

The Walk of Christ, Part 1: The Contemplative Life  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
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Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Last week on Transfiguration Sunday, I focused on the central issue in the gospel of Matthew – the divinity of Christ. Today, is the first Sunday in Lent, the season when we consider the events after Jesus “set his face to Jerusalem.” His teaching, his preaching, his clashes with secular and religious leaders and, then in Holy Week, his prosecution, persecution, suffering, dying and, finally, rising.

After last week’s sharp focus on the divinity of Christ, I propose we focus this Lent on the humanity of Jesus and how Christ shows us how we can walk most closely with God. The Book of Hebrews describes Jesus as “the pioneer and perfecter” of our faith. Those are two good words, aren’t they? As pioneer, Jesus was the first, the trailblazer. As perfecter, he showed us a complete faith, a walk with God that includes all of the aspects God expects from us.

What are those elements, those building blocks of the Christian life? The answer to that question is where I propose we “go” for these 40 days of spiritual development and deepening. Specifically, Christ modeled disciplines that have become major Christian traditions. Now, before you react to those words “disciplines” and “traditions” by thinking it’s going to be a boring series of sermons, let me list them for you. I think you will see how each tradition can be its own source of strength and, together, they paint a picture of the complete Christian life we see in Christ.

First, there is the Contemplative Tradition, marked by a deep connection to God through prayer. There is also the Holiness Tradition, the discovery and practice of living out the virtues of Christ. There is the Social Justice Tradition, the living of the compassionate life; the Evangelical Tradition, which focuses on the power of the Word of God in Scripture; and, finally, there is the Incarnational Tradition, which is the power of God in and through the sacraments we celebrate in worship.

Now, do you see how the elements fit together like the pieces of a puzzle? How they give us the complete portrait of Jesus, fully divine but also fully human? I want to emphasize the humanness of Jesus in this series for an important reason; Jesus showed that we can practice these disciplines as fully as he did.

It’s not easy, but it’s not impossible. So, they are not out of our reach. We can’t let ourselves off the hook by saying that we aren’t divine so we can’t do what Jesus did. In

these disciplines, these perspectives and approaches to every-day living, Jesus lived a life that was closest to God. Isn't that our objective in Lent, too? To close whatever gaps lie between us and our Creator by changing those parts of our lives that keep us at a distance ... and by taking up those practices that draw us closer to God?

Before going any further, I need to cite the outline for this series and give its author full credit. Richard Foster leads an intrachurch movement called Renovare' that is "committed to the renewal of the Church in all her multifaceted expressions."<sup>1</sup> Foster has written several books about spiritual formation. This series will be shaped by his 1998 book, Streams of Living Waters. In that work, Foster reviews the major traditions we will explore. If you want to read all that Foster says, perhaps you want to find a copy of the book.

One last note: In the interest of full disclosure, I have chosen to postpone consideration of one tradition – the Charismatic Tradition, to make room for our bilingual worship service next Sunday. But be assured that we can talk about that tradition come Pentecost Sunday in June.

Let's begin, then, with the life of prayer, the Contemplative Tradition.

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Scripture, as we should expect, is full of examples of those who practiced the contemplative, prayer-filled life. We heard in our Old Testament how the psalmist described the thirst of his soul for God. Elijah prayed through earthquake, wind and fire. When Mary learns she is pregnant, the text says she "pondered all things in her heart." The Apostle John made the love of God the center of his life and prayer his sanctuary. The Apostle Paul drew on the power of prayer to persevere and endure the hardships of his life and ministry.

But this Lent we are most concerned with Jesus. Christ prayed the moment he was baptized, before and after and his entire life. He prayed with the disciples but more often he withdrew to a place of solitude to be alone with God. He prayed for the good, the bad and the indifferent. He instructed us to pray for our enemies. Perhaps most of all, he prayed for God to give him the strength to walk the path the Lord had laid out for him, prayers that took him to the anguish of the Garden of Gethsemene and the surrender on the cross.

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<sup>11</sup> Bio from book jacket.

He was, as he instructed his disciples to be, oriented to God in everything. That is the contemplative life. He prayed honestly and even vulnerably. We need to keep that in mind when we ask God to forgive us our debts as we forgive others.

As with all of the Christian traditions we will consider in this series, we ought not to limit our efforts by telling ourselves we cannot be as obedient in prayer as Christ was. He was not so disciplined in prayer because he was divine. He was just perfectly human, a model for our aspirations, however broken we may be.

In that human side, Jesus knew God had answers and strength and guidance that he didn't. In that way, he was not all that different from Abraham Lincoln, who said:

I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day.

What was exemplary about Jesus was the sheer focus and fortitude of his prayer life. Scripture tells us that Jesus prayed so hard that he sweats blood. At so many times, Jesus lost himself in prayer, and in that way he was found.

Christ's example inspired the desert fathers and mothers in the 4<sup>th</sup> century to monastics, Benedictines, Moravians and others who followed for centuries, those who removed themselves from society, into the desert or the mountains or monasteries to be completely undistracted in their focus on God.

The contemplative life bears many benefits and blessings, as Richard Foster notes.

- "a delicate but deepening love for God that feels more like a gift than an achievement."<sup>2</sup>
- Peace that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7)
- Deep joy and pleasure, unlike worldly pleasure
- Emptiness in us that makes room for God; and,
- Slowly and gradually, transformation that gives hope, which is a lot better than optimism.

A life of such disciplined prayer, as Thomas Merton said, is to encounter God in the "nakedness of pure trust."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Streams of Living Water, p. 49

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

At the same time, as Foster writes, such a life of disciplined prayer also has its perils. They include:

- An elevation of the gift of faith to the exclusion of the gift of intellect
- A solitude so consuming that it overshadows the importance of a community of faith.
- A detachment from the pressing social issues of the day; and, a
- A tendency to separate oneself from ordinary life. (As Foster notes, monastics didn't have to worry about diapers or baby-sitters of PTA meetings.)

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And there's the rub, we would say. Jesus was, well, Jesus. The monastics lived for decades in the desert. Even the Monks and nuns of today don't face the 24-by-7-by-365 demands of the "real world."

So here is what we can do. In these 40 days of Lent, we can add one time of prayer to our day. If you pray just once a day, make it two. If you pray at meals, add a time of prayer to your morning or your afternoon. You get the idea. Think about our Muslim brothers and sisters. Five times a day they go to God – before dawn, at noon, afternoon, at sunset and in the evening.

You may find a devotional book to use in your additional prayer or you might pray the psalms. You may use each week's prayer of confession from our worship service You can pray for our Caldwell brothers and sisters who are hospitalized, ill or unable to be here in worship with us. Or you might meditate by repeating over and over the 'breath prayer,' which is simply to say, "O, Lord Jesus, hear my prayer." And don't forget how Jesus most liked to pray – by removing himself to a place of solitude.

You know what they say, if you do something every day for 30 days, it becomes a habit. That means that by Palm Sunday, we can be a bit more Christ-like in this one way. So in this way, and in the other disciplines we will consider in this Lenten series of sermons, we can be bold enough to seek to imitate Jesus, to be like Christ, to share Jesus' vision, love, hope, feelings and habits.

Let us pray:

Show us again, O God, the compassionate love of our Lord, who suffered for our sins, who took humiliation upon himself and died on the cross to make us whole, who runs to meet us on the road, throws his arms around us, and welcomes us home. In his love we pray, Amen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A prayer by Mark Landfried, Let Us Pray: Reformed Prayers for Christian Worship

