

Spiritual Retreat for A Time to Serve

“Love God, Love People, Love You”

By Patti Stratton

Focus Scripture: Matthew 22:36-40 (NIV)

Introduction: Crafting this spiritual retreat has been an intimate journey for me. I felt led to center it on one of my favorite spiritual practices, “Dwelling in the Word” or “*Lectio Divina*,” the sacred reading of Scripture. The ideas I’ve put forth are things that I do in my own devotional times. I wrote the retreat as a personal spiritual retreat, one that can be done simply by you individually, but it is easily adapted to a group context. You will see that I’ve added ideas for adaptation where needed.

Our ministry focus for 2013-2015 is “A Time to Serve.” We understand we are to serve, that now is the time, and that God has gifted us with all that we need as leaders to “equip the saints for the work of the ministry,” (Ephesians 4:12-13). We also know that as women we are pulled in many directions. We’re caring for our families, our ministries, our homes; we have jobs (paid and unpaid); many of us are sandwiched between caring for children and aging parents... and the list goes on. How do we stay focused? How do we attend to our own needs, spiritually and otherwise? From where do we draw strength? My strength comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth; from Jesus the Christ, lover of my soul; and from the Holy Spirit who continually teaches the deeper things.

I invite you to journey to the heart of God. I invite you to explore the source of your strength. I hope is that as you explore God’s heart, your heart will be changed, your mind renewed, and your strength multiplied.

Venue and Supplies

Choosing an appropriate place for retreat is essential. If you are able to set aside several hours, or even a whole day, that would be ideal. I often use my front porch. It’s intimate, shaded, and quiet. Find a place that’s comfortable and away from distractions. Let the phone go to voice mail, have a favorite beverage and snacks available, find a comfortable spot, bring a Bible, something in which to journal, a writing or drawing utensil, and maybe even some crayons or colored pencils. A favorite worship song can help to set the mood. Also, if you’re able to in your space, light a candle as a visible of sign of the presence of Christ in your midst.

If you are doing this retreat as an individual, the pages with the outline of the retreat are all you’ll need to print. If you’re doing this as a group, you will want to print enough copies of the handouts for each person in the group.

[Groups: A living room-type setting is more conducive to the idea of “retreat” than a classroom setting. Candles, dim lighting, and comfortable seating help to set a relaxed tone. Participants will need Bibles or copies of the Scripture passages to be explored and something to journal on and with. Have art supplies on hand, such as crayons, color pencils, paper, markers, and play dough—anything that will help participants express themselves. Encourage participants to wear comfortable clothing and even bring a pillow. Provide some favorite snacks and beverages.]

Centering

Begin with a few moments of silence to center you mind on God. Take a few deep breaths. Breathe in — begin to focus on the love of God. Breathe out—sending away all that distracts you. Breathe in—relax your body. Breathe out—pray for God to speak to you and for the Spirit of God to fill you with peace.

[Groups: After welcoming the group and settling in, follow with this exercise.]

Use a favorite worship song that will help you to enter the presence of God. I have a favorite CD, *What Grace* by Graham Kendrick.¹ These are my favorite tracks:

- “I Kneel Down” Graham Kendrick [Track 3]
- “What Grace” Graham Kendrick [Track 4]
- “Lord You’ve Been Good to Me” Graham Kendrick [Track 6]
- “The Lord is Present Here” Graham Kendrick [Track 7]
- “Say the Name of Jesus” Graham Kendrick [Track 10]

As you begin to feel relaxed, focused, and centered, let your mind dwell on the goodness of God and God’s love for you. Offer praise to God out loud—speak words and phrases of thanksgiving to God. Do this for as long as you feel inspired. Then, get your Bible and begin the first Dwelling exercise.

[Groups: Ask the group to share words of praise and thanks out loud. For the Dwelling exercise it is helpful to have the Scripture text printed out. Sharing the same translation is a plus. Also, it’s easier to mark up the text when it’s on a piece of paper.]

Dwelling in the Word (*Lectio Divina*²): The Basics

[Groups: Share the handout of this section with the group; it could be printed on the back of the Scripture text handout. Read over it together before you begin. If possible, have a different person read the Scripture aloud each time. Following the one minute pauses, allow the group to respond out loud, sharing with the group the words/phrases and thoughts from each section as they feel led. If you have a group of 12 or more you might want to break up into small groups for this exercise to allow more sharing in the time allotted, and for greater comfort in sharing in a smaller group.]

