**An Introduction to Mindful Christianity**

Mindfulness as the first step into Christian contemplative practice

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**Preface:**

It could have been at the mouth of one of the shallow caves carved by Nature out of the limestone cliffs of Mount Quarantania. There he would have faced the palm oasis of Jericho on the Jordan River, with the Dead Sea shimmering to the southeast. For forty dawns in desert solitude, what awe filled his soul? To what inner and outer realities did he awaken? In silence, searching for himself, whom did he find?

I invite you to join Jesus in the desert right now, and experience mindful Christianity.

Go to a quiet place – a metaphorical desert, if not a physical one - and get into a physical position in which your body will be comfortable but you’ll be unlikely to fall asleep. Sitting with your legs crossed and your tailbone slightly elevated on a little pillow is just one way to achieve this balance. Close your eyes, and in silence, observe whatever arises to take your attention.  The object of your observation can be anything at all.  A thought.  An idea. A sensation: something your body feels, something you hear.  A memory. A scheme for the future. It can be an urge, a sense of needing or wanting to do something.  Just watch the urge.  Let it be.  Watch all that arises and passes, observing with non-judgmental, caring attention.  Be a quiet presence, like a friend who stays close in silence with a loving attitude toward you.  Do this for twenty minutes.

In the silence, sitting in the desert with Jesus, who were you?  The observer, or the personality and body consisting of the experiences that were observed?  In my mindful prayer practice, I reach a point where I identify my true self as this inner Observer, rather than the features of my personality or body or thoughts that are observed.

Meister Eckhart, a mystical German Catholic Christian priest of the 14th century, preached: *“The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love.”1*

Teresa of Avila, the Spanish mystic of the 16th century, advised her fellow nuns: *“mire que le mira” – “see that you are seen”.*

Mindful Christianity begins with this experience of spiritual union with the Divine, seeing that we are seen with the same eye.  The observer within you, when you are deep in mindfulness meditation, is God. This divine seer directs loving attentiveness toward your every sensation, urge, and thought.  God is compassionate awareness of all that manifests within and around you. Christ = God = Love = attention = prayer.

*"Prayer consists of attention."* So wrote the 20th century French philosopher Simone Weil.

**“***Attention is the beginning of devotion,”* said the poet Mary Oliver.

So who am I? I am God experiencing Jim Burklo’s particular, unique life on a particular planet in a particular time.  Who are you? You are God experiencing your particular, unique life on a particular planet in a particular time.  Through mindfulness practice, we can experience God directly and personally.

*“Mindfulness is "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally,"* says Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Just in the past decade, mindfulness practice, defined in a secular way and studied scientifically, has come fully into the cultural mainstream. Its physical and psychological benefits are well-documented. Thirty years ago, the American public image of meditation was that of a dark-skinned yogi with long hair and a beard, wearing a white cotton robe, sitting beatifically in the lotus position. Just ten years ago, the image was of a trim, blonde, white woman sitting beatifically in the lotus position on a pink foam yoga mat. Now the image is of a worker in office attire, sitting on a chair with eyes closed at a desk with a computer.

Mindfulness finally has been liberated from religion. So this is a good time to liberate religion with mindfulness.

Mindfulness is woven into the ancient contemplative practices of the world’s religions. Out of these traditions, secular practitioners have stripped it of religious language and reference, and brought into the secular mainstream. That’s a good thing, because it makes this experience available to the non-religious. And it has also made it something that can be examined and applied empirically for the purposes of physical and emotional healing.

But religion itself needs the healing that mindfulness offers. Part of the reason that mindfulness needed to have a secularized manifestation is that for many people, religion has become more of a curse than a blessing, so anything that smacks of it is suspect. Religion needs reformation so that its rich traditions can be more of service to souls. Mindful Christianity lifts up the secular definition of mindfulness and locates it in the heart of the faith, in the writings and practices of mystics throughout Christian history. It re-focuses Christianity on contemplative practice and compassionate action rather than on belief in arcane and outdated doctrines.

To be mindful is to be aware: observing what is happening right now in the changing flow of experience.  It is to be open: allowing what is happening right now simply to be, and to observe it without judgment. It is to be kind: responding compassionately to whatever arises before one’s attention. Throughout its history, Christianity has been a very special container for this experience, enriching and enhancing it, giving it a context in a wide, deep spiritual tradition.  And now, cultivating this state of mindfulness will lead us to interpret Christian traditions afresh.

