

“Searching Everything”

Moving Inward through the *Prayer of Examen*

Part 1 of the Sermon in the Series *Perspectives on Prayer*

1 Samuel 7:3-12; 1 Corinthians 2:1-13

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There once lived a man named Inigo, a name quite befitting his personality, for it means “ardent.” He was born in Northern Spain in the long ago year of 1491, the youngest of thirteen children. Given this ranking in the family, we can imagine that as a child and as a teen he indeed needed to be ardent – that is, to be very passionate – about standing up for himself and expressing his needs. At the age of sixteen, this fiery fellow was sent to work as a page to the Treasurer of the Kingdom of Bastille. This put him in the company of some powerful people with powerful, and not exactly prayerful, lifestyles. He consequently developed a gambling addiction, quite a fancy for the ladies, a penchant for wearing military garb and a tendency to engage in swordplay.

He was forced to exam his lifestyle, however, when, at the age of thirty, he found himself (along with his fellow Spaniards) in an overwhelmingly losing battle against the French in the town of Pamplona. He fought adamantly to defend the honor of Spain. When others decried the need to surrender, he, being the ever ardent one, refused to quit, refused to stop having a *bullish* outlook on the Spaniards run in *Pamplona*. Until, that is, a cannonball clobbered his legs. His body and his bravado broken, Inigo was advised to prepare for his death.

Why is it that it so often takes a near-death experience for us to really reflect deeply on our lives? Why do we have to wait until *that* moment before we realize what we’ve taken for granted, to assess our regrets, and to try and make last minute amends? And for some of us, why does it take until then to turn to God?

Well, it turns out this sparkplug of a personality survived death. Probably wasn’t too much of a surprise for those who knew Inigo. But for someone who lived life full tilt, the recuperation period was a complete bore. So much so, he had apparently asked for some romance novels to read! But in the castle where he was couped up, there were none to be found. This left him with his daydreams about fame and glory and, tradition has it, about a certain noble lady of the court.

Available for him to read, however, were books about the life of Christ and of various revered saints of the Christian faith. There was much in the adventures and

ardent personalities he found in these writings that he related strongly to. And so began a critical reevaluation of his life and a spiritual conversion, which guided him through an eventual healing of his body and of his impulsive desires for conquests, both military and romantic alike.

The high point of this conversion happened when he left his knife and sword on an altar, gave away his finest clothes to the poor, and set out on a long pilgrimage which began with a ten month stay in a cave near the banks of a river in Barcelona. It was there that he began to hone a particular perspective on prayer – born from his ardent life and equally ardent faith in the Lord -- that he later described as having the purpose of, in his own words, “conquering oneself and regulating one’s life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment.” In other words, the purpose of prayer is to help the person praying to have “a greater degree of freedom from his or her own likes, dislikes, comforts, wants, needs, drives, appetites and passions” that they may instead make choices “based solely on what they discern God's will is for them.” (quoted from Wikipedia). Inigo, or St. Ignatius of Loyola, as he is better known in Christian history, built up a community known as the Jesuits. Practicing this intense, introspective, very personal form of prayer was the staple of their devotional life. It is known as the Prayer of Examen because “examen” comes from the Latin word meaning the weight indicator on a balance scale, “hence conveying the idea of an accurate assessment of the true situation.” (Foster, Prayer, p.27) I suppose we could alternately call this the Prayer of Weighing What’s True.

Like the Apostle Paul, Ignatius and the Jesuits passionately strived to know Christ in all and through all, and to rely on the grace of the Holy Spirit to help them search the depths of God within and beyond themselves. And, like Samuel, they were committed to keeping track of their personal “Ebenezer’s” – that is, they sought to take great account of all of the Lord’s help. This Ignatian spirituality, this Prayer of Examen, this way of encountering Jesus in everyday experiences of life, has been a traditionally well-respected spiritual practice for Christians all over the world.

