

Wisdom from the Desert Christians: Love of God and Love of Neighbor

By Mary C. Earle

“How am I supposed to *do* this?” she asked in frustration. “How am I supposed to live this out?” The woman asking the question was a young friend of mine, in her 30s. Nancy (not her real name) is a much sought-after consultant whose gifts for organizational management have brought her prosperity and respect at an early age. She is married to a lawyer, and they have two young children. She has been attending church ever since she was a little girl, and she has participated in Bible study. We had come to the story of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel according to Luke (Lk. 10:25-37). We had been reflecting on showing God’s mercy to our neighbor when Nancy’s question burst out of mouth.

Nancy was asking the question that is at the heart of our faith: how do we live out what we believe, in the midst of our culture? How do we embody that Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord the God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself”? (Lk. 10:27, Dt. 6:5, Lv. 19:18) How in God’s name are we to become who Christ calls us to be while the dominant culture encourages us to seek wealth and fame and to be working non-stop, “24/7” as colloquial English puts it? How do we grow beyond the various polarities that plague us both within the church and within our larger society?

For Jesus, and for believers in the early Church, love of God and love of neighbor were inseparable. In Jesus’ life and ministry it is very clear that he knew this truth: exalted love of God without love of neighbor tends to produce a kind of spiritual inflation, a kind of pseudo-holiness bought at the neighbor’s expense. Jesus’ frustration with the Pharisees seems primarily directed toward their condescension. He is demonstrably angered by those who diminish or put down others whose lives don’t fit a particular code of holiness. His outright anger and impatience with those who practice their prayer so that others may see and be impressed tells us much about the need for balance.

By the same token, his own band of disciples is riddled with political zealotry. Those who sense that love of neighbor is primary, and take the love of God out of the picture, can never see a real-life circumstance from a divine perspective. When love of God is forfeited for love of neighbor, it is often the case that social action becomes ego-centered. Those who want to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick become caught up in a self-centered agenda in which all kinds of psychological and spiritual maladies begin to be acted out. A kind of single-minded obsession can be the driving force behind a ministry.

How in the world are we to find a balance? Jesus did not live in our modern circumstances. Holding love of God and love of neighbor and love of self in a delicate balance can only happen when the practices of silence, stillness and deepening self-awareness are integral to the spiritual life. This is not new information. The Christians who lived in the early centuries of the life of our faith knew this well.

In fact, at the time when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, this practice of learning to live the intricate pattern of love of God, love of neighbor, love of self came to be the heart-focus of many men and women who left the urban

centers in Egypt and the Holy Land. These Desert Fathers and Mothers went to the wilderness in hopes of encountering the living God—the God who had been revealed to Moses and Jesus in the desert. What led thousands to leave their lives and possessions and seek radical encounter with God in the wilderness? What prompted them to desire to *live* their faith in the ordinary relationships of their lives?

Up to the fourth century, prior generations of Christians had lived under the imminent threat of persecution and possibility of martyrdom. Worshipping as Christians was a political act, an act which defied the official cult of the emperor. Under some Roman emperors, those Christians who refused to worship in accordance with state regulations were put to death in horrifying, excruciating ways.

Then, with the Emperor Constantine, the situation changed radically. It was no longer illegal to be a Christian. Suddenly the imperial court was filled with those professing to follow the Risen Christ, and there was a relaxing of the rigor and discipline of the faith and practice that were normative while Christianity was under persecution. Some followers sought to find a new way of living the gospel, of being Jesus' followers, in an age when wealth, power and luxury were suddenly joined to Christian faith and life.

Many women, and almost as many man, went to the deserts of Egypt and the Holy Land and sought to live out the Great Commandment. They left the lives they knew and sought to find ways to embody love in a new social and cultural circumstance. From them we have received sayings and stories, a tradition that was predominately oral for several generations, and then later written down. It is a tradition that is practical and focused on not judging one's neighbor. It is a tradition that is wary of the human distortions of love that result in our tendencies to use one another, to puff ourselves up at the expense of others, to reduce love to dependency or manipulation. Scholar Roberta Bondi has said of these desert Christians, "I have found in them a fleshing out of what Christian love is: God's for all of us, ours for each other, God's world, and God." (*To Love as God Loves*, Fortress Press, 1987, p. 7)

These men and women, who became known as *ammas* (spiritual mothers) and *abbas* (spiritual fathers), wanted to find ways to live the faith, not just talk about it or argue about it. They went to the desert seeking not so much a place as a *way*, a path of life. They wanted to be carefully, gently mindful of their own behaviors that got in the way of embodying the love of God in and for the world. They desired to open themselves to the divine reality of transformation in Christ, not solely for their own benefit, but for the life of the world. More than anything, they sought to see the reality of the universe soaked through and through in the mercy and grace of Christ, and to perceive all actions, all thoughts within that context of mercy.

These desert ammas and abbas started with some practices we have all but forgotten:

First, they went to the wilderness. In their cases, they went to stay and to live. For most of us, such a shift is impossible. We have families and responsibilities. We have vocations that require an urban setting. I suggest to you that they offer us the invitation to regularly step outside of the daily demands and details of our lives. When we take the time to step aside, take a breath, get a little perspective, we may discern moments and possibilities that we had overlooked. We step back from the immediate press of the everyday and allow God's

mercy to beckon us. We step away from the press of our lives and into the silence of God's kindly, creative presence.

In the culture of the United States, we are driven to a frenzy by the speed of our lives. The desert Christians call us to stop, to step aside, to "seek the One who made the Pleiades and Orion." In this stopping, stepping aside and entering silence and stillness, we allow God to return as the center of our vision and life. As long as we are hurried and harried, it is so very easy for our own egos and control agendas to be the dominant center of our planning, decision making and moral choices. Our dominant culture in the U.S.A. is shaped by speed, by work, by sheer busyness. The desert *ammās* and *abbas* tell us that if we are to embody the love of God as persons and in our communities, we begin with stillness and silence that will allow us to hear God, see God, taste and know that God is good. These desert Christians would tell us to quit eating spiritual "fast food" and to slow down, to return to the practice of savoring spiritual food, to remember that this good God revealed in Jesus even gives us gifts when we sleep.

Second, the desert Christians would tell us to quit spending so much time judging one another. Such a way of wisdom is almost counter intuitive to those of us fed by the sound bytes of television commentaries and what passes for civil debate in this country. At the heart of our present dilemma is a failure to listen deeply to God, to ourselves and to one another. We are habituated to noise, to impulsive behavior and to quick, shallow judgments. Conversation is virtually unknown—we talk at or past one another, forgetting to listen. Truly listening always invites change and transformation—it is hard to prove I am always right if I really listen to another's life and experience.

Third, these desert Christians knew that we need one another. Their practice was to seek out those who were more experienced in the faith, and to "ask for a word." The *ammās* and *abbas* left us sayings that come from these spiritual conversations, sayings that sometimes confound us, and sometimes set us free. One of my favorites relates to spiritual pride:

A brother asked, "I have found a place where my peace is not disturbed by the brethren; do you advise me to live there?" Abba Poemen replied, "The place for you is where you will not harm the brothers."

The Desert Mothers and Fathers have left us a legacy that will help each of us as we remember that love of God that speaks us into being, sustains all that is created, and redeems us through the love of Christ.

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