**Presence Project ~ Week 1**

*James 4:8 ~ Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.*

“Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things. Every single creature is full of God and is a book about God.” – Meister Eckhart

*Brother Lawrence was a simple, lay, Carmelite monk in 17th century France who spent most of his time working in the abbey’s kitchen washing dishes. We know his name because he was so tuned-in to the presence of God that even while he was in the midst of his mundane chores he knew he was experiencing the Sacred. It is from this simple monk that we will learn to live Coram Deo – in the Presence of God.*

*Learning…*

“Our lives are fragmented. It is to this condition of fragmentation and alienation that Brother Lawrence speaks when he presents us with the practice of the presence of God. Brother Lawrence had a deep conviction that prayer is not saying prayers but a way of living in which all we do becomes prayer. We indeed are called not just to say prayers but to live a prayerful life.

For Brother Lawrence the practice of the presence of God was not a practice for a few moments a day, not even for a few hours a day. No, for him it was *a practice that permeated every moment of his day*. This simple but difficult way of Brother Lawrence is indeed a great challenge for us today….It is the way to God.” – Henri Nouwen

*Practicing…*

Find a partner to have a discussion with, or if you prefer, try some journal writing as you reflect on these questions…

* This week I sensed Sacred Presence when I…
* This week I savoured God’s Presence when I…
* This week I found it hard to notice the Sacred because I…
* This week when I sensed and savoured God’s Presence it made me feel…
* This week I sensed God’s Presence in an unexpected place…
* I’m finding I tend to “notice” when I’m…

*Surely God is in this place…*

**Presence Project ~ Week 2**

*Psalm 100:2 ~ Worship the Lord with gladness; come into God’s presence with singing.*

“We cannot attain the presence of God because we are already totally in the presence of God. What is absent is awareness.” – Richard Rohr

*Learning…*

Brother Lawrence’s great insight was that he found a way to be in constant prayer and be in the world at the same time. Rather than his prayer life drawing him into seclusion in the cloister it empowered him to love those with whom he shared the journey. Teresa of Avila (the founder of the Discalced Carmelites which was Lawrence’s order) was clear that what counts is love of God, but she was adamant that the only genuine sign that one loves God is love of neighbour.”

We usually assume that neighbour means strangers, showing compassion to the world, but the plain meaning of loving your neighbour is living in right relationship with “others” including the others who you know and love intimately. In other words, your neighbour can be the person sharing your house, or your bed for that matter.

One of the common knocks against spiritualities that give emphasis to the interior life is that they are seen as self-indulgent and celebrate the loving of God to the exclusion of loving one’s neighbour. Brother Lawrence had limited contact with the world. His neighbour love consisted of how he treated his brothers in the monastery, how he joyfully engaged in the menial tasks assigned him for the good of the community, and how he poured his heart into correspondence with others seeking his wisdom regarding practicing God’s presence.

*Practicing…*

Here are some techniques for savouring on-the-go:

* When you notice something that feels sacred, when you have one of those momentary glimpses through a window, when you sense the Presence…

1. close your eyes and take one deep long breath in and out
   * say or think a word such as “grateful” while you’re doing that breath – *OR*
   * make that breath the Yahweh breath prayer (breathe in through your mouth silently saying the syllable “yah”, then breathe out through your mouth silently forming the syllable “vay”

*Surely God is in this place…*

**Presence Project ~ Week 3**

*Psalm 16:11 ~ You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

"Basically prayer is an exercise in divine participation—you opting in and God always there!" – Richard Rohr

*Learning…*

“Great purity of life…[and] great fidelity to the practice of this presence and the fostering of this awareness of God within” are the means Brother Lawrence names for acquiring the presence of God.Digging deeper into his writing we can say that this mindfulness practice is achieved through self-abandonment and self-emptying, and maintained through building a habit of adoring God despite difficulties and failures, and persevering to enjoy God even in suffering by transforming your entire life into one all-encompassing religious practice.

For Lawrence, this was the single most important spiritual concept in the world. He said, “If I were a preacher, I would preach nothing but the practice of the presence of God; and if I were a spiritual director, I would recommend it to everyone, for I believe there is nothing so necessary or so easy.”

