



Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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Put Down Your Weapons

We cared for each other. We also were deeply divided on several issues of faith and culture. After he expressed his point of view, I shared mine. He immediately began to refute what I was saying, correcting my position. I felt diminished, hurt, and defensive. His voice grew in intensity as he told me what the Bible said and how his views were correct. I listened, praying and fearful.

I did not want to argue with him or even change his opinion. I simply wanted space in his world and our relationship for me to be me and respected with my point of view. I knew that however I responded to him I needed to be honest and vulnerable with no effort to impose my views on him.

Reaching inward I discovered the source of my unease. An ancient sorrow stabbed me with a sense of profound estrangement and grief. A fear, disproportionate to any real threat I was

experiencing, took hold of me.

Shaking, near tears I spoke quietly, “I don’t feel like you listened to me, that you heard me. I feel like you are trying to convert me.” There was silence.

When another person believes something which one finds objectionable, an inner alarm may go off. The body goes on alert. I prepare myself for attack and put on arms in an effort to protect what I hold dear. We all carry weapons, some more lethal than others. We may pull out arguments, persuasion, and fear to change someone’s mind. We may denigrate, ridicule, or pass laws to control our enemy. We may bully or avoid confrontation. We may hold our ground, arms crossed, unwilling to compromise.

When I respond to my friend in such ways, I have stopped seeing my friend as a human being with his or her own freedom and destiny in God. My friend has become someone I must correct or

change in some way. This view of my friend may destroy the potential for true mutuality and respect. I see only what I consider as false or dangerous or evil in the other. I am incapable of seeing the mysterious beauty of this person loved by God.

Could there be hope in that place of impasse, when my friend and I can go no further, when we are tempted to either walk away or deepen the rift between ourselves with anger and coercion? Suppose that in this very failure of unity there is door you can open which leads to peace?

While Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, came. With him was a large crowd carrying swords and clubs. They had been sent by the high priests and elders of the people. . . .One of those with Jesus reached for his sword. Striking the high priests slave, he cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put the sword back into its place. All those who use the sword will die by the sword.'

Mt: 26: 47-52

A weapon, drawn and dripping with the blood of the high Priest's slave, is gripped by the hands of one of Jesus's friends. In the approach of the angry crowd, he hears the piercing alarm of danger and strikes quickly to protect his

beloved master.

Then Jesus says, "Put down your weapon." Jesus has set his face to reconcile all conflict which separates us from each other and from God. He will show the depth of his Abba's Love as he lays down his life for his friends, even those who draw swords against him. In his death and resurrection Christ Jesus heals, gathers, and connects us together as one body. In Jesus we find both the power for reconciliation and the one who reconciles.

Relationships of mutual care are not made through our ability to convince those who see differently to believe as we do. Nor will laws, imposition of power, or force bring the lasting peace we long for in our communities and the world.

For me as an occasional sword-drawing follower of Jesus, it is through vulnerable, loving surrender to Christ, and willingness to put down my weapons that I find love and peace in relationships, even as we hold very different views. Over and over I find that it is precisely in the context of shared vulnerability and openness that Jesus shows up in our midst.

How does this peace in the context of conflict occur?

Sixteenth century spiritual director, Jean Pierre de Caussade, wrote that “Divine action, being limitless in its plenitude can take possession of a soul only to the extent to which that soul is emptied of all trust in its own action, for such self-confidence is a spurious fullness that excludes divine action.”

Tell me this isn't so, Jean Pierre! My self-confidence is fraudulent, a sham, false? Isn't self-confidence something many of us work very hard to achieve? What possible good will my insecurity do for me or God's Realm?

Our confidence is spurious – deceptive and untrustworthy – because it is ours. That is, human confidence is mortal and fallible, easily manipulated, tainted with pride and envy. God removes our confidence in ourselves in order to replace it with Christ and his mind. As we become one with Christ, our ego or false self, the part of us which wants to be confidently in control, decreases in order that Christ's presence in ourselves may increase.

When John the Baptist hears of Jesus's ministry, he gets this immediately as he says, “He must increase and I must decrease.” (John 3: 30) John understands that there is a relationship

between the divestment of his sense of personal power and influence to the increase of the power and influence of Jesus.

It takes most of us a long time to see the relationship of our own self confidence to the increase of God's power in and through our lives. The dying of that false self which wants to increase, to puff itself up, and enlarge its power is a slow and painful process.

