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A VISION SO OLD IT LOOKS NEW

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Almost everywhere I go these days, people agree that something is wrong in American Christianity. Whether I'm talking to Pentecostals or Presbyterians, Democrats or Republicans, Muslim friends or secular neighbors, there seems to be a consensus on this: the church in America isn't living up to what it claims to be. Somehow we've lost our way.

Some Christians get defensive when others point out the irony of Crusades fought in the name of the Prince of Peace or anti-gay preachers getting caught for soliciting gay sex. We're a little embarrassed by reports that suggest battered women are at greater risk if they talk to their pastors or that people are more likely to be racist if they are members of a church. But I think we may have reached a point of clarity here at the dawn of a new millennium. It's hard to be a Christian in America.

Much of my generation has grown up with this sense that we are living in a Post-Christian era. But I have to admit that I didn't. I was raised the son of Southern Baptists in King, North Carolina, one of those last bastions of Christendom between the ever-expanding holes in America's Bible Belt. Born in 1980, I was born again while Reagan was still in the White House. Where I grew up we talked about Jesus like he lived just over the next hill. My people taught me to love Jesus and memorize Scripture, and I did as I was told. By the time I was in high school, I was certain the God had called me to become President of the United States… for Jesus. While still a student in high school, I made my way to D.C. to work as a page for Strom Thurmond, then President Pro Tempore of the U.S. Senate.

That's where I learned firsthand that it's hard to be Christian in America. Just outside the doors of Union Station, as I was walking to get lunch one day, I saw a man crouched down, holding a Styrofoam cup. He asked if I could spare some change, and I looked at him without saying a word. I remembered what I'd heard back in King about how poor folks in the city were lazy and begged money to buy drugs and booze. A country boy in the city, I was dressed in my Sunday best, doing everything I knew to fit in. I didn't want to look naïve. So I looked straight through the man and kept walking.

But about the time I stepped through those glass doors into Union Station, I recalled a memory verses from Vacation Bible School. They were the words of Jesus, ringing in my head: "Verily I say unto you, just as ye did not do it unto the least of these my brethren, ye did not do it unto me" (Matt.25:40, KJV). If those words were true I had not only just ignored a fellow a human being; I had completely missed the Lord I was trying to serve. In my rush to follow Jesus to the White House, I'd almost tripped over him outside Union Station. Following Jesus wasn't as simple as chasing after my dreams. I began to see that it's hard to be Christian in America.

Yet learning the cost of discipleship turned out to be good news. It opened my eyes to the deeper and truer reality of God's work in the world through Jesus Christ. Yes, it's hard to be a Christian in America. Indeed, the church we know is fraught with contradictions. But the same God who raised Jesus from the dead is able to restore life giving warmth to limbs that were frozen in death. Even if the church is the dead and broken body of Christ, God can resurrect it.

Throughout the history of God's people, prophetic voices have arisen to remind us that our life depends on the power of resurrection—on God's ability to make dry bones live. This is an ancient vision, though ever new because it calls us to a deeper and truer life in the here and now. Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker used to say that he believed in a vision for society that was "so old it looked like new." Since the third and fourth centuries of the church, monastic movements have served to bring us back to this truth. They show us in fresh and often dramatic ways a vision so old that it looks new.

In his book *The Monastic Impulse*, theologian Walter Capps summarizes the legacy of monastic history. "Monasticism," he says, is the West's "most powerful and enduring instance of counter-culture." When I think counter-cultural, I usually think punk rocker with a nose ring, not nun in a cloister. But I think this is a pretty incredible claim that Capps makes: not only does monasticism last longer; it is also more powerful than any other form of resistance we've seen to mainstream society in the West. If that's true, then the real radicals aren't quoting Che Guevara or listening to Rage Against the Machine on their i-pods. The true revolutionaries are learning to pray. If Capps is right, they always have been.

