

Lenten Self-Examination

Psalm 139:1-16, 23-24 & Romans 7:15-25a

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First Presbyterian, Luling

You may have heard that Kenny Rogers died yesterday, at the age of 81. I hadn't thought about Kenny Rogers in years, but when I heard that news, snippets of songs came back to me, and then more and more memories. I think we must have listened to Kenny Rogers a lot when I was little. I remember singing "Islands in the Stream" with my friends in their front yard when we were in elementary school. Go back and think of those lyrics. It is not a song that elementary school kids should be singing in the front yard or anywhere else.

"The Gambler" is stuck in my brain, deep in the long term memory, because we had an Alvin and the Chipmunks album, on vinyl, that remade those songs into a kids version. So a few of the lyrics are twisted in my memory: for instance, instead of a sip of whiskey, the Gambler asks for a sip of soda. And bums a twinkie instead of a cigarette. But the basics of the song are still there.

Our Lenten spiritual discipline for today is "self-examination," and as I was listening to "The Gambler" it struck me as a self-examination kind of song, because of course any country song about gambling is really a song about life. Here's the chorus: "You've got to know when to hold 'em / know when to fold 'em / Know when to walk away / And know when to run / You never count your money / When you're sittin' at the table / There'll be time enough for countin' / When the dealin's done." And then there's this part of a verse: "Every gambler knows / That the secret to survivin' / Is knowin' what to throw away / And knowin' what to keep."

The gambler is not just trying to figure out a successful poker hand. He's advising the younger man about when to stick with something and when to give up and move on to something else. He's telling him to take his time considering options and making a decision. And he's suggesting, in a way, a self-examination—"what to throw away" might be habits of action or thought that we need to kick, and "what to keep" might be relationships or better habits that we need to embrace.

I don't know about you, but this social distancing and not going places has allowed me some time to do some extra self-examination. Just in the past week, I've reassessed all kinds of things. What's really important—being with my family, and what I can let go--meetings. What I'm sad about being canceled—a trip to the Valley, and events that I was kind of happy to see go away—again, meetings. What habits I can easily fall into—wearing pajamas all day, and what habits I could take up—Rachel and I did yoga each morning last week. I've also thought about other things, but there really has been some self-reflection time, time that is usually spent doing other things.

What grounds our self-examination, and what makes it a spiritual discipline, rather than psychological self-therapy, what makes it a spiritual discipline, is that it is grounded in our identity as children of God.

This is what grounds the psalmist, in Psalm 139. "O Lord you have searched me and known me." God knows us. God knows us better than we know ourselves. If we're hiding something from ourselves, it's not hidden from God. God knows it already. And God loves us, knowing everything about us already. There's nothing we can discover inside ourselves that will

make God stop loving us or love us less. That gives us the freedom and space and will to look deep inside ourselves, so that we can begin to know ourselves as well as God knows us already.

And I think we all can identify with Paul's lament in the Romans passage. "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Paul here is an example of self-examination of our consciences, the one spelled con-science, the part of us that knows right from wrong. We examine our actions in light of our consciences, we know where we have gone astray from what we knew was right. We then can confess, to a person we have wronged if we need to, and confess to God. In the case of God, forgiveness comes as a gift of grace. In the case of wronging another person, it may or may not.

There is also a different kind of self-examination, this one an examination of our consciousness, this time spelled conscious-ness. Another word for this might be awareness. Awareness can start with our physical bodies. In times of stress and anxiety, it can help to find 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. Just as a way to be conscious and aware of where we are, rather than getting tangled up in our swirling thoughts.

And examining our consciousness can be more internal as well. One thing I have been doing this week that has made a huge difference in my outlook on life—some of you may have seen this on facebook—is I've been thinking of three things each day that I'm thankful for. Those have ranged from the rain to my washer and dryer, to all of you. Making myself write those down by the end of the day has made me more conscious of how much I have to be thankful for. Practicing being thankful has changed my consciousness and caused me to self-examine how much I was focusing on what was gone or changed or different rather than what gifts I had been given. If you want to pick up a spiritual practice this week, I recommend that as something simple to do: three things, every day, that you're thankful for. Write them down.

We are grounded in God's love, rooted, held firmly and steadfastly. Resting in that assurance, we can examine ourselves for our sins, confess, and receive forgiveness. Resting in God's goodness, we can look inside and become ever more grateful for God's presence in our lives. With God's gifts of wisdom and self-examination, we can know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run.