Lectio Divina is derived from a Latin word that means “holy reading.” It is an ancient method of slowly reading the Scriptures, allowing the Scriptures to usher us into the presence of God. *Lectio* allows us to move through four different considerations of the text.

Reading (*lectio*): Slowly begin reading a biblical passage (aloud) as if it were a long awaited love letter addressed to you. Approach it reverentially and expectantly, in a way that savors each word and phrase. Read the passage until you hear a word or phrase that touches you, resonates, attracts or even disturbs you. Circle or in some way mark that word or phrase.

Silence for one minute.

Reflecting (*meditatio*): Slowly read the text aloud again. Ponder for a few minutes the word or phrase you’d picked up on the first reading. Let it sink in slowly and deeply until you are resting in it. Listen for what the word or phrase is saying to you at this moment in your life, what it may be offering to you, what it may be demanding of you. Write down your thoughts.

¹ <http://www.grahamkendrick.co.uk/songs/albums/21-what-grace>

² -An Ancient Way of Praying with Scripture, (http://www.ymsp.org/resources/practices/lectio_divina.html)

Silence for one minute.

Expressing (*oratio*): When you feel ready, openly and honestly express to God the prayers that arise spontaneously within you from your experience of this word or phrase. These may be prayers of thanksgiving, petition, intercession, lament, or praise. You may speak your prayers aloud, journal them, or draw them using color pencils or crayons.

Silence for one minute.

Resting (*contemplatio*): Allow yourself for several moments to rest silently with God in the stillness of your heart, remaining open to the quiet fullness of God's love and peace. This is like the silence of communion between the mother holding her sleeping infant child, or between lovers whose communication with each other passes beyond words.

Dwell with Matthew 22:36-40 (NIV)

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Following the process outlined above, dwell with Matthew 22:36-40. Here Jesus is quoting two texts from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) that would have been very familiar to the people to whom he was speaking. Deuteronomy 6:5 (and the larger context of Deuteronomy 6:4-9) is about loving God. Leviticus 19:18 is about loving neighbor as self. Jesus wasn't teaching the people anything new; he simply tied the two commands together, implying that should we do these two things we will have no problem with the Law.

Journal

Intellectually we probably understand the "love God/love neighbor" parts of this text. But how often do we gloss over the "Love your neighbor as yourself" part? We cannot give away what we do not already possess. Do you love you? What does it mean to love yourself? What does that look like? What do you do to love yourself? Spend some time praying and journaling about the idea of loving yourself.

Now read aloud Psalm 139:1-18; 23-24. Spend a moment dwelling here, then pray and journal your thoughts. Decide on one thing you will do to love yourself in the next week. Write it down.

[Groups: Allow the group time to journal and consider then ask them to share out loud. After reading Psalm 139, allow time for anyone who might want to share the one thing they plan to do for themselves in the next week.]

Psalm 139 New International Version (NIV)

1 You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. 2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. 3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. 4 Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. 5 You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. 7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," 12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. 13 For you created my inmost being;

you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! 23 Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. 24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Closing

Spend time considering all that you have experienced. Pray a final prayer of thanks and sing a song of praise. As you leave your sacred space go out with joy, considering when you will meet with God in this deliberate way again.

[Groups: Allow time for sharing and final prayers. Sing a song together as you prepare to go out. Hug someone before you go.]

“Love God, Love People, Love You”

What has the Spirit of God taught you? Did you enjoy spending time dwelling in the Word of God? As you considered again what it means to love God, love people, and love yourself, how have you been changed?

I commend you for deliberately setting aside time in the presence of God and encourage you to do this again and again. *Lectio Divina* is not meant to replace Bible study. It is an ancient spiritual practice intended to help you open your heart to God and dwell in God's presence. This is a practice that has enriched my spiritual journey, one that I return to often. Blessings on your journey,

Patti Stratton, M.Div, is national president of AB Women's Ministries, 2013-2016. She and her husband Jon co-pastor the First Baptist Church of Rutland, Vermont.

Handout 1
Dwell with Matthew 22:36-40 (NIV)

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Handout 2

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