

Practicing the Presence of Jesus

Week 4 – Wholeness through the Presence of Jesus

Opening reflection on developmental psychology

This week I've been doing some reading in some theories about infant development. It appears that some of the very first crucial skills that infants develop are:

- **attention to human presence** with us (first month)
- **pre-imagination** (technically “cross-modal knowing” which is the ability to imaginatively translate one kind of knowledge into another – e.g. if something feels like this, it should look like this) (second month)
- ability to **rest with an “evoked companion”** – a child’s sense of being securely with another even when the other is absent
- ability to have **shared attention** – join another in paying attention to something
- ability to **emotionally synchronize** with someone (“**affect attunement**”) (nine months)

I was struck by all the ways this resonates with what is part of practicing the presence of Jesus. And this is all before around the age of 15 months when the child’s verbal self begins to develop.

Our psychological wholeness depends to a large extent on how well those very early developmental periods go. I would guess that it is not a huge stretch to suggest that our spiritual health:

- a) may be partly dependent on our psychological health in these areas
- b) may be based on developing the same kinds of skills in relationship to God

If this is true – and if the emphasis on the presence of God with us is as pervasive as I suggested the first week then it backs that up - that would mean some of the most important aspects of spiritual growth might depend on paying attention to God’s presence with us, our ability to rest securely in the experience of that presence regardless of circumstances, and our ability to emotionally attune with God and come to share his perspective.

Instead, we have tended to focus most of our efforts on words: Bible, doctrine, sermons – all things which may be very important for our spiritual development provided we have a solid foundation of resting securely in the presence of God. In other words, our focus on words won't touch the deepest places inside of ourselves. Wholeness in this crucial area is gained by practicing the presence of Jesus: intentionally reminding ourselves and opening ourselves to God’s presence, bringing our true self into that presence, and being changed by encountering Jesus in the context of where we’re at.

Wholeness vs. Fragmented Stories

One way to think of wholeness is to think of being able to tell an integrated and coherent story of ourselves and our lives in the world. It all kind of fits together into one piece. It might have lots of ups and downs. It might have points of tension and contradiction. But we can imagine ourselves being able to include all the pieces as part of one story and feel honestly, emotionally connected to this story.

Interestingly, a research study accidentally verified this way of looking at wholeness. They were studying attachment – the way infants and toddlers enter into a secure way of attaching to their moms (or other primary caregivers) – and they found that the trait that correlated most highly with securely attached children was that their caregivers were able to tell a coherent story of their lives (to a researcher, not necessarily to the children). It didn't matter whether their life story was smooth or rocky; it just mattered that they could make some kind of coherent sense of it and could tell it clearly with appropriate emotion.

When I was writing my dissertation on inner healing prayer, I used this language to talk about memories requiring healing. Often, it seemed, there were memories in people's lives – either single traumatic memories or long term patterns of neglect or pain – that people couldn't fit into the rest of their life story. So they could talk about how God had changed their lives and they could make sense of 90% of their story, but there would be these broken off fragments that didn't make sense. They couldn't see where God was at in that episode, or for those years. Or they felt such shame about themselves during those times that they refused to let that shame affect their larger story – which kind of protects them in one way but at the same time never lets the shame be addressed and healed. The emotions connected with those fragments didn't fit with the emotions of the rest of their story. One way of seeing the purpose of healing prayer was to draw these broken off fragments into the larger story of their life.

Now, I should also say that some of us are still early on in the process of allowing God to help us make sense of our lives with God. So it may feel like our whole lives are just a mess of fragments right now – some with God involved and lots where God is not involved. This is especially likely if you didn't grow up thinking at all of God's presence in your life. This is where everyday practice of the presence of God, and regular interaction in a Christian community, is like an inner healing of the fabric of our lives, slowly allowing a more coherent tapestry to come together.

Obstacles

In the dvd last week we saw Dr. Lehman's focus when working with Doug was on the obstacles that were in the way of Doug being able to see Jesus. Dr Lehman brought his confident faith into the mix, supporting Doug's struggling faith, assuming that Jesus was present with him in spite of years of feeling disconnected and many failures of trying to encounter Jesus more experientially. He helped Doug experience the true emotional place where he was at in relation to God which was that of being simultaneously resentful of his absence and yet pushing away his presence in order to remain safely in control. Doug came to realise his childhood vow of "I'll do it on my own because I can't rely on anyone else." As he risked letting go of this vow and opening himself up to vulnerability, he was able to confidently see Jesus' embracing presence close beside him.

With the help of others and with trusting persistence, we can push through the obstacles that prevent us from being able to connect with Jesus. There are many of these obstacles that might make it difficult to connect with God in the context of the broken-off fragments of our lives: a variety of fears, distortions about God learned through a variety of experiences, resistance to emotions, disobedience, etc. With God's help and with support from others we can break through these barriers once we've identified them as being in the way.

