, and spend a few moments meditating on the flames. Next, shift your awareness to the theme of today's meditation. The following questions may help you in your reflections:

- What attitudes to pleasure were you taught growing up?
- How comfortable are you associating God with pleasure—both in terms of God experiencing pleasure and God's Presence and involvement in our pleasure?
- In what ways do you feel that pleasure can be a spiritual experience and an important part of a wholistic spiritual practice?

When you feel ready, you may want to offer this, or some other prayer: Somehow, we have come to believe that pleasure and spirituality are opposites, God; We know that we need pleasure, we go to great lengths to experience joy, laughter, play, and pleasure, but when it comes to being spiritual, we tend to assume that seriousness and sacrifice are all that we are allowed. We forget, God, that pleasure was your idea, that you want us to have abundant, joy-filled lives and that, in the chaos and pain of being human, pleasure is a necessary and holy balm for our souls. Thank you for the gift of pleasure and for your presence within it. Amen. **LISTENING** Insert the listening exercises for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice. **RESPONDING** When you feel ready, spend a few moments responding to your reflections of today. Consider any areas of your life where you struggle to embrace pleasure as Divine and to allow yourself to dive deep into healthy pleasure. Now take a few moments to notice what stood out for you in today's practice. Journal any thoughts that are especially helpful or challenging and consider how you will work with these thoughts through the day. Finally, give yourself some time to do something that you enjoy and to experience pleasure as part of your spiritual practice. **INTEGRATING** As you end your spiritual practice think of one thing you can do today to be more aware of God's Pleasure in your life and to enjoy pleasure more as a Divine gift and a sacred experience. One helpful practice can be to start your day by looking back over the previous day and noticing any moments of pleasure that you enjoyed. Be especially aware of any emotions, thoughts, or physical feelings that came along with your experience of pleasure. Were there any signs of mixed emotions, of guilt or uncertainty around your experience of pleasure? Did any thoughts of questioning, judgement, or disapproval come up or were your thoughts purely positive? Did your body feel any ambivalence or reluctance to let go and dive into the pleasure?

When you've spent time reflecting on your past experience of pleasure, use that awareness to set an intention for the day ahead to be more open to pleasure and to enjoy it more freely when it happens. At the end of the day, you may want to journal the impact that your intention had on your life through the day. Close this time of personal spiritual practice with a short moment of silence or a prayer of thanksgiving and preparation for the rest of your day. LISTENING EXERCISES DAY ONE

Monday

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything new that may have stood out for you today. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke to you. Or you can use the following questions to guide your prayer and meditation

: What influences in your life have led you to believe that pleasure is dangerous or unspiritual? What influences have helped you to embrace pleasure as good and spiritual?

Now turn to

Psalm 16:5-11.

Read through the passage once and then spend a minute or two in silence as you reflect on how it connects with this week's theme.

Then read the passage through a second time, noticing anything new that may stand out in your reading. As you read the Psalmist's words of praise for the gifts of joy and pleasure, what thoughts arise in your mind?

How do you respond emotionally?

What happens in your body?

Take time to meditate on this passage and your response to it. And then reflect on your experiences of joy and pleasure. When have you allowed yourself to be completely lost and immersed in a moment of deep joy, intense pleasure, or raucous play?

When have you struggled to allow yourself to experience these things?

What is the relationship between pleasure and spirituality in your life?

What difference would it make to your life to learn to experience more of God's Presence and Pleasure in your times of joy, pleasure and play?

What can you do today to start learning now?

End this listening part of your practice today by journaling any thoughts or experiences that you want to treasure, keep in mind, or return to later.

Tuesday

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything new that may have stood out for you today. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke to you. Or you can use the following question to guide your prayer and meditation: How or when have you noticed or reflected on Jesus' sense of humour in the Gospels?

Now turn to

Matthew 7:3-5.

Read through the passage once and then spend a minute or two in silence as you reflect on how it connects with this week's theme. Then read the passage through a second time, noticing anything new that may stand out in your reading. As you read Jesus' words about specks and logs in our eyes, what thoughts arise in your mind?

How do you respond emotionally?

What happens in your body?

Take time to meditate on these words from Jesus. Try to avoid getting caught up in the seriousness of not judging and allow yourself to imagine, as graphically as possible, the comedic scene of someone with a log in their eye trying to get a speck of dust out of someone else's. What would it even look like to have a log in your eye?

Why do you think Jesus used this ridiculously exaggerated image to make his point?

What can you learn about God's sense of humour and pleasure from noticing how Jesus used absurdity here?

End this listening part of your practice today by journaling any thoughts or experiences that you want to treasure, keep in mind, or return to later.

Wednesday

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything new that may have stood out for you today. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke to you. Or you can use the following question to guide your prayer and meditation: We often get caught up in the drama, beauty, and glory of the Christmas story. But where do you see humour in the biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus?

Now turn again to

Luke 2:8-20.

Read through this passage once again and then spend a minute or two in silence as you pay special attention to where God's Pleasure is evident in the account and where there is humour, joy, and playfulness. Then read the passage through a second time, noticing anything new that may stand out in your reading. As you read Luke's account of the birth of Jesus again, what thoughts arise in your mind? How do you respond emotionally?

What happens in your body?

In what ways can you recognise Divine Pleasure in the birth of Christ?

What pleasure is experienced by others, like the shepherds, Mary, or the people to whom the shepherds told their story?

What makes this pleasure sacred and how can this help you to recognise sacredness in your own experiences of pleasure, play and joy?

End this listening part of your practice today by journaling any thoughts or experiences that you want to treasure, keep in mind, or return to later.

Thursday

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything new that may have stood out for you today. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke to you. Or you can use the following question to guide your prayer and meditation: What is the relationship, in your life, between your awareness of incarnation and sacredness and your experience of Divine Pleasure?

Now turn to

Psalm 19:1-6.

Read through the passage once and then spend a minute or two in silence as you reflect on how it connects with this week's theme. Then read the passage through a second time, noticing anything new that may stand out in your reading. As you meditate on how the natural world reveals God's glory and participates in God's Pleasure, what thoughts arise in your mind?

How do you respond emotionally?

What happens in your body?

Take time to meditate on these thoughts and your response to them. And then consider how you can be more intentionally aware of God's Pleasure in those moments when you get caught up in wonder, awe, amazement, joy, or laughter.

How can you invite God into your pleasure in ways that don't restrict your enjoyment but increase it and allow you to lose yourself in it more freely?

End this listening part of your practice today by journaling any thoughts or experiences that you want to treasure, keep in mind, or return to later.

Friday

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything new that may have stood out for you today. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke to you. Or you can use the following question to guide your prayer and meditation: In what ways has your religion frowned on or restricted your experiences of joy, pleasure, and play?

Now turn to

Luke 7:31-35.

Read through the passage once and then spend a minute or two in silence as you reflect on how it connects with this week's theme. Then read the passage through a second time, noticing anything new that may stand out in your reading. As you reflect on Jesus' words about his generation and their hypocrisy, what thoughts arise in your mind?

How do you respond emotionally?

What happens in your body?

Take time to meditate on this passage and your response to it. Notice how the people of Jesus' time chose to judge John for living simply and Jesus for enjoying good food and good friends. Notice how their self-righteousness kept them from joy and pleasure while also leading them to act negatively toward the pleasure of others. Have you ever been tempted to judge others for their playfulness and joy?

Have you ever been judged for your pleasure or laughter?

How can you be more intentional about rejecting anything in your religion that frowns on pleasure, play, and joy?

End this listening part of your practice today by journaling any thoughts or experiences that you want to treasure, keep in mind, or return to later.