To be mindful is to wake up: first to what is, and then to what ought to be. It’s about getting a clear view of the world within and around us. For those of us who are Christians, this leads to a clearer view of our religion as a living spiritual tradition, continually created and shaped by human beings. Our religion is meant to change progressively with the development of science and society, and, alongside other faiths, to contribute to the betterment of humankind. Mindful Christianity does not require the followers of Jesus to leave their brains in their cars in the parking lot when they arrive at church. It does not require the suspension of critical intellectual faculties in order for us to keep the faith. It leads us to see the Bible for what it is: not a book of facts, not a fixed set of prescriptions for behavior, but rather a collection of wisdom and poetry and myth made sacred by the ongoing human quest for intimate encounter with the Ultimate Reality. It reveals Christianity as one of many wonderful languages for describing and encouraging the journey of the soul toward higher consciousness and compassion.

Mindfulness practice is simple. But it’s not easy. It’s easy to think and feel habitually. It’s difficult to stand back in mindful, contemplative prayer and observe those habits. When we see that we are seen, we realize that some habits serve neither ourselves nor others very well. Mindfulness shines a loving, accepting light on the murkiest realms of our inner worlds. This can be unnerving. It can be disturbing to see things we’d rather not notice. But if we keep looking with the eye we share with God, we’ll see not only our problems, but ways to solve them, as well.

**Mindful Christian Contemplation: Five Steps**

*“He said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.’ Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”* (1 Kings 19:11-13, NRSV)

**First step:** Enter Elijah’s cave, metaphorically, and get into a comfortable physical position and for 20 or more minutes, be mindful of your body.  What bodily sensations do you experience in the moment?  What emotions are associated with these sensations? How do these emotions affect your breathing, as well?

Are you experiencing pain? What is the nature of it, the exact location from which it radiates? Remember: suffering equals pain times resistance.  So drop the resistance and observe it carefully. Stay open to it, surround it with loving attention, and gently abandon ideas or opinions about it. Mindful prayer changes the meaning of our pain. It releases us from identifying ourselves with it. It gives us a detachment from it that relieves our suffering.

Something that can help with this practice is "progressive muscle relaxation".  Tighten and then relax your body's muscles, one group of muscles at a time, being mindful of each of the sensations that result.

As part of your practice, try "urge surfing".  When you feel an urge to do to take an action or solve a problem, explore it by paying attention to it.  Let the urge be. Delay acting on it long enough to fully experience it.  Where and how does the urge manifest in the body?  What emotions go with it?  What does this urge feel like?  Ride it out for a while.  See what happens!

**Second step:** For twenty minutes, focus especially on emotions that may arise, and on the ways they manifest in your body and breath.  We have emotions all the time. This discipline involves watching them.  When one arises, observe it with "high-resolution perception".Observe the emotion, and its effects on the body, with openness and warmth.  Let it play out naturally and then let it pass in its own time.

Here’s a mnemonic created by mindfulness teacher Michele McDonald to describe the essentials of the practice -  RAIN:  *Recognize, Accept, Investigate, Non-identify*.  Non-identifying means moving from "I am sad" to "I feel sadness".  How long does it take for you to move from sensing an emotion to observing it in a conscious way, thus recognizing its distinction from your core identity?  For example, you become conscious that you are anxious.  In that moment, can you look back and recall when the emotion of anxiety actually began - and how that anxiety manifested in your body?  In the gap of time between experiencing an emotion and becoming consciously aware of it, suffering and confusion multiply.  One of the fruits of mindfulness practice is shortening this time gap, giving us much more control over the way we respond to our emotions.  *“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,”* said St. Paul (Ephesians 4:26).

**Third step:**  For twenty minutes, in silent mindfulness meditation, turn your attention to someone you love very much, aim love toward that person, and savor and investigate the experience of it.  How does it feel?  Where does the love reside in the body, how does it affect your breathing, how does it express itself emotionally? Then turn your attention to a person you don't know well at all, and direct love toward that person, and investigate the experience.  Then turn it toward the whole human race, the whole planet, and do the same.  Then turn it toward yourself, and do the same.  That's the hard part, for most of us!  We're so much easier on others than we are on ourselves.  But learning the discipline of deep self-compassion also turns open the tap of love for others.

**Fourth step:**  For twenty minutes daily, focus on your thoughts.  What are the colors, textures, tones, and qualities of your thoughts?  Which ones are "sticky" and which ones pass quickly?  What form do they take? Are they voices? Are they images?  What emotions are associated with them?  Where do these emotions reside in your body?

