



Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation Wednesday, January 22, 2020

As in the early church, the desert Christians were deeply committed to Jesus' teachings and lived practice. Their chosen solitude and silence were not anti-social but a way to become better at seeing clearly and at loving deeply. Withdrawal was for the sake of deeper encounter and presence.

Speaking of the relationship between contemplation and action, Diana Butler Bass describes the natural flow from solitude to prayer to active love:

For those who went to the desert, “come follow me” [Matthew 19:21] was not an escape; rather, it served as an alternative practice of engagement—the first step on the way toward becoming a new people, a universal community of God's love.

[Their response to Jesus'] “Come follow me” was intimately bound up with the practice of prayer. For prayer connects us with God and others, “part of this enterprise of learning to love.” Prayer is much more than a technique, and early Christians left us no definitive how-to manual on prayer. Rather, the desert fathers and mothers believed that prayer was a disposition of wholeness, so that “prayer and our life must be all of a piece.” They approached prayer, as early church scholar Roberta Bondi notes, as a practical twofold process: first, of “thinking and reflecting,” or “pondering” what it means to love others; and second, as the “development and practice of loving ways of being.” [1] In other words, these ancients taught that prayer was participation in God's love, the activity that takes us out of ourselves, away from the familiar, and conforms us to the path of Christ. [2]

Through their solitude, the *abbas* and *ammās* learned to be sparing and intentional with their words and to preach more through their lifestyle than through sermons. There were few “doctrines” to prove at this time in Christianity, only an inner life to be experienced so the outer life might be changed. Abba Isidore of Pelusia said, “To live without speaking is better than to speak without living. For the former who lives rightly does good even by his silence but the latter does no good even when he speaks. When words and life correspond to one another they are together the whole of philosophy.” [3]

An old *abba* was asked what was necessary to do to be saved. He was sitting making rope. Without glancing up, he said, “You're looking at it.” James Finley, a member of our Living School faculty, puts it this way: “This dance of infinite love is rhythmically playing itself out in the rhythms of our life standing up and sitting down, waking up and falling asleep. The rhythms of the day by day are the

rhythms of love given to us as this inherently sacred nature of life itself.” [4] Just as so many of the mystics have taught, doing what you’re doing with care, presence, and intention is a form of prayer, the very way to transformation and wholeness. There is no trick, no magic formula to becoming one with Reality. There is only living and, as you know, this is much harder than it first seems.

Gateway to Action & Contemplation:

What word or phrase resonates with or challenges me? What sensations do I notice in my body? What is mine to do?

Prayer for Our Community:

O Great Love, thank you for living and loving in us and through us. May all that we do flow from our deep connection with you and all beings. Help us become a community that vulnerably shares each other’s burdens and the weight of glory. Listen to our hearts’ longings for the healing of our world. [Please add your own intentions.] . . . Knowing you are hearing us better than we are speaking, we offer these prayers in all the holy names of God, amen.

[1] Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Fortress Press: 1991), 13-14.

[2] Diana Butler Bass, *A People’s History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (Harper One: 2010), 48.

[3] *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward, rev. ed. (Cistercian Publications: 1984, ©1975), 98.

[4] James Finley, *Intimacy: The Divine Ambush*, disc 1 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2013), [CD](#), [MP3 download](#).

Image credit: *Vendimian of Bythinia* (Menologion of Basil II) (detail), Anonymous artist, 981 CE.