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Transformed by . . . Presence

Intro: Today is the last Sunday in a four Sunday series that has focused on the Christian Values that were the focus of our Officer's Retreat in September. Your Elders and Deacons all gathered over the space of a weekend to think and to pray about how our congregation needs to change in order to better serve God's purpose in this community and in the world. And we tried to imagine how we might be transformed into even more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ by working on how we could embody/live out four values: Joy, Generosity, Reconciliation and Presence. And today we come to "Presence." The invitation of this series is to ask each of us to spend time thinking about how we can be more and more like Christ – specifically as it relates to these four values. What does God want from us? To grow in our ability to be full of joy, to live with a generous spirit, to be reconciled with God and others, and to be able to be present to God and others. I challenge us all to think and talk and pray about how to grow in these virtues. Every one of us is invited to change. And today's focus is on the Christian Value of Presence. To get us thinking, I would like to read two Scripture passages.

Psalm 123:1-3

Luke 10:38-42

Mindfulness is quite a buzz word these days. I see and hear it everywhere. And as far as I can tell what the current culture means by "mindfulness" is exactly what I mean by presence. To practice presence, we bring ourselves – our whole selves – to attend to whatever is happening. We stop thinking about other things, tasks, people and we engage or attend to what is going on in front of us. To be present meant that we choose to place our focus only on what is going on in the present moment. And, I think that the opposite of presence is multi-tasking – or dividing our attention and so not being present at any one place. We are learning that the effectiveness of multi-tasking is actually a myth. Efficiency experts now say that while we may claim to be able to be present to – or focus on – several tasks at once, when we do that our efficiency goes way down. To try to be present to several tasks at once means that we are not very good at any of them. And yet we continue to try.

There are at least two different types of presence. The first I would call psychological presence. To be psychologically present means that we recognize the limits of our own mind and energy and make decisions about which events, people and issues on which we will spend our attention, time and energy and the things on which we will not spend our attention. So, it is

important to evaluate on what we have chosen to spend our attention. For example, all those times when I was physically in the room with my children, but on the phone or working on something else, I was not present to my children. We need to be honest with ourselves and decide if we are happy with our decisions about which things get our presence or attention. So, when we sit at a meal with family or friends, but decide also to take a phone call or check our email, we need to evaluate honestly our use of our own attention and presence.

During the Officers' Retreat, one group of younger dads took on the task of trying to design a practice that would allow our congregation to practice "Presence." And they had a GREAT IDEA. They suggested that the church set up a "Technology Free Day" that would make a plan for a fun day for families to share. They suggested that participants intentionally leave their phones and tablets home for the day and do things that the groups thought would be fun. They suggested maybe an outing to the River Walk or to the Zoo, with time to eat and time to rest and an emphasis on having fun together. Then, after a day of practicing being present with each other, I think that they talked about having time to debrief what the practice of presence was like and how individuals might like to adjust their own daily practices in order to be able to become better at being present to each other.

I think that practicing presence with each other – deciding to focus on the people/events/issues that are really important to us – is a great and practical place to begin. To do this, we need to do a couple of things:

1. We need to be clear about our priorities – what really matters to us?
2. We need to be willing to put our own needs, egos and opinions aside so that we can focus on the other.
3. We must make an intentional choice NOT to be present to other priorities, people or needs.

Essentially that is what Mary does in Luke's story. When Jesus and his disciples come to Martha and Mary's home, Mary decided that the most important thing that was going on at the moment was to listen to what Jesus was saying. It was important to eat. It was important to offer hospitality. It was important to make sure that the guest towels were hung and the house smelled of freshly baked bread, but it was MORE IMPORTANT to listen to Jesus. And that is where she chose to spend her attention. Mary was present. Martha was multi-tasking. And Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

And that leads us to the practice of presence that I would call Christian Presence. Christian Presence is the decision to spend our attention and time on God and God's Kingdom. It is absolutely clear that we need help practicing being Present to each other. I don't want us to underestimate the value and urgency of practicing being present for our families and loved ones. But I do think that this psychological presence is a warm up for a much tougher practice – the practice of being present to God.