Thoughts spin around problems we are anxious to fix.  This can pose a challenge in mindfulness practice, as we lose our attention to the problem by becoming absorbed in problem-solving, which leads to the experience of getting "stuck".  I cherish an old, wise book:  “How to Solve It” by George Polya.  Polya was a celebrated mathematician who wrote the book to help improve math education.  But it generalizes as a source of wisdom for many situations.  It's a contemplative approach to the study of mathematics.  In his book, he repeated this phrase:  *"Look at the unknown!"* This concentration on the problem itself, rather than on solving it, has the paradoxical effect of opening up a fresh awareness of the peripheral realm around the problem, in which solutions may be found.  When you get stuck in your thoughts, go back to Polya's mantra and *"look at the unknown".* Let yourself be awestruck by it. Enjoy the unknown! Isn’t that the essence of awe itself – being absorbed with appreciative attention by something that is beyond your mind’s ability to grasp? Contemplate the problem itself with loving, patient focus, and gently let the solution emerge in its own time.

Richard of St. Victor understood this practice, as a teacher of monks in the 12th century: *“Thinking always passes from one thing to another by a wandering motion; meditation endeavors perseveringly with regard to some one thing; contemplation diffuses itself to innumerable things under one ray of vision.”* Spiritual practice moves between and among these forms of attention. One-pointed focus yields to a wide peripheral vision, a sense of the wholeness and unity of all.

*“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”* -- Jesus (Mark 4: 30-32)

By compassionately, carefully observing the smallest things, mere mustard seeds of thought or emotion or sensation, we are able to apprehend the bigger pictures of our lives.

At least in the context of mindfulness, wanting equals having.  To pay attention to our desire for progress in mindfulness is to have a taste of that progress.  As the anonymous author of the 14th century “Cloud of Unknowing” wrote: *“The will needs only a brief fraction of a moment to move toward the object of its desire.”*  *“The aptitude for this work is one with the work; they are identical…. You possess it to the extent that you will and desire to possess it, no more and no less.”*

 Savor your desire for this progress, as its own experience in the moment.  Let it be a mustard seed that you can trust to grow, in it own time and on its own terms.  Mindfulness practice trains us to trust that our awareness of a problem or of a need for growth will activate our inner creativity and capacity for change.  We don't need to solve problems or fix things as we practice. We learn to trust that solutions will arise from within, when the time is right.

**Fifth step:** Mindfully attend to all that arises in your daily practice: bodily sensations, the rhythm of your breath, your emotions, your thoughts; directing love toward each of these experiences. Stay open and accepting toward them, releasing them as they pass in their own time and on their own terms. One way to do this briefly in everyday life is called the “STOP” method. S = stop what you are doing for a moment. T = take deep breaths : think “in” when taking in breath, think “out” when exhaling. O = observe: what are you feeling and thinking right now? Who is the one observing? P = proceed with your day, doing it more mindfully. Do this STOP routine three times during your workday, just a few minutes at a time, and take note of the results.

If you lose attention in mindfulness practice, pay attention to that. Everything and anything can be the focus of your attention - even the lack of focus!

As Thomas Merton, the 20th century Trappist Catholic monk, summarized, *“in prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don’t know it and we don’t experience it.”*

**Mindfulness in Christian Spirituality**

Mindful Christianity is knowing ourselves through the One who sees us from within.

Bede Griffiths, a 20th century Catholic monk who lived for decades in an Indian ashram, wrote *“Behind all knowledge is the Knower, which can never appear, never be seen, never become an object…. It is the subject, not the object, of thought, the ‘I’ that thinks, not the ‘I’ that is thought. It is the Ground of consciousness just as it is the Ground of existence… This is the experience of the Self, the Atman, beyond being in so far as being is an object of thought, beyond thought in so far as thought is a reflection, a concept of being. It is pure awareness of being, pure delight in being….”*

Jesus started his career as an itinerant rabbi after forty days of fasting and praying mindfully by himself in the desert.  The gospels describe this retreat as his time of temptation by the devil (Matthew chapter 4, Luke chapter 4).

