

Contemplation, Intentional Community and Acts of Justice

February 9, 2020

It is good to be back in your midst this morning after being away for a month. Don't get me wrong – being able to escape the minus 40 weather of early January was a blessing and even though I saw that the thermometer rebounded to above 0, it still couldn't compare to walks on the beach. Our vacation was a wonderful sabbatical in so many ways, except for one. My faith life retreated a little over the last month. I don't mean that my doubts grew or the value I place on the Christian church receded – I simply grew a little lazy. There were some moments of prayer and I did listen to the sermons preached at McClure Church but walking in the Christian way requires more intentional practice.

Last fall I was speaking to a young woman in her mid-twenties. She explained to me how she had struggled with her Christian faith. Most of her friends were indifferent to the Christian church and a few were openly hostile. She was frustrated that they thought her faith was built upon belief in the Garden of Eden, the virgin birth, and the insistence on being 'saved.' She knew that these ancient stories were not the essence of her faith but she wasn't sure how to explain herself until she stumbled upon a book by the very liberal Roman Catholic theologian Richard Rohr. His writings helped her understand why the Christian story was important to her. She summarized her new found understanding with a simple sentence: "Being a Christian is not so much about subscribing to a set of beliefs as it is about pursuing a way of life."

Her statement reminded me of the book some of us studied together last year entitled: ***Saving Jesus from the Church***. The author, Robin Myers, explained that as the church became more an institution than a movement it placed an emphasis on doctrines **about** Jesus rather than a focus on how his life was lived as an alternative to the prevailing norms of power and greed.

My young friend observed that greed and the pursuit of power are still rampant in the world and so the Jesus story which champions justice, compassion, peace and courage is a very appealing alternative for her. Richard Rohr, the theologian, explains that following in the path of Jesus requires three things: spiritual contemplation and acts of justice sustained by a community of the faithful.

Over the last fifty years many of us in the United Church have become more and more inclined – like my young friend – to be more intrigued by Jesus' alternate values than by the doctrines which enshrine him as a supernatural saviour. The United Church has followed Jesus' pursuit of peace and justice into the welcoming refugees; support for gender equality and the rights of sexual and cultural minorities; offering apology and seeking reconciliation with Indigenous persons; and advocating for the environment, as well as countless local initiatives such as volunteering at the Lighthouse or participating in Chop 'n Chat.

It is a concern, however, that in seeking to replicate Jesus's actions for the 21st century we neglected to concurrently practice his spirituality. The stories of his life are filled with instances where he reflects on his own Jewish scriptures; where he pauses to pray; where he retreats to a "lonely place" for solitude and renewal; where he sits with friends enjoying the spirituality that comes with sharing food and good conversation.

Richard Rohr and other spiritual leaders insist that action without contemplation can result in burnout at best or worse, devolve into an angry dualism that pits "us against them". Rohr writes:

The most important word is neither 'action' nor 'contemplation'- it's the word 'and'. We need both compassionate action **and** contemplative practice for the spiritual journey. Without action, our spirituality becomes lifeless and bears no authentic fruit. Without contemplation, all our doing comes from ego, even if it looks selfless, and it can cause more harm than good.

I have to confess that I have long struggled to incorporate contemplation into my own spiritual life. Although my tendency toward introversion should lead me to greater contemplation it is often overtaken by my drive to be active and productive. Even in my spare time I strive to get things accomplished. Although I did my share of sitting on a beach chair last month, the days seemed incomplete if I had not achieved my 10,000 steps. Over the years my prayer life has mostly been composed of 'popcorn prayers' ... prayers that simply 'pop up' when I feel moved. I have prayed when I walked or was driving; sometimes when I was preparing for sleep. Richard Rohr reminds us of Jesus' desire to go to what the Bible calls 'a lonely place' (a place of solitude) in order to commune with his God. He writes:

Most of us who live in a capitalist culture, where everything is about competing and comparing, will find contemplation extremely counterintuitive. How do we grasp something as empty, as harmless, as seemingly fruitless, as the practice of silence? Whenever emptying leads to a new kind of fullness we have experienced the sacred.

