

“Contemplation in the Midst of Chaos”

sermon by Sister Joan Chittister

Today's reflection on “contemplation in the midst of chaos” is about your life - the one you fear is not spiritual enough because of its complexities and concerns. Spirituality, we have come to believe, is the province of those who managed to escape from the pressures of life. But if withdrawal is of the essence of the spiritual life, then whole generations of spiritual sages have been wronged. The truly spiritual person, tradition teaches us, knows that spirituality is concerned with how to live a full life, not an empty one.

The fact is that all we have in life is life. Things - the cars, the houses, the education, the jobs, the money - come and go. They turn to dust between our fingers eventually. They change and disappear. No, things do not make life. The gift of life, the secret of it, is that life must be developed from the inside out, from what we bring to it from within ourselves, not from what we collect or consume as we go through it. Not even from what we experience in the course of it.

It's not circumstances that make or destroy a life. Anyone who has survived the death of a lover, the loss of a position, the end of a dream, the enmity of a friend, knows that. It's the way we live each of the circumstances of life, the humdrum as well as the extraordinary, the daily as well as the defining moments, that determines the quality of our lives. Yet each of us has the latitude to live life either well or poorly. Ironically enough, it's a matter of decision and the decision is ours.

Time presses upon us and tells us we're too busy to be contemplative, but our souls know better. Souls die from lack of reflection. Responsibilities dog us, tell us we're too involved with the real world to be concerned about the spiritual questions. But it's always the spiritual questions that make the difference in the way we go about our public responsibilities – marriage, business, children, professions - have all been defined in ways that keep contemplation out, but no one needs contemplation more than the harried mother, the irritable father, the ambitious executive, the striving professional, the poor woman, the sick man. Then, in those situations, we need reflection, understanding, meaning, peace of soul, more than ever.

Religion is about rituals and morals and systems - all of them good, but all of them incomplete. Spirituality is about coming to consciousness of the sacred in the secular. It's in that consciousness that perspective comes, that peace comes. It's in that consciousness that a person comes to wholeness. Life is not an exercise to be endured, it's a mystery to be unfolded. Life comes from the living of it, from the attitudes we bring to it, and the understanding we take away from each of the moments that touch our own. The truth is that life is the only commodity each of us actually owns. It's the only thing in the universe over which we have any real control whatsoever, slim as that may be.

It's a busy world; it's a frightfully busy world; it's the kind of world that consumes us, drains our souls, dries out our hearts, damps our spirits, and makes living more a series of duties than a kind of joyful mystery. We find ourselves spending life too tired to garden, too distracted to read, too busy to talk, too plagued by people and deadlines to organize our lives, to reflect on our futures, to appreciate our present. We simply go on day after day after day. Where is what it means to be human in all of that? Where is God in all of that? How shall we ever get the most out of life if life itself is our greatest obstacle to it? What does it mean to be spiritual, to be contemplative in the midst of the private chaos that clutters our paltry little lives?

The illuminated life is a summons. It means that we must quit looking for spiritual techniques and psychological quick fixes to give substance to our lives. It means that we must remember again the

spiritual direction that has stood the test of time. It asks us to go inside ourselves to clear out the debris of the heart rather than to concentrate on trying to control the environment and situations around us. Spiritual reflection, contemplation, leads us to see into the present with the eye of the soul so that we can see into the glimpse of heaven that each life carries within itself on earth. It takes us back inside ourselves and leads us back out of ourselves at the same time. Abba Sisoës, a desert monastic, said, "Seek God and not where God lives." We live and breathe grow and develop in the womb of God and yet we are forever seeking God elsewhere in defined places, in special ways, on mountaintops and in caves, on specific days and with special ceremonies, but the life that is full of light knows that God is not over there. God is here and for the taking. The only question is how. And the answer is an ancient one too.

Abba Poeman said, "The nature of water is yielding and that of a stone is hard yet if you hang a bottle filled with water above the stone so that the water drips drop by drop it will wear a hole in the stone in the same way the Word of God is tender and our hearts are hard so when people hear the word of God frequently their hearts are opened to the presence of God." Prayer is the answer. But there's one thing wrong with the traditional definition of prayer. It misrepresents God. Prayer, the old definition read, was "the raising of our hearts and minds to God," as if God were some regal distant judge outside ourselves. But science - with its new perception that matter and spirit are of a piece, sometimes particles, sometimes energy - assures us that God is not out there on a cloud somewhere imperious and suspecting. God is the very energy that animates us. God is the spirit that leads us and drives us on. God is the voice within calling us to life. God is the reality trying to come to fullness within us both individually and together.

It is to that cosmic God, that personal inner and kindling God, that we pray. The contemplative is the seeker who can go down into the self, down the tunnel of emptiness, and find nothing but God in the center of life and call that everything. Most of all, the contemplative is the one who, looking at the world, sees nothing but the presence and activity of God everywhere, in everyone. How can this be possible? Because the contemplative is the one among us in whom prayer, deep reflection on the presence and activity of God in the self and the world, has come little by little to extinguish the illusions of autonomy and the enthronement of the self that make little kingdoms of us all. The contemplative goes beyond the self and all its delusions to the boundlessness of life and the consuming presence of God here and now.

One prayer at a time, the contemplative allows the heart of God to beat in the heart they call their own. But prayer is a long, slow process. First, it indicates to us how far we really are from the mind of God. When the ideas are foreign to us, when the process itself is boring or meaningless, when the quiet sitting in the presence of God in the self is a waste of energy then we have not yet begun to pray. But little by little, one word, one moment of silence at a time, we come to know ourselves and the barriers we're putting between ourselves and the God who is trying to consume us. The contemplative does not pray in order to coax satisfaction out of the universe. God is life, not a vending machine full of trifles to fit the whims of the human race. God is the end of life, the fulfillment of life, the essence of life, the coming of life. The contemplative prays in order to be open to what is, rather than to reshape the world to their own lesser designs. The contemplative does not pray to appease a divine wrath or flatter a divine ego. The contemplative prays in order, eventually, to fall into the presence of God, to learn to live in the presence of God, to absorb the presence of God within. The contemplative prays until wordlessness takes over and the presence is more palpable than the ideas. One prayer at a time, the hard heart melts away, the satiated heart comes newly alive, the mind goes blank with enlightenment. To be a contemplative, prayer is the key to the dialogue and eventually to the silence that is everything. That's the contemplation that comes to see the creativity of God in the midst of chaos. That is life lived to the full.