Today we think of the devil as an anti-god who fights against God.  But Jews of antiquity saw the devil as someone more like an annoying “inspector general”.  In the book of Job, “*ha-satan*”, Hebrew for “the accuser”, is the member of God’s court whose role is to ask tough questions.  In the story of Jesus’ desert sojourn, the devil was this personification of the process of critical self-examination.  The gospel story portrays the devil as tempting Jesus to think of himself as a sort of Superman who could turn stones into bread or leap off the top of the temple in a single bound and land safely on the ground.  In effect, the devil asked Jesus *“Who are you, really?”*And Jesus, in effect, answered *“I am not Superman!”*

This sacred myth from the Bible dramatizes my own experience in mindful meditation, which for me is the same thing as prayer. When I’m lovingly observing my thoughts, feelings, and urges, then God is at my center rather than the thoughts, feelings, and urges that I so often allow to define me.

I speculate that the Loving Observer within Jesus spent forty days attentively examining his own inner experience. Jesus drifted away from that attentiveness now and again, as we all do.  In mindfulness practice, I recall situations in my life that I feel the urge to resolve, and I drift into overdrive to find a solution.  Suddenly I’m Superman, cleverly responding to insults on the spot, brilliantly solving problems in ways that never work out so neatly in real life.  It’s not unlike imagining that I can turn stones into bread!  Then the Divine Self once again manifests to me with loving attention, regaining my consciousness of this process. Then the temptation to play Superman evaporates.

Saint Paul described this experience artfully when he wrote: *“…it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”* (Galatians 2:20)  This is the essence of Christian mysticism.  In moments of mindful attention, it is no longer my small-s self at the center of my being, but the awesome capital-S divine Self, the Ultimate Reality of the universe.

In that most mystical of the gospels, John, Jesus keeps repeating the phrase *“I am”,* and keeps asking the question *“Who do you say that I am?”* He answers his own question: *“I am the door” – “I am the way” – “I am the truth” – “I am the light of the world” – “I am the life”.  “Before Abraham was, I am,”* he said, enraging his enemies.  But what did he mean by this?  The phrase *“I am”* refers to God’s answer to Moses from the burning bush.  Moses asked whom it was he had encountered, and God’s answer was *“I am that I am.”*

This sounded like heresy to the religious authorities of Jesus’ day. But the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh put it beautifully:  *“… we must distinguish between the ‘I’ spoken by Jesus and the “I” that people usually think of. The ‘I’ in His statement is life itself, His life, which is the way.  If you do not really look at His life, you cannot see the way.  If you only satisfy yourself with praising a name, even the name of Jesus, it is not practicing the life of Jesus.  We must practice living deeply, loving, and acting with charity if we wish to truly honor Jesus.”* When Jesus said he was the door, he didn’t mean that he had hinges.  Likewise, the “I am” to which he referred was not his small-s self, but rather was the Ground of Being of the universe. It is God, who manifests within us as the loving observer in mindfulness practice.  The historical/mythical personality of Jesus is a metaphorical door that opens into this “I am” experience.

“*See that nothing remains in your conscious mind save a naked intent stretching out toward God. Leave it stripped of every particular idea about God (what he is like in himself or in his works) and keep only the simple awareness that he is as he is….. He is your being and in him, you are what your are….”*  The anonymous author of the 14th century mystical classics, “The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counsel”, understood that whatever else God might be, we know God as Being itself, the Center of our existence.

In the early Christian Gospel of Thomas, Jesus is quoted as saying *“Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me. I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to that one.”*  Jesus’ apostle Thomas was called Didymus, or “the twin”. The canonical gospels of the New Testament do not indicate the identity of Thomas’ twin. But some early Christians understood Thomas to be Jesus’ spiritual twin – a status that anyone can attain. In another early Christian text, the Book of Thomas the Contender, Jesus is quoted as saying *"Now, since it has been said that you are my twin and true companion, examine yourself, and learn who you are, in what way you exist, and how you will come to be. Since you will be called my brother, it is not fitting that you be ignorant of yourself. And I know that you have understood, because you had already understood that I am the knowledge of the truth. So while you accompany me, although you are uncomprehending, you have (in fact) already come to know, and you will be called 'the one who knows himself'. For he who has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge about the depth of the all.”*

