

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday March 10 2024

The Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare)

Festal Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

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The Examen of St. Ignatius

from the 2024 Lenten sermon series: "Lord, teach us to pray" - current and former clergy of Saint Thomas explore patterns of prayer.

Where is God? What is God up to?

In my early twenties, when I began formal discernment of a calling to ordained ministry, I was asking those questions a lot, as you might imagine. What is God up to in my life? Where is God in all of this? And it was around that time that I began meeting with a spiritual director. In those meetings, I first encountered St. Ignatius of Loyola - the 16th century founder of the Jesuit Order and author of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The spirituality of St. Ignatius or Ignatian spirituality really resonated with me and continues to form the bedrock of my spiritual life to this day because it is so utterly practical. Grounded in the firm belief that the Creator seeks to communicate himself directly to his creatures, Ignatian spirituality is about seeking traces of God's presence and activity not in privileged mystical experiences or mountaintop transcendence but in our ordinary days, recognizing our mundane lives as sites of God's revelation of himself to us. Our task is to pay attention and notice God's presence and activity and then to generously respond with our prayer and our action. That's what the way of Ignatius is all about. And there's one form of prayer in Ignatian Spirituality that is most precious to me in my own spiritual life. It's called the Examen and the core of it is pretty simple: you review your day with God. At nighttime before bed, first thing in the morning or on a lunch break: you review your day with God.

You start by bringing yourself into God's presence. The practice of the examen, crucially, isn't just a review of the past day, it's a review of the past day **with God**. And so - right off the bat - you ask the Holy Spirit to help reveal to you what is important - the light and the dark. You pray for the grace to pay attention. And once you've done that - brought yourself into God's presence, asked for the help of the Spirit, once you're settled into a more prayerful and attentive space, you turn to gratitude. What in the day that is past are you grateful for? Big stuff and small stuff. Savor those blessings. Re-experience the goodness of those things you're thankful for. Next, you look at your sins, your failings and frailties, your stumblings and fallings down and you ask God's forgiveness and healing and help in amending your life. Then you go through your day from its beginning to the present moment. Asking "an account of your soul" as Ignatius says. What happened in your day? What did you do and what did you experience? How did you feel - what emotions were stirred in you? Did you feel close to God or distant from God? What were the results of your actions and experiences? Father Mark Thibodeaux suggests asking questions like, "Did my actions today give me greater trust in God, in the Church, or in the God-given people of my life—or did they lead to unproductive and paralyzing doubts?" "Have the feelings I've been experiencing lately led me to greater optimism for the future and deeper confidence in God's providence—or have they led to despair and to forgetting that God will take care of me, no matter what?" "Have the things that have preoccupied my thoughts today really led me to greater love of my neighbor—or have those thoughts coaxed me into isolation, secrecy, passivity, or aggressiveness?" Test the spirits, as Ignatius would say. What happened, how did it feel, and where did it lead you...towards God and faith and hope and love or away from God into selfishness and fear?

And finally, once you've reviewed your blessings and gratitude, your sin and need for healing, and the day that is past - you look ahead to the future, the next day, the next week...What is coming up for you? What do you need to do or do differently? And what graces do you need from God? What help do you need? And then you close with the Lord's Prayer or another favorite prayer. The whole thing can take ten to fifteen minutes, in a pinch.

That's the Examen. You can do this at the end of the day or the beginning of a new day or at lunchtime partway through a day...but the important things are A. that you do it often and B. that you do it with the Lord. In conversation. Expressing your gratitude, your regrets, your frustration and your joy. Ignatius suggests that we should relate to God, to Jesus, as "one friend speaks to another." To consider the Examen time with God like time you'd spend with a trusted friend. Reviewing your day, your gratitude, your sins, your need for help.

So how does this help answer those two big questions? Where is God and what is God up to?

When I was a little kid and my mom noticed I wasn't really paying attention to what she was saying to me she would say, "Adam - are you just hearing me or are you really listening." Was I paying attention to her words or just nodding along or pretending to listen? It's like that in our spiritual lives too. We can go to church, hear sermons, read theology or Scripture, even pray and allow it all to go in one ear and out the other or get swept up in life and let faith and God take a back seat. Like little kid me zoning out when mom was trying to tell me what chores needed to be done. She was right there trying to communicate but I wasn't really paying attention. We can do that with faith too. Nod along but not really listen. Or we can pay real attention to what God might be up to in our life and how we are or are not responding.

For me, if I am faithful to the practice of the Examen, day in and day out, I begin to notice a couple of things. First of all: God IS in my life. In those gifts and blessings I'm grateful for, in small glimpses of beauty or goodness in my days, and even in my own acknowledgement of my failings and attempts to do better. Secondly I start to see patterns of how God is relating to me which are unique to me and patterns of how I respond or don't respond. How I am attracted to God's working in my life **and** how I habitually resist it. But like with most prayer, describing it only gets us so far. This sermon will only get you so far. Prayer isn't a spectator sport. You have to get into the arena. You need to *practice* prayer. I've practiced the examen for years and years now and, for me, it really works. I have grown closer to God, better at paying attention to God's activity and my response, more grateful for life's gifts, more aware of my sins and more comfortable relating to Jesus as "one friend speaks to another."

So, where is God? For Ignatius and in the practice of the examen the answer is...everywhere. God is everywhere. Our task is to attempt to find God in all things.

And what is God up to? I can't answer that question for you. Only you can, by paying attention to God's presence in your life. As one way to do that, over time, this afternoon I offer you the Examen - this form of prayer that has made such a profound difference in my life. Try it tonight. Enter the presence of God. Express your gratitude. Confess your sins. Review your day paying attention to moments of significance, times of closeness or distance to God, and your feelings and response. Then look ahead to the future and ask God's help in it. That's the examen. Give it a shot.

God is in your life already - at work right now desiring to draw you nearer. Seek God - there in your life. Pay attention to God's presence. And unlike little kid me: listen.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...Amen.