

Sermon: God in all things September 1, 2024 Colossians 1: 9-20
Rev Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON

A young man had decided that he wanted to go to Jerusalem to see the Holy Land. This was 500 years ago, so the way was by road and then by ship. He began traversing his native Spain by mule. On the road he met another traveler, also on a mule. They began to discuss theology, maybe not the ideal topic to discuss with a stranger. His companion had ideas about the Virgin Mary that he found upsetting.

They came to a fork in the road, and the young man, who was extremely hot headed, decided that he would let circumstances direct his course of action. He let the reins of his mule drop.

If his mule followed the mule of the other traveler, he would *kill his fellow traveler* for his theological views. If the mule took the other fork, he would let the man live. Fortunately, the mule took the opposite road. And so, a theological dispute did not end in murder.

In the weeks of summer, August through Labor Day, I am sharing with you, each week, something rediscovered on my bookshelves, a book or an author who has something to say to us in our present moment. In preparation for retirement, I am working through the volumes on my bookshelves.

In week one I shared Henri Nouwen and his classic book *The Wounded Healer*. Then it was *Original Blessing* by Matthew Fox. Both books were from the 1980s but still have relevance. Then we went back to the 1380s to spend time with the English Anchoress and mystic, Julian of Norwich.

Today we consider the writings of a once hot-headed young man turned spiritual innovator, who lived at an historical turning point in the history of the West, where the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance. The Book is the *Spiritual Exercises* written by the Spanish Saint-Ignatius of Loyola.

Ignatius was born in 1491 in northern Spain. He was the youngest of thirteen children. At the age of sixteen years, he was sent to serve as a page in the court of the kingdom of Castile. There he developed a love of gambling, women and sword fighting. He became fond of fine clothes and always wore burnished armor, accessorized with a sword that he was skilled in using.

Eventually he found himself at the age of 30, in May of 1521, as an officer defending the fortress of the town of Pamplona against the French. He fought with inspired courage. During the battle, a cannon ball struck Ignatius, wounding one leg and breaking the other. Because they admired his bravery, the French soldiers carried him back to recuperate at his home, rather than putting him in prison.

Ignatius came near to death. The leg healed, but with one now shorter than the other, for the rest of his life, he walked with a limp.

His time of healing and recovery was a hinge point in Ignatius' life. During the long weeks of his recuperation, he was bored and asked for some novels to pass the time. Luckily, there were none in the castle of Loyola, but there was a copy of the Gospels and a book on the saints. Desperate, Ignatius read them. The more he read, the more he considered the exploits of the saints' worth imitating. Recovered from his wounds enough to travel, he left the castle in March of 1522.

Ignatius came to a town called Manresa. He stayed in a cave outside the town, intending to linger a few days, but he remained for ten months. He spent hours each day in prayer and worked in a local hospice. Here, the ideas for what is recorded in his Spiritual Exercises began to take shape.

On the banks of the nearby Cardener River, he had a vision. The contents of the vision were not recorded for history, but it further impacted the direction of his life. He proceeded to a local shrine, knelt all night in vigil, left his sword and knife at the altar, went out and gave away all his fine clothes to a poor man, and dressed himself in rough and simple clothing. A new stage of life now began.

As a soldier, Ignatius was intense in his pursuit of glory. As a man of prayer, he began with the same intensity. He hurt his stomach from excessive fasting. He talked about Jesus so much that Inquisition jailed him for 42 days.

In time he matured in his faith and settled into a more measured rhythm of life. He studied. Was ordained a priest. Formed a community with other young priests. He was elected their leader in two successive votes. Each vote was unanimous, excepting his own dissenting vote.

They took the name The Society of Jesus – better known now as the Jesuits.

Ignatius of Loyola was a spiritual innovator. His Jesuit order was a new expression of faith for a new age. In the Middle Ages, monastic communities, like the Benedictines, were physical communities. Monastic settlements dotted the European landscape, providing centers of learning, education, medical care, and hospitality. They were a center that people could go to...

As the world changed and the Renaissance began, Ignatius formed a community that would be spiritual, but not physical. Rather than be in a location that people could go to, their community went out into the world to be among people. One of the Jesuit mottos is God in All Things. Ignatian spirituality sees God in the very fabric of life. *"Find God in all things, and you will find all things in God."*

The Ignatian community had few rules. There was a prayer that he insisted should be prayed every day. It's called the Examen. It is a prayer that helps you to see that God is present in your life.

The Examen: A Prayer- Seeing God in your life.

Shorter Version:

The prayer in Six Steps:

1. Thank you God for.....
2. Ever present God, what did you see in my day today.....
3. How has my day gone?
4. What has touched my heart with joy or sorrow, fear, or peace today?
5. Loving God, this is what I need from you today.....
6. Consoling God, I know you are with me.....thank you.

We will use this model of prayer in our long prayer this morning.

One of Ignatius's sayings that I find helpful is this: he asked, "Do you think that Scripture has all been written?" His answer is No. God is still at work in the world; each life, your life, is part of the unfolding Gospel story. God is in all things, even right now with us. The sacred story continues in us, in this world here and now.

Ignatius also encouraged an innovative way of reading Scripture. Bible stories could be engaged with the imagination. He encouraged readers to enter the story. If you are reading the story of Jesus feeding the Multitude, become part of the story. Imagine that you are in the crowd. Or see things from the perspective of a skeptical disciple. Or become the young person who offers two fish and 5 loaves to Jesus. Enter the story and watch it unfold before you. Become part of it and experience the story in a new way.

Ignatius' master work is a book called the Spiritual Exercises. The Exercises are a method of entering, reencountering the Gospels and Jesus. I had the opportunity to complete the exercises years ago and it was a profound experience.

And Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises offers a method for discerning, for making choices between good options. Ironically, the young man who would let his mule choose between murder or mercy, developed a method of guidance for making choices informed by the Spirit of God within you.

We conclude with a prayer penned by Ignatius of Loyola. Its words may be familiar:

Prayers of Ignatius

Lord, teach me to be generous.
Teach me to serve you as you deserve;
To give and not to count the cost;
To fight and not to heed the wounds;
To toil and not to seek for rest;
To labor and not to ask for reward;
Save that of knowing that I do your will.

<>< <>< <><

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, understanding, my entire will,
all that I have and call my own.

You have given all to me.

To you, Lord, I return it.

Do with it as you will. Give me only your love and your grace: that is enough for me.