

SLD07.03.11 14th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Sermon Series on Sacred Communities – The 4th Century Mothers and Fathers
Luke 10:25-28
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“Gazing More Deeply”

This is the third of our twelve week summer series on sacred communities. Last week we talked about the early church during that first century following Jesus' death. Today we jump to the 4th century to look at what happened when the church went mainstream.

On 312 A.D., after winning the Battle of Milvian Bridge, the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Which meant that, after three centuries of church persecution, suddenly the most powerful person in the land had become a great patron of the church. Needless to say, this represented a major turning point for Christianity. Suddenly were ended years of state and local assault beginning with the stoning of Stephen and continuing with arrests, imprisonment, mob violence and mass executions, including crazy Nero's burning captured Christians in his garden at night for a source of light.

Yay! – right? Surely this ushered in an era of inexpressible relief to all who followed Jesus. And so it did. Only, what coheres and strengthens a group better than a common enemy? Over the centuries the horrors of persecution had also served a certain purpose for the Jesus Movement. Disciples were united in resistance to the state, martyrdom for Jesus was honored as a mark of true faith, the cult of saints was sparked. The miseries of “us against them” facilitated the rapid growth and spread of Christianity, prompted all manner of clarifying defenses and explanations of the faith, and contributed mightily to

forming the fundamental tenant of Christian identity.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for there is the kingdom of heaven,” right? But what happens when you’re not persecuted anymore? Martyrdom had become a pretty popular means of attaining the kingdom of heaven.¹

The Romans, of course, just thought Christian fanaticism was a pain, that subverted their ideals of civic duty, honor and justice. "Tertullian (Ad Scapulam, 5) tells us that a group of people presented themselves to the Roman governor of Asia, C. Arrius Antoninus, declaring themselves to be Christians, and encouraging the governor to do his duty and put them to death. He executed a few, but as the rest demanded it as well, he responded, exasperated, ‘You wretches, if you want to die, you have cliffs to leap from and ropes to hang by.’"^[16]²

But for the Christians, the martyrs’ willing embrace of an ignominious death was perceived as a heroic victory over the persecutors. Absent the drama of state persecution, “red martyrdom” (sacrificing one’s life rather than recanting faith in the resurrected Lord) was no longer possible. Did no martyrdom mean no clear means to attain to the kingdom? It was almost as big a crisis for the 4th century church as the world not ending when they thought it would back in the first century.

Enter then, in the 4th century, the practice of what became known as the “*white* martyrdom” — men and women moving to the deserts of Egypt and the Holy Land to dedicate their lives in a different way. If you couldn’t die for the faith, perhaps you could *live* for it, setting aside all worldly concerns and responsibilities in order to seek only to live out the Great Commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution_of_early_Christians_in_the_Roman_Empire

² Ibid.

and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)³ And so was born the 4th century movement of Desert Mothers and Fathers.

There were lots of them, women as well as men. One historian of the times tells us that there were twice as many women as men in the deserts. Another scholar said that there were so many Christians who sought to live this life in the desert that “the desert became a city.” There were even accounts of “tourists” going out to the deserts to observe the ammas and abbas.⁴

And if the earliest church were all about getting carried away with the Holy Spirit, the Desert Fathers and Mothers were all about Intentional Faith Development. If the early church reveled in hanging out with each other and studying and praying and building each other up, the Desert Mothers and Fathers were pretty much loners. Even when they did form communities, in contrast to joyful sharing of time, talents and treasures of the early church, they tended to be spare and austere with little informal or “unnecessary” human interaction. Passionate spirituality was still highly valued, though – those tongues resting on everyone’s heads that first Pentecost still set the standard for authentic worship.

A brother went to Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, “If you will, you can become all flame.”

Becoming “all flame,” though, was a rare event, even for those early hermits of the desert. Rather than focus too much on that sort of end result, they aspired instead to

³ <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/features.php?id=16777> The Desert Mothers, Mary C. Earle.

⁴ Ibid.

follow the Apostle Paul's relentless instruction to "pray without ceasing," which was, and is, a whole lot harder than it sounds. The clean swipe of a lion's paw was beginning to look nostalgically easy.

There's the story of the brother who went to Abba Agathon (p.100) and asked, "Amongst all the good works, Father, which is the virtue that requires the greatest effort?"

And what do you think he said? "Boy, there 's nothing tougher than forgiving someone who's wronged you. Or turning the other cheek to a creep. Or withholding judgment of someone who's perpetually a drag. No, Abba Agathon replied, "Forgive me, my son, but I think there is no labor greater than that of prayer to God."

And to "pray without ceasing...? Lord, have mercy.

Some monks called Euchites went to see Abba Lucius. The old man asked them, "What is your manual work?" They said, "We do not touch manual work but as the Apostle says, we pray without ceasing." The old man asked them if they did not eat and they replied that they did. So he said to them, "When you are eating, who prays for you then?" Again, he asked them if they did not sleep and they replied that they did. And he said to them, "When you are asleep, who prays for you then?" They could not find any answer to give him. He said to them, "Forgive me, but you do not act as you speak. I will show you how, while doing my manual work, I pray without interruption. I sit down with God, soaking my reeds and plaiting my ropes, and I say, "God have mercy on me; according to your great goodness and according to the multitude of your mercies, save me from my sins.... And when I have spent the whole day working and praying, making thirteen pieces of money more or less, I put two pieces of money outside the door and I pay for my food with the rest. He who takes the two pieces of money prays for me when I am eating and when

I am sleeping; so that, by the grace of God, I fulfill the precept to pray without ceasing."