Richard of St. Victor, a Parisian monk and mystical theologian of the 12th century, wrote an elaborate allegorical treatise on the “Twelve Patriarchs”, identifying each of the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel as expressions of different spiritual virtues. It was an exposition of the psychology of spiritual experience. Richard identified Joseph as “discernment”, or self-knowledge: *"Let a person first learn to know his own invisible things before he presumes that he is able to grasp at invisible divine things... If you are not able to know yourself, how will you have the boldness to grasp at those things which are above you?"*  *"Whoever thirsts to see his God - let him wipe his mirror..."* *"O man, learn to know; learn to think about yourself and you have ascended to a high heart.  The more you advance daily in the knowledge of yourself, the more you always tend to higher things.  He who arrives at perfect knowledge of himself already takes possession of the summit of the mountain."* *"Do you wish to see Christ transfigured? Ascend this mountain; learn to know yourself."* Richard wrote that Joseph is born before Benjamin, whom he identifies with ecstatic contemplation. To reach the heights of mystical spiritual experience, one first must be thoroughly mindful of one’s thoughts, experiences, sensations, urges, and emotions.

**Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament: A Christian Contemplative Practice**

Yearly, I lead a small group of students to Tucson, Arizona for the week of Spring Break. It is a service-learning trip to explore the work of interfaith activists for border justice in southern Arizona.  One of our stops is at the monastery of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, a beautiful compound north of downtown Tucson.  Our students are amazed at the physical, mental, and spiritual liveliness of these mostly older women, and the level of their engagement with the world despite their semi-cloistered way of life.  Their meditation practice is to stare at the closed doors of a small box containing the wafer of the Eucharist.  An unusual job, is it not, to perpetually adore a piece of bread?  We joined them for their vesper service, which begins and ends with this practice. We stared at the box containing the wafer at the far end of their big, ornate chapel.  I contemplated the box itself, the idea of adoring the wafer, the wafer itself, and the mysterious idea of the Christ, and all of us and everything else, at one with that wafer.  I kept my gaze fixed on it. When vespers was over, I released that focused attention and noticed its "echo".  Focusing attention, and then releasing it, made me suddenly more awake to everything and everybody in the chapel.

It turns out that this is also a form of Buddhist meditation practice: to focus attention narrowly and then release it, in order to widen consciousness.  A few years ago I attended a conference on the use of contemplative and meditative teaching techniques in all kinds of classrooms in higher education. There I heard a talk by Arthur Zajonc, emeritus professor of physics at Amherst College. In the optics course he taught, he had his students look at images of raw data.  He asked them to concentrate on the images, and allowed for plenty of "dead air" time to do so.  Then he turned off the image, and asked them what patterns or connections they had noticed.  This discussion led into his presentation of the theory of physics that accounted for the raw data.  Arthur didn’t tell his students he was using an "attention and release" meditation technique, but that was the basis of his teaching method.  He found it very effective in enabling students to gain a deep and enduring understanding of the subject matter.

On Easter Sunday, preaching at the church where I’m a member – Mt. Hollywood Congregational United Church of Christ in Los Angeles - I propped a loaf of bread on the pulpit and invited my fellow congregants to adore (not perpetually) the blessed sacrament.  We contemplated the mythical Easter narratives in the New Testament, in which the resurrected Jesus offered bread to his disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee, and blessed and broke bread at Emmaus before abruptly disappearing.  I asked us all to stare at the bread for a while, then release our attention and notice whatever "echo" followed that experience.  We caught the bread, and then released it.  At Emmaus, the disciples gave Jesus their full attention, then released it when he suddenly vanished in the instant that he blessed the bread.

Try this practice! Take a cracker or a loaf of bread and set it before you. For ten minutes, gaze at it. Observe everything you can about it – its color, texture, shape. Observe and release any definitions or assumptions you have about it. Let it be what it is, in itself, as opposed to being what you think it is. By paying attention to this bread, you love the bread, which Jesus said was his body. Jesus = Christ = God = bread = love = attention = prayer. By loving the bread, you love the Christ, and you are one with God. By attending to the bread, it is “transubstantiated” into the body of Christ. At the end of ten minutes, release your attention to the bread, and close your eyes. Very often, people report that this focused attention, when released, results in a sense of expanded, open awareness. From it, what thoughts, experiences, emotions, sensations arise? Focus on just one experience that arises, for another ten minutes. Then release your attention on that, and see what arises – and for another ten minutes see what arises next, and focus on that.

You have communed with the bread that is Christ that is God that is love that is attention.