*Practicing…*

Little sentences or prayers can help tune us in to being intentional about looking for the Sacred.

* when you walk into a new room;
* when you get into the car;
* when you arrive at a destination;
* when you sit down to start an activity;
  + “Show me, Lord.”
  + “Help me notice.”
  + “Where are you?”
  + “Surprise me!”
  + “May I be present!”

The idea is to declare your intention to notice and you will notice more!

*Surely God is in this place…*

**Presence Project ~ Week 4**

*Genesis 28:16 ~ Surely God is in this place, and I did not know it!*

“Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul...a Divine Center...to which we may continuously return.” – Thomas Kelly

*Learning…*

The practice of becoming present to God is a mindfulness practice that one does not do from time to time but is something that permeates your day. Brother Lawrence uses a variety of terms to describe it including: a simple act, a clear and distinct knowledge of God, an indistinct view, a general and loving awareness of God, attention to God, silent conversation with God, trust in God, simple awareness, and a loving view of God present everywhere.

Mindfulness is supposed to be a natural and easy thing in his view. He nonchalantly advises that “God does not ask a great deal of us: a brief remembrance from time to time, a brief act of adoration, occasionally to ask him for his grace or offer him your sufferings, at other times to thank him for the graces he has given you and is giving you.”

In fact, Lawrence warns us not to try too hard, suggesting that long discourses and wordy prayers are the seeds of distraction rather than being useful.He goes so far as to say such long, wordy prayers “spoil everything; that’s how trouble starts!”Instead we should focus on recognizing God in our midst and engaging in a “continual conversation [with God in which we] praise, adore, and ceaselessly love God for his infinite goodness and perfection.”

*Practicing…*

Upon beginning and ending a task or starting and stopping a meeting say this mantra either alone or responsively.

Upon Beginning

* (Declaration) Surely God is in this place! (Intention) Help me notice!

Upon Ending

* (Affirmation) Surely God is in this place! (Gratitude) I noticed… (pause and reflect)

*Surely God is in this place…*

**Presence Project ~ Week 5**

*Song of Songs 8:13 ~ O you who dwell in the gardens, my companions are listening for your voice; let me hear it.*

“My deepest me is God!” – St. Catherine of Genoa

*Learning…*

After emerging through his ‘dark night’ in his first decade as a Carmelite, Brother Lawrence continued to see himself as sinful and frequently confessed to God and sought to abandon himself into God’s hands.He spoke often of surrender, trust, renunciation, and self-emptying. He taught that “total surrender to God is the sure way”and that “in the beginning we must faithfully act and renounce ourselves, and after that come only unspeakable delights.”He “renounced for the sake of his love everything other than God, and [he] began to live as if only [God] and [he] existed in the world.”And he realized that to achieve this depth of relationship with God that one’s “heart must be empty of all other things because God desires to possess it exclusively.”

In one of his most penetrating insights Lawrence realizes that we become entangled not just in worldly things but also in spiritual things, and that such things interfere with our desire and ability “to arrive at self-abandonment to God to the extent that he willed.”Standing so completely in the light of God’s presence revealed to Lawrence the need to unequivocally renounce those things that do not lead to God, and at the same time it showed him that this constant turning toward God eventually works to “rid us of self-love without our even realizing it.”

*Practicing…*

Ponder Catherine’s quote for a few minutes: *“My deepest me is God!”*

If our deepest me is God, what are the shallow me’s?

And if our deepest me really is God, what does that say about how we might live our lives?

What does it say about what harmony means?

Maybe it just means to not fight against our deepest self…

*Surely God is in this place…* (and what if “this place” is me?)

**Presence Project ~ Week 6**

*Psalm 139:7-10 ~ Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

“…the loving gaze that finds God everywhere.” – Brother Lawrence

*Learning…*

Another theme that emerges in practicing being present to God is the importance of growing this intention into a habit. With his signature simplicity Brother Lawrence teaches that “the habit is formed by the repetition of acts and by frequently bringing the mind back into God’s presence…yet once [the habit] is formed we will find contentment in everything.”