Clearly Abba Lucius had no time for the Euchite monks' self-righteous withdrawal from responsibility for the life and work of their community for the sake of prayer. But on a deeper level, Abba Lucius' story illustrates a central theme for the ancient Egyptian teachers: prayer is not just devotional time set aside for chatting with or listening to God, but a constant activity throughout the day *whatever* one is doing.

In fact, the Abbas and Ammas regarded those moments that we bracket to sit and deliberately spend time with God, as I do, quite frankly – almost as an indulgence. While potentially refreshing or heartening, personal prayer time to the desert mothers and fathers was actually secondary to two other prayer practices: reflecting and acting. Reflecting about what it means to love – specific people, our enemies, ourselves – and about what gets in the way of our ability to behave lovingly. And then translating the fruit of that reflection into action in daily living. The Desert Mother and Fathers and their devotees were less interested in pious prayer rhythms than in developing and practicing actual loving ways of being – like listening carefully, apologizing for unwarranted irritability, sharing themselves and their resources, that sort of thing. This action/reflection model, in their view, literally moves one closer, though loving ourselves and one another, to loving God. What prayer was finally to the Desert Mothers and Fathers is a shared life with God.

God is always with us, taught the ammas and abbas, but for *us* to be with *God*, we must actively, intentionally, and continuously choose to share our lives with God, in a constant back and forth movement between us and God in all that we think and say and do. And that constant movement back and forth, that awareness, that attention, that disposition of the heart that opens us to the presence of God whatever we happen to be

doing in the moment – that’s what the Desert Mothers and Fathers call “prayer.”

The monastics insisted that there’s no one right way to pray, though. Indeed, nobody’s way of prayer is quite like another’s because prayer is fundamentally an expression of each person’s unique relationship with God. How one prays depends largely upon the needs and personality of the person praying.

Abba Macarius was asked, “How should one pray?” The old man said, “There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one’s hands and say, “Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.” And if the conflict grows fierce say, “Lord, help!” God knows very well what we need, said the old man, and God can be counted on to show us God’s mercy.

For Abba Macarius, prayer is a simple, straight-forward petition for God’s help in the face of temptation. To pray without ceasing, we must share the whole of our lives with God. True prayer, the desert mothers and fathers taught, is a shared life with God.

We might think – oh, easier to share life with God out in a desert without all the distractions and demands of our lives. But the Abbots and Ammas who lived in solitude in the desert taught that temptations were part of the Christian life that not only never go away, but are essential to our salvation. Abba Anthony said, “Whoever has not experienced temptation cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. (notice the shift giving one’s life for the kingdom to *living* one’s life for the kingdom.) For wrestling with one’s own temptations produces humility, or self-knowledge, and it is from humility that true compassion for others is born. The ammas and abbas didn’t go to the desert to escape temptation. Quite the opposite: they went to the desert to wrestle with their demons.⁵

⁵ http://www.monawest.com/sermons/Forty_Days_in_the_Wilderness.htm

The primary goal of prayer, the desert mothers and fathers remind us, is not a particular outcome but a deepened connection with God. Good things may and do come out of prayer, but we don't pray for the sake of those good things. Whether we pray for God's blessing, or the healing of a friend, or the enlarging of our territory, or the end of the war, our primary goal remains, according to the Ammas and Abbas, the love of God.

For them as for us, though, the hardest struggles around prayer were less when God seemed to stand against them than when God seemed absent altogether. However, they taught, even when we cannot experience the presence of God, even when God withdraws God's Self from us, even then God seeks our healing. God stands back, they said, yet God is with us.

"I stand back but I am with you." Imaging God in this way illustrates the monastics' understanding of the purpose of prayer. Not an outcome. Not a feeling. Not even an experience. But a relationship. A friendship. A trust. They regarded learning to pray, growing in relationship with God, becoming all flame, as a process, not of a moment of fervent devotion or a season of feeling good about God, but of the hopes and heartbreaks of an entire lifetime.

While it may be beyond the capacity of our imaginations to conceive of the time and culture of the desert mothers and fathers, their teachings still speak to deep human yearnings and to perennial human difficulties. We still judge one another constantly. We still stumble in the practice of living faithfully. We still have difficulty being honest with ourselves and with God. The wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers continues to encourage, confront and guide us. Their practice of silence, solitude and stillness

remains a kind of medicine for our over-heated, frenetic culture. Their emphasis on prayer as a shared life with God over against any particular technique continues to ring true. While few of us may be designed for solitary life in the desert, allowing time for quiet, experimenting with patterns for living that are congruent with our faith, and gazing more deeply into our daily circumstances for the healing presence of God still support our effort to live out our faith in our daily lives.

For those who seek God and a life of discipleship and love, the Ammas and Abbas have this advice: pray.

To the glory of God. Amen.