Despite its historical popularity, however, this prayer practice has greatly fallen into disuse by many modern Christians. This strikes Richard Foster, upon whose book this new sermon series is grounded, as ironically odd. He writes, “How very strange that the Prayer of Examen has been lost to us who live in an age of obsessive introspection. It is actually possible for people to go to church services week in and week out for years without having a single experience of spiritual examen. What a tragedy! What a loss!” He’s got a great point. Just consider how big the self-help

section is of any major bookstore compared to the shelf or two labeled “Christianity.”

Foster then holds this lament in the light of biblical heroes such as King David and the apostle Paul. “These folk of faith knew the examen of God, and they experienced it not as a dreadful thing but as something of immeasurable strength and empowerment.” (p. 27 of Prayer)

There are two basic aspects to this daily prayer, “like two sides of a door” says Foster. One side of the door has a big sign on it that reads, “Examine Your Consciousness!” This is a reminder to prayerfully reflect on how God has been present to you throughout the day, and how you have responded to God’s loving presence. This is the means, writes Foster, “God uses to make us aware of our surroundings.” (p.29)

On the other side of the door is another big sign, this one reading “Examine Your Conscience!” This is actually an invitation, an invitation to prayerfully uncover those areas in our lives that need “cleansing, purifying, and healing.” Foster calls this aspect of the prayer the “scrutiny of love,” and assures us that God is with us in this search and so we need not be defensive. We just need to listen. (p.29)

Some folks practice the Prayer of Examen by keeping a journal. It’s certainly a good, practical way to pray. Just jot down your responses to both side of the door for each day. If journaling isn’t comfortable, I’ve found that this prayer can fit nicely into any part of the day. You can examine your God-consciousness and your conscience while on a treadmill, while having an evening glass of wine, while grocery shopping, or even just while trying to get yourself to sleep. For myself, however, I’ve found the Prayer of Examen most often appears in the form of a song. And I write quite a few, though it’s not a daily practice. For example, the lyrics to a song titled “Today” read as follows – “Today I have more empathy than apathy. Today I’m hungry but not in my glutton’s gut. Today my eyes are clear and not cloudy. Today my heart is pounding but with joy.” I then sing in the chorus, saying, “God how can I really thank you, for the gift of today?” When I wrote these lyrics, I was examining my conscience and finding myself confessing that I have days when I feel apathetic about life and faith, that I have moments of acting like a real glutton, that my views and values can be clouded over, and that there are moment when my heart races with panic and despair. But then I examined my consciousness of God. That’s when I realized that every day is a holy gift. And when it is viewed this way, everything amounts to having gratitude for God’s loving presence in my life. And so I professed having empathy for others, hunger for righteousness, clarity of vision and an exuberant, heart pounding joy.

What I really love about this perspective on prayer is that it’s very practical.

There is not getting caught up in having the “right” words to say. It’s very honest, raw even. And because the only way for this sort of self-examination to take place is through the help of the Holy Spirit, it is wonderfully faith affirming and reassuring. And that someone the likes of Inigo – someone who was anything but a cookie-cutter kind of Christian – is the figurehead for it gives the Prayer of Examen tremendous authenticity.

In the coming weeks, we’ll be considering other forms of prayer as well. There will be prayer practices that, like this one, help us focus inward. There will also be prayer practices that help us focus upward. And, of course, prayer practices that help us focus outward toward the world. I hope you’ll consider downloading these sermons from our website and giving the prayer practices a try. I believe it’s very important to find what works best for you so that you can have a daily time of sincere devotion and centering on God. It will also help you appreciate the different ways our biblical ancestors prayed.

One final word on the Prayer of Examen. It is, again from Richard Foster, and it is a prayer he wrote that reads as follows –

“Precious Savior, why do I fear your scrutiny? Yours is an examen of love. Still, I am afraid ... afraid of what might surface. Even so, I invite you to search me to the depths so that I may know myself – and you – in fuller measure.” Amen.