

Spiritual Practices: Don't Underestimate the Power of a Small Group

It's a new year. In this continuing series on spiritual practices, it's a good time to review and renew the exploration of how we choose to deepen our walk with God, or again, as the writer, Kees Waaijman's defines it, 'a process of reformation which aims to recover the original shape of man, the image of God.' It's a good time to ask again, "In what way that I walk the earth each day, will I practice being reformed into the image of God?"

We've talked about the practices of 'Saying Yes and Saying NO', Giving Away Money and Walking Slowly. As the New Year begins, I want to talk about a practice quite dear to my heart—being part of a spiritual small group.

Ah, I have quite a legacy in this practice, watching my mother go to Ruth Circle without fail at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Manson, Iowa every month for, yes, 60 years. It was her touchstone for support, for sharing faith, for serving. Those circles no longer function as they once did, yet the power of a small group of people, gathered in a circle, with hearts open continues to be transforming. And it requires discipline to show up, to open up and to be changed by the conversation, by the listening and by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In the midst of spiritual crisis nearly twenty years ago, I began to meet with two other women from my church on a weekly basis. Since we didn't know exactly how to start or what to do, we simply stuck with one question. "Where is God working in your life right now?" Each person got to talk without the other two interrupting, giving advice, rescuing, fixing, or setting the other straight. After each person talked, the other two could say what they noticed or perhaps ask a question to clarify what they heard, but overall, it was and has been a practice of deep listening.

Over the years, this small group grew to five, we studied books or participated in some of the wonderful online retreats now offered. But overall we keep to asking the question, "Where is God working in my life RIGHT NOW?"—even when it wasn't apparent at all that God *was* there. Over the years, this question has ground away any doubt that God is always present, always meeting me with what I need, always loving me unconditionally especially in my mess.

Once I was traveling with one of the group members high in the mountains of the Philippines in a beautiful little town called Sagada. We heard morning church bells at a stone Episcopal church across a small valley and I remember the peacefulness of crossing that valley on a small footpath to the church. There was a service in a side chapel that weekday morning, attended by maybe ten other villagers. After the service, we were invited, insisted upon really, to go with them to a little outbuilding for coffee and a big coconut cake. As we were sitting with them, we both became aware of the closeness of the group, the delightful laughter as they shared from their hearts and the welcoming of us into that circle. They called each other 'kasamas'—I may have the spelling wrong, but that is how it sounded. It meant special spiritual friends who go on the journey together.

There is nothing else like it. If you don't believe me, remember Jesus chose 12 disciples not 1200 to be his small group. (In fact, if you form a small group, don't make it more than 12—it just works better that way.)

I know that many of you reading this may already be part of a small group and are nodding your heads at these words. So I pose two challenges: One, for those of you who are part of a small group, sit back and re-evaluate! Have we settled into old comfortable ways so that our small group has become more of a social club? Are we still open to being transformed? Having our comfort zones challenged? Letting the Spirit lead us in new ways? Unafraid to examine old beliefs to see if they still have life?

To those of you who haven't formed the spiritual practice of a small group, look around and see who is right there waiting for an invitation. Joyce Lucas, a former member of Central Lutheran, now in warmer climes, wrote to tell me that she was unexpectedly called four years ago to form and lead a small group at her church called "Soulful Conversations." She wrote, "Sometimes I'm overwhelmed with the unexpected feedback and how our conversations may touch an individual's life. Gives others an opportunity to ask questions in a forum they otherwise don't have. Gives me the opportunity to practice spiritual listening and to ask more questions rather than having all the answers."

And when I asked what it meant to have a small group, she replied, "Initially it was a bold step for me trusting that leading a small group was a calling. Doing so has given me the opportunity to allow the Holy Spirit to work through me to use my gifts in a way that had never before occurred to me. It is a time to share faith stories, learn from one another as well as deepen our biblical knowledge. By being in conversations with others, I've explored ideas and questions that otherwise I wouldn't have."

There is an abundance of support online to form a small group: Five basic guides for success:

Not more than 12.

Try to meet at a regular time and place.

Be sure **everyone** gets a chance to speak.

Don't interrupt, don't give advice, don't rescue.

Be bold.

Be sure God is the focus.

Share food.

Have fun.

It's a new year. Perhaps don't so much resolve, as let yourself be led into a spiritual practice that fits 'how your walk' with God. Peace!

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