Antony and the First Monastics

When we think about the early church, we often think about how Christians were a persecuted minority, eaten by lions and burnt at the stake by Roman emperors. Even though that kind of persecution was not constant in the early church, it is true that it cost a lot to follow Jesus for most of Christianity's first three centuries. But by the mid-3rd century, Christianity had spread to people in power. About then, the world started changing for Christians.

In the midst of this transition, an eighteen year-old Egyptian Christian named Antony lost both of his parents and suddenly became responsible for his family's household. In 251 AD, after hearing Jesus command to "sell what you have and give it to the poor," Antony gave his parents' land to their neighbors and sold all their possessions. After he'd given all the money away, he started trying to figure out what God wanted him to do with his life.

At that time in Egypt there was the occasional hermit who devoted himself to prayer and fasting. Anthony made the rounds from one hermit to the next, learning the disciplines of a godly life and developing quite a reputation for holiness, even among his peers. But then something happened to Antony. He started to lose his resolve, to remember the life he'd left behind, and to wonder if he was really getting anywhere. When he tried to sleep at night, Antony dreamed of lavish meals and seductive women. He said his mind was filled with "a great dust cloud of considerations."

But Antony continued the prayer and fasting that his mentors had taught him. He cried out to God for help. Then one day he heard a human voice speaking to him. He asked who it was, and the voice answered that he was "the friend of fornication." Antony saw a small, dark demon, and listened to him complain about how Antony had resisted all of his schemes. "From now on," Antony said to him, "you cause me no anxiety, for the Lord is my helper, and I shall look upon my enemies." When he said this, the demon ran away.

Antony's experience with the demon opened his eyes to the spiritual battle that was going on in the 3rd century world. The devil, he saw, was using the power and favors of the Roman Empire

to entice Christians. Though at first they had just seemed like a “dust cloud,” Antony realized that these were powers he could not understand, even less resist. Still, if God was his helper, Antony knew he could face the devil and his schemes head on. He could fight on the Lord’s side in the battle against evil. And he could do it best, Antony decided, by leaving society and going out into the desert.

“Nearly twenty years he spent in this manner, pursuing the ascetic life by himself,” Athanasius says. But somehow word spread about this holy man who’d gone off to do battle with the devil. So after twenty years, some of his friends went to find him. They tore the door of his hermitage down and asked Antony to come back to the city with them. Antony agreed, and when he came back to the city he brought the power of God with him. “Through him the Lord healed many of those present who suffered from bodily ailments; others he purged of demons, and to Antony he gave grace in speech. Thus he consoled many who mourned, and others hostile to each other he reconciled in friendship, urging everyone to prefer nothing in the world above the love of Christ.” A revival like no one had ever seen swept through the Egyptian church with a power to change lives and renew broken relationships. All the bishops of the church couldn’t have organized such a movement. But the witness of Antony, who trusted the Lord and fought the devil face to face, literally moved thousands to give themselves over to the way of Jesus. “And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains,” Athanasius says, “and the desert was made a city by the monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens.”

Thus monasticism was born. During a time when Christianity was transitioning from the persecuted faith of a minority to the state-sponsored religion of the powerful, the monastic impulse drove Dessert Abbas and Ammas out into the abandoned places to learn God’s power by fighting the devil face to face. They helped the church discover new forms of faithfulness for a new time. But even more than that, they set a precedent for how the church remembers the power of God when the powers of this world are in transition. They introduced the monastic impulse to relocate and re-imagine our role from the margins of society.

Benedict and a “School for the Lord’s Service”

By the end of the 4th century, it was clear that the imperial project of Rome had failed. Caesar Augustus had brought the whole Mediterranean world under Rome’s power, but the Romans had not been able to figure out a way of life that was sustainable for all those diverse peoples. The sack of Rome by the Visigoths was more traumatic for Romans than September 11, 2001 was for us in America. Afterward there were no illusions that life could go on as before. Europe was in the midst of a social crisis.