**Contemplation of the Cross: A Christian Contemplative Practice**

*“I am a mirror to you who know me,”* sang Jesus in the early Christian text, The Round Dance of the Cross: *“…this human passion which I am about to suffer is your own.”*

*“In the Round Dance of the Cross, Jesus says that he suffers in order to reveal the nature of human suffering, and to teach the paradox that the Buddha also taught: that those who become aware of their suffering simultaneously find release from it,”*wrote the great scholar of early Christianity, Elaine Pagels. Jesus in the Gospel of John (3:14-15) said: *“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up…”* The people of Israel during their exodus suffered from snakebites, and the cure God offered was for them to gaze at a bronze serpent. The Gospel of John offers a parallel interpretation of the cross on which Jesus was executed. The image of Jesus on the cross mirrors our own suffering. Gazing at it is a mindfulness practice that is a homeopathic cure for the human condition. There is no way *around* the cross to get to the resurrection and redemption on the other side. Only the way *through* it.

Look at a cross, or a picture of the cross. It can be the cross in any form – with or without Jesus’ body on it. Stare at it intently for 10 minutes. Let it be the homeopathic remedy for your human condition of suffering. Face the truth of your pain and your implication in the suffering of other people… releasing any judgment or opinion or dogmatic interpretation you have about it. Face it in its raw reality. Let it be. Then release your attention to the cross, close your eyes, and see what emerges. Again, many people report having a sense of open awareness after a period of intent attention to one thing. What emerges from that open awareness? What experience arises on the other side of the cross? Focus your attention intently on it for another ten minutes. Then release your attention, and see what emerges next for you to attend for another ten minutes.

**Mindful Lectio Divina: A Christian Contemplative Practice**

*“Seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation,”* wrote the 16th c Spanish mystic, John of the Cross. He drew on the work of 12th c Carthusian French monk, Guigo II, who described the spiritual life as climbing a ladder. The steps were *lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplatio* – reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. This “ladder” has defined Catholic Christian spiritual discipline ever since.

An ancient practice, employed today in churches both Catholic and Protestant, is called “*lectio divina*”. It follows Guigo II’s steps. It is about reading passages from the Bible in a way that lets them dwell in the heart. It’s not about parsing some official theological meaning or historical context out of the passage, but instead is about directly experiencing it. The passage is read aloud up to four times, each followed by a time of meditation. Then follows a formal petitionary prayer. This is followed by contemplative prayer, in which the focus is on listening to God. “Contemplatio” is the goal-state of mindful Christian prayer: present awareness of the union of one’s soul with God.

*“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”* -- Jesus (Mark 4: 30-32)

**Lectio:** Read this scripture passage aloud, slowly. Release any interpretation or opinion you may have about this passage, as you read it. You can accompany this “lectio” with “tactio divina”: hold a mustard seed between your fingers as you do this practice. Or accompany it with “visio divina” – just look at the mustard seed in “lectio” and “meditatio”.

**Meditatio:** Let the passage “sink in” for two minutes. Plant the mustard seed in your soul and wait for it to grow. Sit with the passage, focus on it. Hold it lightly – don’t force any attempt to interpret it. Let go of any pre-conceived interpretation of it. *“Thinking always passes from one thing to another by a wandering motion; meditation endeavors perseveringly with regard to some one thing; contemplation diffuses itself to innumerable things under one ray of vision,”* wroteRichard of St. Victor, a Parisian monk, in the 12th century. “Meditatio” is this step of focus that precedes “contemplatio”.

**(You can repeat “lectio” and “meditatio” three more times if you choose.)**

**Oratio:** Pray aloud: “May I receive from the scripture what my soul needs for today.” Or recite the ancient Jesus Prayer, used in contemplative Christianity since the earliest days of the church: “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon me.”

**Contemplatio:**  For twenty minutes, pray in the desert with Jesus. Go to a quiet place – a metaphorical desert, if not a physical one – and get into a physical position in which your body will be comfortable but you’ll be unlikely to fall asleep. (The “lotus position”, seated with legs crossed and tailbone slightly elevated on a little pillow, is just one way to achieve this balance.) Close your eyes, and in silence, observe whatever arises to take your attention. The object of your observation can be anything at all. A thought. An idea. A sensation – something your body feels, something you hear. A memory. A scheme for the future. It can be an urge – a desire – a sense of needing or wanting to do something. Just watch the urge. Let it be. Watch all that arises and passes, observing with non-judgmental, caring attention. Be a quiet presence, like a friend who stays close in silence with a loving attitude toward you. Watch, until you recognize the Watcher at the center of your being, instead of your ego or personality. Know, until you know the Knower. See, until, as St Teresa of Avila said, you “see that you are seen” in union with divine Love.