Employing inescapable logic Lawrence argues, “We cannot ask [God] for [help] unless we are with him. We cannot be with him unless we think of him often. We cannot think of him often unless we habitually practice this holy exercise.”Lawrence advises that if we bring ourselves into awareness of God’s presence often enough we will become accustomed to doing so, and we will find that “there is nothing easier than to repeat these little inner adorations frequently throughout the day…while at work, [and] at every possible moment.”

*Practicing…*

Contemplation – an invitation to spending 10 or 15 minutes a day reflecting on God and God’s presence.

Imagine your partner or closest friend.

* Do you need to be with them to be thinking about them, remembering kindnesses, feeling warm about the connection you have?
* Bringing them to mind when you’re not physically with them and smiling about the thought is the heart of mindfulness.
* Then as you hold that mindfulness and bask in it or enjoy its glow you are doing the act of contemplation.

Daily, spend time being mindful of God’s love and presence, and hold that mindfulness gently for a time of restful contemplation.

*Surely God is in this place…*

**Presence Project ~ Week 7**

*Song of Songs 8:13 ~ O you who dwell in the gardens, my companions are listening for your voice; let me hear it.*

“Those who recognize God within their own puny & ordinary souls...will daringly affirm the Divine Presence in other unexpected places.” – Richard Rohr

*Learning…*

Adoration of God, loving God with our whole being, is the greatest commandment. Brother Lawrence encourages us to “make our hearts a spiritual temple where we continually adore [God],”and that we should strive “to be the most perfect adorers of God in this life, as we hope to be throughout all eternity.”

Lawrence identifies “a typical error among the spiritually minded [of] not…withdraw[ing] from what is external from time to time to adore God within themselves and enjoy his divine presence in peace for a few moments.”He stresses that “a brief lifting up of the heart is enough. A brief remembrance of God, an act of inner adoration”even while in the midst of seemingly unspiritual circumstances draws us deeper into God’s presence.

To assist us with this Lawrence suggests what Liz Carmichael calls “arrow prayers” – short sentences declaring our desire, our intention, and our love of God. Lawrence writes, “It would be appropriate for beginners to formulate a few words interiorly, such as: ‘My God, I am completely yours,’ or ‘God of love, I love you with all my heart,’ or ‘Lord, fashion me according to your heart,’ or any other words love spontaneously produces.”When we practice being present to God we are in a position to truly love God.

*Practicing…*

Try to practice some “arrow prayers” this week.

See if you can add a sense of adoration into your sensing and savouring of God’s Presence. Remember to keep practicing savouring on-the-go:

*Surely God is in this place…*

**Presence Project ~ Week 8**

*Psalm 98:7-9 ~ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord.*

“What we’re doing in contemplation is learning...how to be present. We're learning how to access what is—and how to offer ourselves to it.” – Richard Rohr

*Learning…*

At this point the practice of the presence of God appears to be an easy thing to maintain. The truth is it is very difficult to do so. Henri Nouwen remarks that “to achieve the presence of God is no easy task and the path is strewn with numerous pitfalls and constant difficulty.”

Brother Lawrence acknowledges this and candidly speaks of his own difficulties, distractions and failures. About a dry spell he wrote, “It seemed to me that all creatures, reason, and God himself were against me, and that faith alone was on my side.”Lawrence counsels that “the mind is extremely flighty, but the will…must take hold of it and bring it back to God,”and that “we must work faithfully, without turmoil or anxiety, gently and peacefully bringing our minds back to God as often as we find ourselves distracted.”

However, Lawrence also advocates a very humane and forgiving approach to practicing being present to God. When he failed he simply acknowledged it, surrendered it to God, and no longer worried about it.Here there is no expectation to be perfect, and no reason to be upset over failures. We simply do what we are able to do. Lawrence said, “Everyone is capable of these familiar conversations with God, some more, some less. He knows what we can do. Let’s try. Perhaps he is only looking for the right intention on our part.”Indeed!