Augustine of Hippo wrote *The City of God* at the beginning of the 5th century to argue that Rome had fallen because it was built on the worship of false gods. Christians could continue to make a life in the ruins of the Empire, Augustine said, because they were citizens of another city, a people on their way to God’s kingdom. As it turned out, Augustine not only had his theology right, but he described well what would happen throughout the 5th century. Christian

communities sheltered people from the economic fallout of a crumbling Empire and offered the hope of a different kingdom, “on earth as it is in heaven.”

This is the situation that Benedict of Nursia was born into. Though he is now remembered as the father of Western monasticism, we don’t know very much about Benedict’s life. We wouldn’t know anything at all except for the fact that a fellow named Gregory, who became a monk at a monastery that Benedict started in Rome, went on to become Pope Gregory the Great. He wrote a biography of Benedict and, more importantly, held up Benedict’s Rule of Life as a model for community life. After that, new monastic communities spread across all of Europe.

In his *Rule*, Benedict said that monastic community is to be a “school for the Lord’s service.” In the midst of society, as people struggled to get by in the world, Benedictine communities were to be islands where people could learn a different way of doing life. That way of living was summarized in the Latin phrase *ora et labora*—“to pray and to work.” Benedict’s *Rule* offered a model for communities where people could live a life of prayer together, serving one another and the community around them. They were able, as Gandhi later said, to “be the change they seek” in the world. And through the practice of hospitality, they would welcome others into their life with God.

In our democratic world of supposedly endless possibility, it’s hard to imagine the radical alternative that Benedict offered people in the so-called “Dark Ages.” In early European society, there was little to no social mobility. Peasants had children who grew up to be peasants. People with power passed it down to their children. There was no such thing as a middle-class. The one long shot at possibly moving up from the lower classes was the military, and this option was only available to men.

But all of this changed when monastic communities started popping up. Benedictine life was literally an alternative society. Rich and poor were treated as equals under the Rule, serving one another out of reverence for Christ. What is more, women could choose not to remain in their father’s house or marry into another man’s house, but to share life and even have the possibility to lead in a house of fellow sisters. These little societies within society became like leaven in a lump of dough, creating pockets of freedom where people could imagine alternatives to the violence and grinding poverty of the world around them. As leaven tends to do, they spread among the peoples they touched.

Protestant Monasticism

The language of monasticism makes sense to Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. It can sound strange, however, to Protestant ears. Even so, it’s no secret to Protestants that the 16th century church in Europe was in serious need of reform. Though it wasn’t happening everywhere, there really were people selling salvation as if it were a commodity. (If you think this was just a 16th century problem, try watching a little late-night Christian TV.) Protestants often look back to Martin Luther as the herald of true Christian faith to a church that had become corrupt, and there is some truth to that. But we just as often forget that Martin Luther was an monk who learned the gospel he preached from his confessor in a monastery. We forget that much of the so-called Protestant Reformation was driven by the monastic impulse.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the radical Reformation. After Luther's 95 Theses stirred up popular disagreement with some of the doctrine and practices of the Catholic Church, some political rulers in Germany found it advantageous to declare their territory Protestant, take control of the church's coffers and landholdings in their jurisdiction, and expand their rule in the name of religious difference. In this way, both Catholic and Protestant churches were equally state-sponsored institutions. But the radical Reformation emerged when people within this tumultuous environment insisted that church was really about allegiance to Jesus, not to a Protestant or Catholic ruler. They focused their witness on believers baptism, thus winning the moniker "Anabaptists"—the re-baptizers.

It's important to note that re-baptism was ultimately about allegiance. In the so-called Christian culture of 16th century Europe, where infants were baptized into church and state citizenship at the same time, the monastic impulse drove some Christians to "give themselves to the Lord" by choosing to go once more under the baptismal waters. At a time when Catholics and Protestants could agree on almost nothing else, they agreed that it was best to kill these radical Reformers.

