

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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A Fruitful Prayer

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Let us pray . . .

Traditionally, Luke is *the* Christmas Gospel because it's the only Gospel that has a birth story on Jesus. Chapters 1 and 2 open up by foretelling the births of first John the Baptist and then Jesus'. John and Jesus are thought to be cousins because Luke says that Elizabeth was a relative of Mary's.

Our lesson from chapter 3 is an account of John's dramatic and heavy-handed proclamation of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John told these early believers that they'd better repent — which essentially means to turn their lives around through a change of mind and heart — or there'd be an imminent and wrathful price to pay.

Using what would likely be familiar imagery from Isaiah, John tells of the winnowing fork and the threshing floor and a fire for burning what the axe brought down. John tells them that their membership in Judaism won't save them because in the end it's their fruits and not their roots that will determine the outcome.

Essentially, John pretty much scares the bejesus out of everyone. So in response, we hear the crowds, tax collectors and soldiers begging to know, "What must we do?" He essentially tells them to act ethically and justly in their lives and work:

He tells the crowd to give from their abundance.

He tells the tax collectors not to swindle anyone.

He tells the soldiers not to abuse their power.

He tells them all, as we hear in verse 8:

Let your endeavor be to produce true fruits of the change of mind and heart.

Can you recall a time you had a change of mind and heart in a way that produced good fruit in your life or the life of another? Meaning, you turned things around and that opened up a better place in your or another's life?

There was a time in my life when I was a terrible worrier. I got it from my dad, who probably got it from his dad. The worrying was so bad that I'd go to bed every night feeling the weight of whatever I had spun out of control in my mind.

My sleep was wrecked and I'd wake up with nothing solved: Always, some situation was left undone, some person unhappy or let down by

me, some deadline come and gone and everything made even worse because I was exhausted.

Eventually, I began telling myself that nothing was going to be made better by me fretting all night and waking up exhausted. I also agreed with myself that the problems that came to bed with me could wait for the light of day. I did not have an immediate change and it took me a few years to turn things around because it takes a while to change beliefs and neural pathways in the brain. Now? I can pretty much go to bed with the weight of the world on my shoulders and fall fast asleep.

Because I wasn't taught to use prayer to help me through life, it didn't dawn on me to pray through the overwhelming worry I used to carry to bed. I more rationalized my way through. But as I make my way through life and encounter new difficulties or old, unhelpful patterns, I know that prayer truly can help guide us and turn things around and in that process, perhaps our suffering is not long-lived.

One way we can turn things around to help with the sort of change of mind and heart that John the Baptist addressed which will lead to better fruits in our lives, is through a daily prayer called “The Examen.”

This prayer originated in 1522 when St. Ignatius of Loyola began writing the Spiritual Exercises. He believed this method would help us develop discipline, ask for God's grace, and see how God works through us and among us daily.

The jesuits.org website tells us that Ignatius was born in 1491. At age 16, Inigo left his home to serve as a page for Juan Velazques, treasurer of the kingdom of Castile.

This position gave Inigo exposure to and a taste for the worldly life and its comforts. He became an officer in the Spanish army and sustained a terrible leg injury from a cannon ball and was bedridden for a year.

While recovering at the family castle, he asked to read books on chivalry. There weren't any, so he was offered books to read on Christ

and books to read on saints. To his surprise, he was mesmerized by the content of the books.

While he once hoped to imitate warring heroes, he began to be drawn to the stories of those who had encountered the Divine like Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Siena. In that process he felt God's movement and guidance in his life.

In March of 1522, Ignatius was well enough to leave home with a newfound zeal to serve God. The story goes that he came to the shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat and kept a vigil all night. He left his sword at the altar and gave his fine clothes to a poor man. He cast aside his life as a noble soldier and dressed himself in rough clothes and sandals so as to take up the life of a poor pilgrim.

He lived in a cave outside the town of Manresa and began writing about the emotions that took hold of him while encountering Scripture —

feelings of gratitude and anguish, consolation and sadness. It was here where he started work on what would become the Spiritual Exercises.

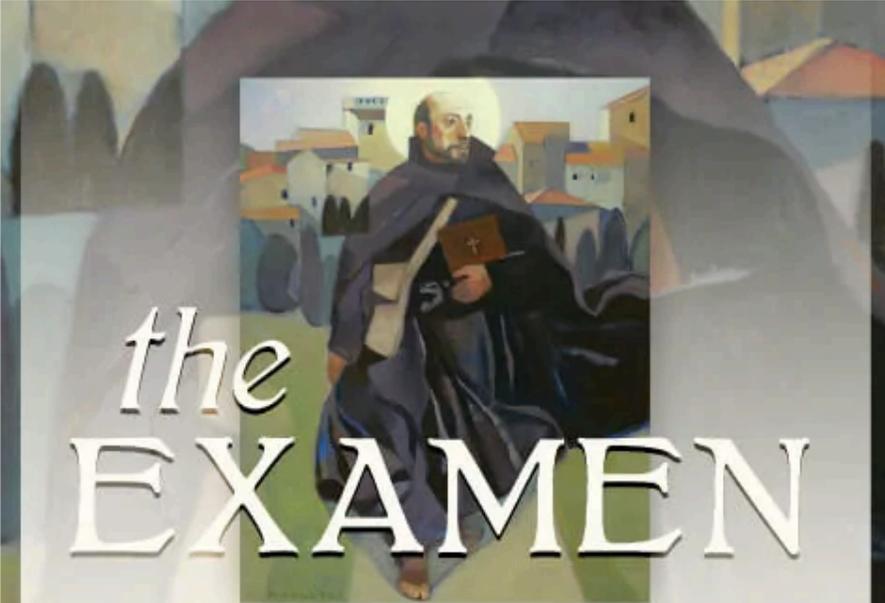
While Ignatius would go on to found the Society of Jesus known as The Jesuits, one of the gifts he left us from his Spiritual Exercises is called “The Examen.”

The Examen is a daily prayer of steps that can sincerely help us engage with God to — in essence — produce good fruits in our lives. I believe The Examen would have helped me turn my worrying around sooner had I known about it when I was a stressed mess each night.

When we had our brainstorming session a few weeks ago, I heard a desire to learn tangible things we can do to help guide and shape our lives, so what I’d like to do is walk you through a sort of pocket version of The Examen now and later today I will also send you an electronic copy of it along with some other resources for you to consider.

This is such a lovely little prayer or actually it's more “a way” to sincerely review your day. Think of it as a bedtime story between you and The Divine. It'd be easy to make this part of your end of day

routine.



the EXAMEN

The *Examen* is a method of reviewing your day in the presence of God. It's actually an attitude more than a method, a time set aside for thankful reflection on where God is in your everyday life. It has five steps, which most people take more or less in order, and it usually takes 15 to 20 minutes per day. Here it is in a nutshell:

- 1** Ask God for light.
I want to look at my day with God's eyes, not merely my own.
- 2** Give thanks.
The day I have just lived is a gift from God. Be grateful for it.
- 3** Review the day.
I carefully look back on the day just completed, being guided by the Holy Spirit.
- 4** Face your shortcomings.
I face up to what is wrong—in my life and in me.
- 5** Look toward the day to come.
I ask where I need God in the day to come.

Version of the Examen from *A Simple Life-Changing Prayer* by Jim Manney © Loyola Press

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