*Practice…*

With your spiritual partner or in your journal, continue to reflect on these questions…

* This week I sensed Sacred Presence when I…
* This week I savoured God’s Presence when I…
* This week I found it hard to notice the Sacred because I…
* This week when I sensed and savoured God’s Presence it made me feel…
* This week I sensed God’s Presence in an unexpected place…
* I’m finding I tend to “notice” when I’m…

*Surely God is in this place…*

**Presence Project ~ Week 9**

*Acts 2:28 ~ You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.*

“Solitude was where Jesus listened to God. It is where we listen to God. Solitude is where community begins.” – Henri Nouwen

*Learning…*

When our prayerful intention runs into difficulties Brother Lawrence’s advice is to persevere. In truth, practicing God’s presence can, at times, feel like you are not accomplishing anything at all. Lawrence understands: “In the beginning you may often think that you are wasting your time; nonetheless, you must continually resolve to persevere until death in spite of all the difficulties.”

Difficulties usually are assumed to be unwanted distractions and unexpected failures, but what of the person who chooses to turn away or quit trying. Lawrence urges such a person to “make a holy and firm resolution at once never to deliberately turn away from [God], and to live the rest of your life in this holy presence,”for if God is always present then the only way to lose that presence is to deliberately turn away, and the only way not to reap the benefits of being present to God is to eschew them.

Lawrence never wants a person to give up, so he compels us to persevere: “Knock at his door, keep knocking, and I tell you that he will open to you in his time if you do not give up, and that he will give you, all at once, what he held off giving for years.”In other words, take heart, “You don’t become a saint in a day!”

*Practicing…*

One summer’s day the sky above me was really interesting. It was like every kind of cloud was laid out side by side – solid cover, then dotted, then stringy, then wispy, then with some depth, then gray, then bright and casting shadows on other clouds. It was as if someone was practicing cloud-making and trying all the different kinds out right there. It was beautiful. I paused and thanked God.

God didn’t paint the clouds for me, and God wasn’t speaking through the clouds – they were simply a dazzling example of beauty that made me stop and wonder. And in my wondering I was awed by how big and amazing and incomprehensible the world is, and that made me sense the presence of God, and my gratitude was for communion in that moment.

What do you notice when you look up to the sky?

*Surely God is in this place…*

**Presence Project ~ Week 10**

*1 John 3:24 ~ As we keep his commands, we live deeply and surely in him, and he lives in us. And this is how we experience his deep and abiding presence in us: by the Spirit he gave us.*

“I prayed so much that I turned into prayer.” – Rumi

*Learning…*

Even a saint, however, might blanch at Brother Lawrence’s declaration, “Ah, how sweet it is to suffer with God!” Yet this ‘sweet suffering’ is neither an oxymoron nor is it masochistic. The idea is that if you are fully surrendered, fully abandoned, and fully living every moment in the glorious loving presence of God then whatever circumstances you find yourself in will seem blessed and filled with love.

So Lawrence teaches, “Adore him in your infirmities, offer him your sufferings from time to time, even in the midst of your greatest pain.” And he assures us, “If our love is great, we will love [God] equally in pain and consolation.”

We would be wise to notice that this teaching comes from his final letters in the last years of his life after decades of living in a state of constant, mature, loving adoration of God. ‘Sweet suffering’ will sound like craziness to a novice, but it promises a most beautiful benefit to the one who achieves the goal of union with God.

“The soul thus inflamed can live only in the presence of its God, a presence that produces in its heart a holy ardor, a sacred zeal and a strong desire to see this God loved, known, served, and adored by all creatures,”which is the second greatest commandment being fueled by the first.

*Practicing…*

With your spiritual partner or in your journal, continue to reflect on these questions…

* This week I sensed Sacred Presence when I…
* This week I savoured God’s Presence when I…
* This week I found it hard to notice the Sacred because I…
* This week when I sensed and savoured God’s Presence it made me feel…
* This week I sensed God’s Presence in an unexpected place…
* I’m finding I tend to “notice” when I’m…

*Surely God is in this place…*

**Presence Project ~ Week 11**

*2 Corinthians 3:17-18 ~ They suddenly recognize that God is a living, personal presence, not a piece of chiseled stone. And when God is personally present, a living Spirit, that old, constricting legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of God’s face.*

“You don’t need to push the river, because you are already in it—and floating along!" – Richard Rohr

*Learning…*

Perhaps the most important thing we can learn from Brother Lawrence is his paradigm shifting idea that we can and must practice our attentiveness to and loving awareness of God beyond the confines of the church sanctuary. Lawrence would have us turn our hearts into God’s church. He says, “We do not always have to be in church to be with God. We can make of our hearts an oratory where we can withdraw from time to time to converse with him there, gently, humbly, and lovingly.”