Michael Sattler was one of the Anabaptists who counted the cost and chose a path that would lead to martyrdom. For Sattler, that journey started at St. Peter's in the Black Forrest, a Benedictine monastery. There he helped lead a reform movement in the early 16th century, calling the brothers to return to the true spirit of Benedict's *Rule*. But Sattler was ultimately dissatisfied with the brothers and left the monastery in search of a new community. He found this among the Anabaptists, and cast his lot with them.

Though he only survived for a few years, Sattler was the main author of the Schleitheim Articles, a statement of the radical Reformation's vision that numerous independent groups came to rally around. In his biography of Sattler, C. Arnold Snyder notes the parallels between the Articles and Benedict's Rule. What these radicals where calling for, he observes, was voluntary membership in community, a common way of life, the disciplined pursuit of holiness, and leadership elected by the community. In other words, they wanted a church that looked like Benedict's monastery.

Though Protestants haven't called their reform movements "monastic," it's worth noting that this impulse has continued through the past five centuries, giving rise to Quakers, Shakers, Baptists, Pentecostals, evangelicals and all sorts of other radical Christian groups. I'm convinced that the most significant new monastic movement in America was the slave church that arose from the "hush harbors" of plantations in the so-called Christian South. In the face of a white Christianity that justified the ownership of black people, black Christians founded an underground community in which holiness was stressed, citizenship in heaven defined allegiance, economic sharing and hospitality were practiced, and church was understood to be "first family," where God alone is Father. For years scholars argued that little could be known about the theology and practice of slave churches because there were no historical documents. But thankfully Albert J. Raboteau saw that the theology of the slave church was in its songs and the practices of its members were recorded in the personal narratives of emancipated slaves from the late 19th century. In my book *Free to Be Bound* (NavPress, 2008), I've tried to show how the hope of the church in America depends on us learning from the black church tradition what it means to follow Jesus. I often tell people that I know the black church was born of the monastic impulse because the folks at our church in Walltown call one another brother and sister, just like they always have in monasteries.

Getting Back to Our Roots

Trying to sum up the history of monasticism, I feel like the author of Hebrews, who came to the end of the role call of faith in chapter 11 and asked, "What more should I say? For time won't let me tell of …" (Hebrews 11:32). I don't have time to write about Francis and Clare of Assisi, Patrick of Ireland, Catherine of Sienne, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avilla, John of the Cross Ignatius of Loyola, the Waldensians, the Brethren of the Common Life, the Pietists or the Puritans, just to name a few. I do hope, however, that by putting a few of monasticism's best known stories into context, we can begin to get a sense of the story we find ourselves in. In the history of the church, it's nothing new to look around and find our institutions severely compromised. Ours is a tragic story.

But it is also a story of hope. In every era God has raised up new monastics to pledge their allegiance to God alone and remind the church of its true vocation. These people have not been perfect. Like the apostle Paul, they often considered themselves "chief among sinners." But, one way or another, they found hope in story of the people of God and strove to get back to the roots of that story. For this they were often called radicals (radix is Latin for "root"). Sometimes they were even killed. But they knew the life they found in Christ was worth more than anything else this world could offer.

These saints who've called us back to our roots generation after generation remind us that the roots of God's kingdom are rhisozomes. They spread beneath the surface, effecting change from below. It is a quiet revolution—one that is often ignored by the newspapers and usually missed by the historians. But, in the end, it is how God plans to save the world. Like the rhisozome called kudzu that covers so much of the South where I live, God's kingdom just won't go away. It is, as the book of Daniel says, "a mountain that grows to fill the whole earth" (Dan.2:35).

Yes, it's hard to be a Christian in America. But even that can be good news. If the cost of discipleship pushes us to go back and listen to Jesus again, it may just open us to costly grace and the transformative power of resurrection life. With God, all things are possible. May we slip God's kingdom in the cracks of this world's broken systems. And may it spread like kudzu.

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