Today we're going to practice trying to connect with the presence of Jesus in the context of some of the split-off fragments of our lives. So this might perhaps be **a memory or a pattern of memories** that we know is somewhat cut-off from our larger story of how we like to see ourselves and God, or a fragment that has **emotions or behaviours of ours that we prefer not to look at**, or simply a fragment like we spoke of a couple of weeks ago when we recognize that there is a **part of life where we tend to feel separate from God's presence**.

Steps for Praying Together (Groups of Two, preferably, or Three)

- 1) As we pray together, invite God to bring to your attention some fragment that is just right to give attention to this morning. Unless God seems to clearly lead you otherwise, choose something preferably significant enough to care about but not so significant that it would be too overwhelming to be a part of a brief exercise like this. Don't take the decision about which fragment to focus on too seriously, but do be decisive. Thinking vaguely of several fragments at once won't help you.
- 2) Each person share very briefly with your partner(s) the fragment that came to mind.
- 3) Choose one person to start. **Briefly tell the story of your fragment. Listeners, help with questions that invite entering the experience (How? and What? – not Why?)** – don't analyze it, but experience it – enter into it together.
- 4) **Tell Jesus how you feel about this experience** (the fragment that is)
- 5) Pray together a simple prayer out loud **asking Jesus to show his presence** and how he is involved in the fragment.
- 6) **Stay briefly in silence** together, allowing yourselves to become aware of Jesus' presence.
- 7) After a maximum of two or three minutes, and beginning with the person being prayed for, **describe whatever you become aware of during this time** (staying 'in prayer' - perhaps eyes shut – if anything still feels ongoing). Try not to say "nothing" – include anything at all that you're aware of such as "I just notice that I am frustrated that nothing is happening" or "Just like I expected – nothing" or "I feel like I can't let myself be open" or "I just started to think about what I'm having for lunch."
- 8) **Then the listener(s) can briefly share anything they became aware of** which they think might be helpful.
- 9) If it feels like you've had some connection with Jesus, then
 - a) spend a moment with any **response** that seems appropriate,
 - b) give **thanks** together,
 - c) **switch** to the other person
- 10) If not, spend some time "trouble-shooting." Simply and directly, ask Jesus to reveal to you **what is in the way** or what is making it difficult to perceive his presence. Then repeat 6, 7, 8, and 9 if possible.
- 11) If the experience still feels stuck or more frustrating than helpful, pledge to be praying about this for the next few days, trusting that God will break through quietly or powerfully, giving you some "glimpse into truth" this week. Journal or dialogue with a friend. If it still feels stuck after a week, prayerfully choose one of these options to follow through:
 - a) ask a friend to come and pray with you about this,
 - b) ask your small group to pray with you,
 - c) stay for prayer after church,
 - d) call me (seriously).

IMPORTANT NOTE: Don't let the steps make you think the process is complicated. Remember the simple heart of the process is this: **bringing together an honest experience of a piece of your life with a "glimpse into truth" or an experience of Jesus' presence.** The steps are just a possible map for the new traveller.

Suggestions to chew on:

- 1) An awareness of God's loving presence in, with and around us is one of the most central and pervasive teachings throughout the Bible and particularly in Jesus' teaching of the kingdom of God.
- 2) Until a deep heart belief that God is present with us at all times becomes our "default" belief (our most normal belief unless something specifically causes it to be otherwise), we need to intentionally and consciously practice God's presence as often as we can.
- 3) For this awareness to sink into our heart, we need to involve our true emotions, imagination, senses and active responses. It is not enough to just think right thoughts.
- 4) Our goal is to attune our lives to God's presence with us – resting securely in his presence, sharing God's perceptions of others and the world, and living in the way His Spirit invites and enables us.
- 5) Living in God's presence requires either obedience or honest struggle with God; anything else creates the experience of distance.
- 6) We are quite unlikely to spontaneously remember to practice Jesus' presence. In order to draw our attention to Jesus, we need to structure into our life:
 - a) associations (like checking in with Jesus' presence every time we go for a walk),
 - b) rituals (like a daily prayer/reading or "examen"), and
 - c) traditions (like thinking of potlucks with friends as a form of communion) into our life that draw our attention to Jesus' presence.
- 7) Becoming very familiar with the Jesus of the gospels helps us more easily and naturally discern Jesus' spiritual presence in and with us.
- 8) When we notice or when God shows us that a piece of our lives is disconnected from God's presence, we (alone or with others):
 - a) enter into this disconnected piece and recall what it feels like
 - b) tell Jesus how we feel
 - c) invite Jesus to be with us and show himself to us
 - d) trust in his presence and persist through any obstacles