

# RETURN



Something within us has changed in the distance between what was and what is now. In the midst of our desire to gather in person again is an opportunity for renewed intention and connection.

By Katie Harmon-McLaughlin, *Spiritual Formation Team lead*

**A** lovely story is told by Father Thomas Keating regarding a workshop he was giving on centering prayer. After engaging in the practice—which involves twenty minutes of silence—one participant shared her frustration that she had to return to her prayer intention about ten thousand times because of the natural distractions and busy-ness in her mind.

“How wonderful—ten thousand opportunities to return to God,” Father Keating, a Trappist priest, said.

As I hear the word “return” in reference to reconvening in-person gatherings after over a year of pandemic separation, I am reminded of this wise story and reframing. The action of return is a spiritual practice, a movement of faith. When I looked up references to the word “return” throughout scripture, there were 532 results! Our biblical ancestors

were returning home, returning to ancestral lands, returning goods and favors, and returning to God. Sometimes they were urged and commanded to not ever return to Egypt, to the land of their birth, or to practices that did not bring life.

Then the Lord said to Jacob, “return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you.”

—Genesis 31:3 NRSV

Return to the Lord your God...with all your heart and with all your soul.

—Deuteronomy 30:2 NRSV

The Lord has said to you, “You must never return that way again.”

—Deuteronomy 17:16 NRSV

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.  
—Luke 4:1 NRSV

From where do we return and to what are we returning? How are we returning? Is there anything we are urged to never return to again? Are we returning to buildings, or are we returning to one another? Are we returning in body, or also in heart and soul?

Return implies intention. We have been somewhere else, and we are choosing to return...to God in prayer, to a sacred space, to a community. As our biblical ancestors can attest, whether in exile or the wilderness of discernment, we do not return as we once were. Something has shifted and changed within us in the distance from what was to what is now.

As with Father Keating's wise response to the frustrated participant, how wonderful is every opportunity to return. Each return has the possibility of bringing fresh intention and connection. We are formed and changed in the spiritual movement of return. How sacred it is to choose one another and the Spirit of God again and again. There is renewed appreciation for what we have missed for so long that was once the background of our normal lives. While some nations are still in the critical stages of the pandemic's varied waves, others are finding the slow beginnings of collective return.

I wonder how it might change our perception of returning to in-person gatherings if we consider ourselves part of this larger movement of return across the globe. We are part of something expansive, yet completely interdependent. How does a new awareness of our global interconnectivity affect how we come back together locally?

I wonder how in-person gatherings might deepen if we consider the ways we have changed since we were last together—what has broken open or apart in us, what has grown or been formed, the suffering and loss we have witnessed, the hope that has endured. I wonder how our gatherings might change shape and focus to reflect these realities, to integrate the new ways we are seeing ourselves and others.

What have we learned about injustice and inequality? What issues of peace have been pressing on our hearts that we yearn to address with our voices, hands, and feet? What have we discovered about what is most essential? What have we learned actually matters most as everything else was stripped away? How did a sudden change of pace affect our desire for the future pace that we will set? What are the rhythms we want to embrace as we come back together in a new way?

I wonder what it would be like for us to imagine return to one another with the same intention as Father Keating's invitation of return in centering prayer...a wonderful opportunity, a fresh possibility, a movement not just of the body, but also of the heart.

Perhaps placing ourselves in the larger, longer history of our biblical ancestors might bring more

meaning and purpose to this time of collective return. We might find ourselves relating to the vision of the "joyful exiles" in Jeremiah 31:

...their life shall become like a watered garden,  
and they shall never languish again...

I will turn their mourning into joy,

I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow...

There is hope for your future,  
says the Lord:

your children shall come back to their own country...

Set up road markers for yourself,

make yourself signposts;

consider well the highway,

the road by which you went.

Return, O virgin Israel,

return to these your cities.

— Jeremiah 31:12, 14, 17, 21 NRSV

This time of return can be a time to come back to God, one another, our intention as a faith community, the deepest desires of our hearts, the integrity of our callings, and renewed hope for our future if we approach it with holy intention. We breathe together into the grace of another day before us. We are more awake to the precious fragility of our days, our communities, everything we love most. With faith and courage, we imagine coming back together, when it is safe and right, and invite the Holy Spirit to boldly ask within us, how will you return?

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