

5-2-10

On Service

As monastics, we build our day around the three principal activities of prayer, study/reflection and service. They are not always equally balanced, nor should they be. Some days we find ourselves more in a role of prayer, other days are filled with mostly study, and many days seem to be engulfed in service.

As Jesus brought his earthly ministry to a close, he charged his followers with a new commandment - "to love one another as I have loved you." (John 13:34) By establishing the standard for love that is based on Jesus' actions toward us, one has to be drawn into a study of the gospels to see just what he did and how he lived so that we are able to follow his model.

Generally speaking, it is clear that he spent time in prayer, that he studied the scriptures as well as human behavior and society, and that he "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." (Philippians 2:7) He lived a life that was a clear blend of preparation, renewal, and encounter.

Jesus shaped the foundations of Christianity to go beyond just avoiding sin. Living is to be more than just not doing anything wrong. Living is primarily meant to do good, to be of service to other people and all of creation. It is a life that responds to "love your neighbor as yourself." It is a life that places us at risk, and yet it is a life that offers the most benefit and satisfaction.

We serve God in different ways and at different times. Each person has been given a special set of skills, talents and interests, and is placed in unique situations every day to use them. We do not have to save a nation or cure a disease to be great in God's eyes; we only have to use the talents he has given us in moment by moment encounters with other people and creatures of his creation. This could mean offering a friendly gesture or kind word to another person; provide a helping hand or simple blessing; or doing one of thousands of things if we are alert enough to see the need in the present moment.

God gives us projects or causes or movements or jobs to get us started in the right direction. Or, maybe we have to run an errand for someone else. These are the "service theatres" within which we live and move. But they are not always the ends in themselves. They may simply be the means by which much of the true service work happens, where we play a role in each scene on that stage.

When we embark on a project or errand or other of the day's activities, we begin to encounter other people in our moment by moment journey. These moments only come one at a time, and will often bring to us something that God needs to be done in that moment. If we are sufficiently aware of each present moment, we may see the opportunity as well as the resources needed to respond to it. Often it will involve other people; sometimes it will be ourselves that need attention (perhaps it is time to get some rest or nourishment). Sometimes God may simply be asking us to enjoy something of beauty. Over time, we come to learn the difference between need and want, and what is really the right thing to do for ourselves and others.

This is service at its finest - responding to the situation we find ourselves in during each moment. To prepare for this best, we need to do what Jesus did: balance our life in prayer, reflective study and service, so that we are ready to perceive and respond to God's call.

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