I don't know how you might incorporate contemplation into your own life. Perhaps it needs to be shaped by your own personality, but it needs to be intentional if it is to be sustaining. I recall an earlier time in my life when I asked Vern Ratzlaff, the former pastor of Nutana Park Mennonite Church, how he practiced contemplation. He shared with me his practice of once or twice a week, before anyone else arrived in the church, entering the sanctuary and sitting in different chairs. As he sat there he would recall the face of those who occupied that place on Sunday morning, he would hold them in his heart, and he would experience the presence of God. As I struggle with engaging contemplation this may be a practice worth revisiting. In this morning's scripture Elijah experiences God not in the rushing winds and fires of life but in the still small voice of silence. What does contemplation look like for you?

There is little doubt that Jesus' spirituality also involved being intentional about community. He asked the twelve to join him and invited himself to the home of Zacchaeus, and of Mary and Martha. He partied at a wedding feast and joined the grieving at the time of Lazarus' death. Placing oneself thoughtfully, intentionally, in the midst of community is essential to the way of Jesus. I recall a cab driver I met while travelling to a retreat centre outside of Ottawa. Although I preferred to stare silently out the window, it seemed that God intended that the cabby should talk.

He explained how he loved his new country and how he would never return to the authoritarian rule he had experienced in his homeland of Yugoslavia. When I asked him how he experienced Canada he explained, with due humility, that some things in Canada confused him. He thought the people were too driven, too taken up with materialism. He went on to tell me that he was a Christian and did not want to lose himself in materialistic Canadian ways. He explained how he drove cab at night so that he could be home with his children during the day while his wife was at work - he did not want them to be alone. I asked him how old the children were, and to my surprise, he told me that his daughter was 14 and his son was 18. When I expressed my surprise over his choice he explained how important community is and how he wanted his children to know the love that comes from being together. He went on to describe how he and a number of other immigrants had created an informal credit union pledging two hundred dollars a month to a common bank account and granting the proceeds to members in times of need. He concluded that what gave him the most pleasure in his new life, was not the collection of material goods, but parking his cab every second Saturday so he could be with friends to eat sausage, drink some whiskey and tell stories. As I imagined the scene, I could not help but think that sausage and whiskey in the company of good friends was a moment of communion and that perhaps, on that taxi ride, I was travelling with the Christ who was once again showing an alternative to endless striving.

Rohr concludes that well practiced contemplation and intentional community leads automatically to acts of justice. The justice that Jesus practiced evolved in the moments of his life. He didn't join the protest movements against Rome. He didn't form a group to petition the synagogue. His moments of justice arose in the midst of his daily life. He could not sit idly by when a woman was harassed by men of power or when children were pushed to the edge of the crowd or when the leper appeared before him seeking care. If we choose to walk in the Way of Jesus such moments will also come to us ... a friend seeking support in a moment of need or a person holding his hat outside the Midtown hoping for eye contact and not avoidance. I recall a conversation with a woman while I was at St. Martin's Church. In many ways this woman was just an ordinary young Mom trying to balance work and raising her kids, but she shared Jesus passion for ordinary acts of justice. She told me of a tense gathering in the locker room where a group of ten-year-old hockey players were being picked up by their parents. The parents arrived while the coach was railing against the kids for poor performance in the game. An athlete herself she had no problem with the coach giving the team a dressing down, but when the coach called the boys a bunch of fags she stepped out into the way of Jesus with intention. Before she knew it she was challenging the coach,

naming his comment as a homophobic slur and defending those whose sexual orientation was different than hers. The Way of Jesus does not necessarily require us to be at the front of a protest movement, but it does invite us to pursue justice with intentionality in the ordinary moments of our living.

We at McClure are passionately engaged in trying to revitalize our church but my twenty year-old friend, the theologian Richard Rohr and the whispers of our own soul tell us that we must not confuse the institution with the life of faith. Revitalizing the church begins with intentionally pursuing the way of Jesus, the church is but a vehicle to aid us in such a pursuit. This last month I realized how easy it is to simply let life go by filled with sunsets and lapping waves. It was a lovely sabbatical but as I anticipated rejoining this community, I felt the call to a much more engaging life, one that requires intention and offers the possibility of deep engagement with the God-power. There is something precious here, we must not let it slip through our hands. Richard Rohr's words echo in my mind: "The most important word is neither 'action' nor 'contemplation'- it's the word 'and'. We need both compassionate action **and** contemplative practice – let us be the community that supports one another as we pursue the way of Jesus. Amen.

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