And when we are in church, or engaging in intentional spiritual practices, we must be aware that they can become empty and meaningless pieties done for all the wrong reasons if not infused with adoration of God, so he implores us, “Even during our religious exercises and vocal prayers – we must stop for a moment, as often as possible, to adore God in the depths of our hearts, to savor him, even though in passing and stealthily.”

Far from sidestepping or abandoning religious practices, as sometimes methods such as Lawrence’s are accused of, he is seeking to redeem and transform them. And further still he challenges us to go on and transform every activity in our lives into a spiritual opportunity to be present to God and adore God. Lawrence warns that it is a “big mistake to think that the period of mental prayer should be different from any other. We must be just as closely united with God during our activities as we are during our times of prayer.”

This is a fully integrated spirituality! This is a prayer-full life – every moment a moment of worship, adoration, love, honor, and blessing – every moment aglow in the presence of God.

*Practicing…*

The next few times you are in church or are worshipping be mindful of adoring God while you’re doing it.

Try to infuse all of your worship and prayer time with a profound awareness and adoration of God’s Presence!

*Surely God is in this place…*

**Presence Project ~ Week 12**

*Psalm 105:4 ~ Keep your eyes open for God, watch for God’s works; be alert for signs of God’s presence.*

"Contemplative practice...is a deeply revolutionary matter.” Rowan Williams

*Learning…*

The task of spirituality is to live out what Jesus called the greatest commandments: loving God and loving people. Brother Lawrence found a way to do this with his whole life. He called it *The Practice of the Presence of God.*

Highly influenced by his time, and richly nourished in the Carmelite spirituality of Teresa and John, Lawrence humbly and wholly committed his life to the simple, loving awareness and adoration of God, everywhere, all the time. His was a ‘methodless method’ that saw no difference in practice whether he was in church, at prayer, in the kitchen, or repairing sandals. It was a mindfulness method initiated in self-abandonment, maintained through habit, gently dealing with difficulties and failures, and persevering to enjoy God even in suffering.

This joyful, attractive yet challenging spirituality found an audience far beyond the wildest dreams of a modest lay friar in Paris. Over the centuries it has influenced and shaped countless Christians all over the world, and it stands poised to transform the current mainline church as well, if we choose to embrace it. Brother Lawrence came to the most wonderfully profound and practical spiritual insight there is, and it changed everything – God is always present; we, however, are not.

The presence we are actually practicing is our own!

*Surely God is in this place…*

**All Brother Lawrence quotes from:**

Brother Lawrence in Conrad De Meester’s, *Writings and Conversations on the Practice of the Presence of God*. Trans. Salvatore Sciurba (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1994).

(Brother Lawrence’s use of masculine pronouns for God was typical for his time)

**Other quotes:**

Henri Nouwen in John J. Delaney’s edition of Brother Lawrence’s, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1977).

Keith J. Egan, "Carmelite Spirituality." *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader*. Ed. Kenneth J. Collins (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 103.

Liz Carmichael, "Catholic Saints and Reformers." *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, from East to West*. Ed. Gordon Mursell (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 231.

**Week 2**

Egan

**Week 3**

Maxims 6.27, 6.28

**Week 4**

Maxims 5.21, 6.31

Letter 9

Letter 7

Conversation 2

Conversation 4

**Week 5**

Letter 2

Conversation 3

Letter12

Letter3

Conversation 1

Meester

**Week 6**

Maxims 5.22, 6.28

Letter 8

Letters 6 and 9

**Week 7**

Letter 15

Conversation 4

Maxims 2.9

Letter 6

Maxims 6.30

**Week 8**

Letter 2

Letter 7

Letter 4

Conversation 2

Letter 9

**Week 9**

Letter 4

Letter 3

Letter 15

Letter 8

**Week 10**

Letter 15

Letter 13

Letter 16

Maxims 35

**Week 11**

Letter 9

Conversation 4

Maxims 2.9

Conversation 4