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Salina Mennonite Church
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Scripture: Psalm 63:1-8; Matthew 6:19-33

Practicing Faith

Focus Statement: Spiritual practices focus our vision so that the rest of life can come into perspective.¹

Take a moment and list your deepest desires. What is your greatest need right now? What have you been longing for lately? What do you wish would happen? What do you want to experience?

The writer of Psalm 63 expresses a deep longing for God.² What the psalmist desires most of all is enduring communion and fellowship with God. Note the words used – seeking, thirsting, and fainting. Imagine the emotions that go along with words. *You are my God, the One whom I trust. I seek You with every fiber of my being. In this dry and weary land with no water in sight, my soul is dry and longs for You. My body aches for You, for Your presence.*³ The need is imperative. Relief is found only in God’s presence.

In response, the psalmist promises to praise God. God will be the object of the petitioner’s worship for the rest of life. The act of worship builds trust and confidence. The psalmist’s soul is satisfied by God’s protective help. While the hours of night might be regarded as a dangerous time, night is also a suitable time to seek God’s presence in prayer and meditation. Remembering and reciting God’s past divine acts reassures the writer of God’s present love and protection.

The relationship between divine and human involves action from both parties. The worshiper clings to God. God’s right hand, the hand of strength, upholds the worshiper. God’s steadfast love satisfies the soul.

Just as little children need to practice saying hello, please, and thank you in order to build relationships, we need to practice our faith in order to strengthen our relationship with God and with other people. With practice, things that seem difficult become a natural part of who we are. We “practice” our faith with activities like prayer, sharing, and loving our neighbors. As we spend time with God, living like Jesus becomes more and more a natural part of who we are. Spending time with God through spiritual practices affects how we act in the world.

In Matthew, Jesus speaks about our priorities and the perspectives through which we see all of life. Here’s a list of topics Jesus covers in the Sermon on the Mount beginning in chapter five and continuing into chapter six..

- Blessings found in unexpected places
- Being salt of the earth and light of the world
- Anger and reconciliation

¹ This sermon draws from Week 1 Worship Resources written by Alissa Bender, *Leader, Summer 2018*, Vol. 15, No. 4, ©2018 MennoMedia p. 41.

² Sources consulted include Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, p. 150 and James H. Waltner, *Psalms, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2006, pp. 307-308.

³ Psalm 63:1, *The Voice*.

- Adultery and divorce
- Saying what you mean
- Do not retaliate, instead publically expose the unjust authority
- Love your enemies
- Give alms, but don't make a show of it
- Pray, but don't make a show of it
- Fast, but don't make a show of it
- Store up treasures in heaven not on earth
- Make sure your inner light is healthy
- Don't think you can serve two masters: God and wealth
- Don't worry
- Seek first God's Kingdom and you will have what you need the most

I encourage you to read through the entire sermon on your own. Jesus asks us to consider where our focus lies, how we see the world, and what that does to us. When we focus on what is most important to God, we see clearly and we walk confidently.

During the past eight weeks, we've been inundated with information about how to stay healthy. The focus, of course, has been on avoiding illness. But we've also been thinking about economic, mental, and emotional health. And, of course, as a faith community, we're concerned about spiritual health as well.

The Greek word for "healthy" also sometimes means "simple" or "single." This is instructive for us in an overloaded, over-informed, and distracted culture, especially in the midst of a pandemic. If our vision is clouded by the wrong things, how can we see clearly with the eyes of God's vision?

I confess that this week has been particularly hard for me. Even though I had the time, I didn't seem to have the energy to fulfill my pastoral tasks. Perhaps there's a particular spiritual "muscle" that needs attention in my life.

In the weeks to come, we'll consider seven spiritual practices: prayer, gratitude, reaching outward/drawing inward, Scripture study, spiritual companions, fasting, and celebration. This list is not exhaustive. What other spiritual practices help you to draw closer to God?

What is your greatest desire? For what do you long? May God guide us as we build up those practices that draw us into God's presence and strengthen us to seek God's kingdom.