Imagine, if you will, that you get an invitation to spend a day with a friend from long ago. This friend was one of your best and most intimate friends as you were growing up. But time and distance got in the way over the years, and so when you got a call saying that your friend would be in town for the day and wanted to spend some time together, you were excited and grateful that they would make time to spend with you.

So, imagine that you greet your friend with excitement and anticipation. It feels like quite a reunion and you begin to remember all of the shared history and retell your shared experiences. But as the day goes on, you realize that you are doing all of the listening and that your friend has not stopped talking about him/herself since that initial reunion. You haven't even needed to ask questions. So, far, a few hours into this highly anticipated reunion, it has been all about him/her.

As the egotistical barrage continues, we begin to wonder if there really is any relationship left. Clearly, if there is such a thing as a relationship it must become mutual and not our former friend talking and us only listening. It becomes clear that while we are present for our friend, our friend is not present to us.

I'd like to invite us to consider if this example resembles in any way the way we are present to God.

When we come to worship, is there any sense in which we stop and attend to God? Or, instead, do we spend the hour talking to God about what we need, how we are, and what we are feeling? Are we multi-tasking while we wait for God to speak? Is there in our lives any silence in which we attempt to silence our own egos and practice sitting quietly waiting for God to speak?

Could it be that God feels like the used friend when what we call our relationship with God consists entirely of us talking about ourselves? Could it be that until our ego steps out of center stage, we cannot really say that we are in a relationship with God?

What Scripture tells us is that God – in the human form of Jesus of Nazareth – came to earth to be PRESENT with us. God gave up everything in order to be present in human history: to be hungry, to be frustrated, to suffer as we suffer, because of God's love for us. God chooses to be present to us out of love. And God invites us to be present to God's own self by choosing to develop a relationship with God through the person of Jesus Christ.

That is the difficult, but life-changing practice of Christian Presence. And I'd like to tell you some of my convictions and invite you to consider if they might be true for you.

1. If what we call prayer is all about talking, and never about learning to sit quietly and listen, then what relationship we have with God is certainly a one-sided one that is all about us and has little space to listen for what God wants us to know.

2. If there is no silence or quiet in our lives, then we cannot claim to be choosing to be present to God. Probably if there is not silence in our lives or hearts, then our egos, our needs and our wants are what we know the most about, and there is little opportunity to say that we know God.
3. If our Christian Life is all about what we need, what we want and how we feel, then how can we ever really claim to be following Jesus?

I love the imagery of Psalm 123. In it those who love God are described as servants whose job it is to be so attentive to the needs of the Lord, that they watch God's hands to anticipate what God might need. Do you remember your first true love? Do you remember how – in the grip of that love – all else seemed to be of secondary importance? Do you remember how we could be in a room full of people but still be acutely aware of the presence and movements and moods of the beloved. Before they could say it, we knew if he/she was cold or needed something to eat or drink. We were present for our beloved, just as the Psalm describes those who love the Lord our God.

I have A LOT more to say about the practice and value of Christian Presence. I have more to say than you have presence to spend or energy to hear. But, if you hear nothing else, I want you to consider this:

- God loves us so much that God came to earth in human form so that God would know what we needed, what our lives were like, how it felt to suffer. God came so that we might know that God loves us.
- We – every single one of us – are invited to respond to that invitation of love. You and I are invited into a loving relationship with God – to be present to God – denying all other priorities and needs a priority in our hearts, lives and calendars. As God is present for us, we are invited to be present to God.
- To know God there must be some silence and quiet in our lives and even in our hearts. It is not an easy practice, but unless we learn how to be silently and attentively present to God, I am convinced, that little else will change.
- In other words, without deciding to be present to God we have little chance of knowing true joy, real generosity, or any kind of reconciliation.

The question is – Will we be present? God invites us to visit. I invite us to consider what needs to happen in our lives and hearts that will allow us to be present to God.