

Resting In God

On Sunday we continued our sermon series based on Father James Martin's book, *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone*. We focused on his chapter about meditative prayer.

1. Warm-up Question: Meditative prayer reminds us to be more mindful of the mystery of God. What is something you don't know about God – and maybe can't be known about God – that you wish you could?
2. Throughout Christian history, Father Jim says, there have been two very different ways of thinking about God: the *apophatic* approach and the *kataphatic* approach. *Kataphatic* is a Greek word that means positive; it refers to what we can know about God. *Apophatic* means negative; it refers to what we cannot know about God. The *kataphatic* approach emphasizes that we are created in God's image and, therefore, God is in many respects like us, can be known by us, and can be related to us in ways familiar to us (through words, logical analysis, and analogies to things familiar to us).
 - a. Jesus is the ultimate example of how the *kataphatic* approach works. He said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." John 14:9. What are some key things we learned about God through Jesus?
 - b. When we talk to God, most of us use some kind of earthly analogy to help us envision who God is and what God is like. Examples would be God as Father, Shepherd, or Great Physician. These are *kataphatic* images of God. What is one of your favorite images of God?
 - c. Envision a pie chart representing everything that is true about God. What percentage of that pie chart would represent things we can know about God? What percentage would represent things we cannot know? Explain your answer.
3. The same Bible that teaches that we can know God in meaningful ways also reminds us that the fullness of God is ultimately beyond our comprehension, beyond any mental images we might have, and in some sense infinitely unknowable.
 - a. This *apophatic* perspective on God is reflected in passages like Isaiah 55:8, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." What do you think this verse is trying to say to us?
 - b. Scientists tell us that dark matter comprises about 27% of the universe and dark energy comprises another 68% of the universe, leaving only 5% of the universe visible to us. For decades scientists have tried every imaginable means to detect and understand these unseen aspects of reality, but with very little success. Michael Guillen says, "Even with all our advances, science is 95% in the dark about the universe it seeks and claims to understand; about what is real and what is not, what is possible or not." When you hear things like this, how does it make you feel about life and God?

4. Meditative prayer is a way to seek to experience more of the mystery of God – to allow us to enjoy more of the presence of a God who is beyond human understanding. It's a form of prayer inspired by verses like Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God." The goal of meditative prayer is to shut down our active minds, with all our random and distracting thoughts, so we can simply bask in the presence of God. Father Jim recommends the following three-step approach to meditative prayer.

Step One: Quiet yourself with a few deep breaths and open yourself to the presence of God there with you.

Step Two: Select a single meditative prayer word that helps open you to God's presence. (Psalm 46:10 is full of example words.)

Step Three: Whenever an active distractive thought enters your mind, repeat your prayer word as a way of dismissing it and bringing yourself back to awareness of God's presence.

- a. Father Jim says, "[Meditative] prayer is simple in theory. But in practice, it can be difficult for beginners, especially if your life is packed with content. The notion that you could meet God without doing anything may seem bizarre. [Meditative] prayer is not about producing or doing or achieving. It's about being. Or rather being with." Your thoughts about what Father Jim says?
- b. Have you ever practiced meditative prayer? What has your experience been like?
- c. Studies have documented all kinds of benefits from meditative prayer, including slower aging of the brain, reduced activity in the "Me Center" of the brain, strengthening of the part of the brain that regulates emotions, and shrinkage of the part of the brain responsible for fear, stress, and anxiety. Why do you think meditative prayer is so profoundly impactful for our hearts and minds?
- d. Read Luke 10:38-41, as printed on p. 3. What is Jesus trying teach us here? Do you feel you're living more like Mary or Martha?
- e. Jeff said, "We need regular times where we stop! Stop trying to figure everything out. Stop trying to control everything. Stop telling God what to do all the time, and just breathe, just bask in the presence of the One who is infinitely beyond us." Do you feel you're putting too much emphasis on trying to figure everything out and trying to control everything? Is it wrong? How can we find a better balance?
- f. Jeff suggested two additional forms of meditative prayer: gazing at a beautiful picture and immersing ourselves in worship music. Do you engage in either of these forms of prayer? What has your experience with them been like?
- g. Jeff encouraged us to experiment this week with the three-part form of meditative prayer Father Jim suggests. Have you? Will you? What draws you? What repels you?

Luke 10:38-42

38 Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.

⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

⁴¹But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."