

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
February 25, 2024 – The Second Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

It is still early in the season of Lent, and I thought that today I would share with you a practice that you might decide to try for Lent and, ideally, to continue after Lent. Some of you may already be familiar with St. Ignatius' Prayer of Examen. It has been called "an examination of conscience" and "an examination of consciousness." This is a way to pray every day, usually at the end of the day, a way to consider your daily life as God may see it. The practice usually takes only a few minutes each day, but over time, the Prayer of Examen may have a profound effect on your life.

St. Ignatius, the 16th century Spanish priest and theologian who founded the order of Jesuits, valued this practice highly. He believed that we can find God in all things, at every moment, even in ordinary times. To do that, we must examine our lives intentionally and prayerfully. This examination can help us to understand what God is calling us to do, how God is calling us to follow Jesus in the particulars of our lives.

The Examen has five steps. These are guides to prayer, not a rigid formula for prayer. The point of this prayer is to build one's relationship with God, and that should be a flexible process.

First, pray for God's help, to see the day as God may see it. Invite God to help you be grateful and honest as you look back on your day. Ask God to help you see the work of the Holy Spirit in your life – in and through you, others, and creation.

Second, give thanks to God for the gifts of the day. For Ignatius – and for many other spiritual teachers – gratitude is the first and most important step on the spiritual journey. Go back over the events of your day. What were the blessings you received? Did God work through other people to bless you? How were you blessed with the gifts of creation – for example, food to enjoy, beauty to admire? How might God have worked through you to bless others or to bless creation? We can be grateful for our own gifts as we have offered them to God and to God's beloved creatures and creation.

Third, pray over the significant feelings you experienced this day. Ignatius believed that God communicates with us through our feelings as well as our minds. As you think back on the day, what strong feelings do you recall? These can be anything – positive or painful. Joy, peace, sadness, anxiety, confusion, hope, compassion, anger – any of the range of feelings human beings experience. Choose one or two strong feelings and pray from them. Ask God where the feelings came from and if the feelings led to greater closeness with God or to estrangement from God. Some feelings may help us grow in faith, hope, and love, or make us more generous with our time and our gifts, or make us feel more alive and whole, more connected to others. Some feelings lead us away from God and make us less faithful, hopeful, and loving. Some feelings lead us to be more self-centered or confused, and lead to the breakdown in our relationships with others.

Fourth, with the information you have gained about your experiences, rejoice in those times during the day that you were brought closer to God. And ask God for forgiveness and healing for the times when you moved away from God. Remember that being honest with God is how we grow in our relationship with God, even when our honest examination brings to awareness what we might not want to examine or admit.

Fifth and last, look to tomorrow. Ask God to be with you in the coming day. As you think of the next day, what might you want God to help you with? Be specific. Are you facing some particular challenge? Do you need God to help you be patient or courageous or determined or compassionate? Is there someone you will be interacting with tomorrow that you want to pray for by name? Invite God to be with you in the coming day, as God has been with you today.

Close the Prayer of Examen with a prayer in your own words, from your heart, or with a prayer such as The Lord's Prayer.

I think you can appreciate how this fairly simple prayer practice can easily heighten our awareness of God's activity in our lives and our awareness of how we are responding to God. When we pray about the specifics of our daily lives, we keep our prayer "real", and we keep our prayer honest. We gain a better understanding of how God blesses us and leads us, not in a general "all the blessings of this life" kind of way. We may take blessings for granted less often and we may appreciate them more. We also gain a better understanding of our movements toward God and away from God. Knowing ourselves better in this spiritual sense gives us a guide for how to live tomorrow and the next day in a way that leads us ever closer to God.

I have described a daily practice. You may use the same basic steps to do an Annual Examen, a prayerful review of the past year as well as a look at the coming year. If you have experienced significant life events in the past year or if you are facing major decisions about the coming year, this Annual Examen may be very helpful.

This Lent, why not try The Prayer of Examen? Give it some time and find out if this may lead you to love God more deeply and to follow God's way more closely.

In that spirit, I would like to close with a prayer written by retired Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston:

"Let me make something beautiful today, Spirit, something beautiful with my life. Let me offer myself freely to you, to use as you will, holding back nothing, venturing everything, trusting in you with my whole heart. I do not know how many days I have to share what I can of goodness and kindness. I only know that if I am to pass on a blessing, now is the time to do it. This small span of years beneath the sun is an invitation, a chance, to make something beautiful from what I have around me, to be creative in how I care, to stretch the limit of my love, to climb to a higher place, to see the edges of what I have dreamed. Let me make something beautiful of my life, today, and every day, Spirit, something that will add beauty to your creation. Amen."