To follow Jesus is to embark on a long journey of disarmament. The experience of diminishment may not feel at all like movement toward union with Christ. One may feel weak, out of control, and scared. You may feel like you are losing power, as well as your faith.

Yet, if you step back away from your feelings of humiliation, you are likely to see signs of Christ present and at work in and through you beyond your own control and effort. As Christ fills more of your being and life and your silly ego stops wringing its hands and defending itself, you may discover a new ease and trust in God. You think you are falling apart, but Christ is busy working through your perceived limitations and weakness.

He said to me, “My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness.” So I’ll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power can rest on me. Therefore, I’m all right with weaknesses, insults, disasters, harassments, and stressful situations for the sake of Christ, because when I’m weak, then I’m strong. 2

Corinthians 12:10 CEB

As we lay down our and swallow our pride Christ’s power is perfected in us. For it is in our weakness that the strength of God is manifest. For it is in our weakness that the strength of God is manifest.

Being seen as weak or incompetent is severely criticized and often ridiculed in our culture. Yet Jesus did not die in order for us to become competent. Jesus died, appearing quite incompetent himself, in order to occupy and meet us in our incompetence.

In the place of our failing self-confidence Christ sets free authenticity and our true self. We become more spontaneous, lighter. We laugh more. We take things less seriously. We are more present to each moment. We are able to go with the flow of events with greater flexibility. We are less pre-

occupied with ourselves. We forgive easily. We are more compassionate and loving. Our prayers may shift from always asking God to take away our stress and weakness to gratitude for how Christ works through our perceived incompetence. We may discover the amazing freedom of knowing, through our own experience, that when we feel the weakest and most useless may be exactly when Christ’s power is the greatest through us. Instead of fearing our diminishment, we begin to trust God more and more.

To come to such awareness and trust requires prayer and contemplation. In contemplation we find the space where we stop running or fighting or controlling and allow Christ to occupy our brokenness with grace. We learn to tolerate and be present to our ambiguity and uncertainty. We learn to refuse to give into dichotomous thinking: either or; good or bad; right or wrong; black or white; us and them. We are more humble as we see the world as a place where everything belongs and that we are all one.

A deeply revolutionary matter
Such maturing as disciples is critical for our times. In 2012 Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, was invited to address

the Vatican's Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Defining contemplation he said, "To be contemplative as Christ is contemplative is to be open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts. With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow."

Williams continued:

In this perspective, contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.

Following Jesus requires divestment of my own interests in favor of the Interests of Love. I lay down my agenda and my need to win on my terms. I begin to notice the blinders I wear which distort my vision and prevent me from seeing my enemy as friend, as part of the human family.

I see and take responsibility for my prejudice, the layers of the pain of my ancestors imprinted in my DNA, the fears I have been taught, the trauma of the human race. I remove my concealed carry weapons of pride, cynicism, bitterness, resentment, sarcasm, envy, and anger.

Theologian and teacher, Dallas Willard, writes about Christians becoming people who are not offendable and not angry and forgiving as a matter of course:

. . . much time is spent among Christians trying to smooth over hurt feelings and even deep wounds, given and received, to get people to stop being angry, retaliatory, and unforgiving. But suppose, instead, we devoted our time to inspiring and enabling Christians and others to be people who not offendable and not angry and who are forgiving as a matter of course. . . . To intentionally

*make disciples is to open the doorway
for people to become like that.
That is why it is such a great gift to
humankind.*

Returning to my friend

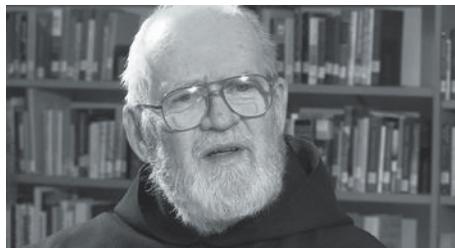
Love listens with an open heart and mind to someone whose views we find fearful and offensive. My friend loved me as I spoke.

I asked, “Could you be there,” pointing to where he sat across from me, “with your story and conviction and all that has led you to believe as you do? And may I be over here with my story and all that has led me to my place of understanding? And can we let Christ be between us and be what reconciles us? Can we let our love for God be what unites us, as Jesus prays in John? Can we both be okay right where we are? Can there be this space of love and mystery between us?”

I am not going to change you and you are not going to change me. I will say things that drive you crazy and you will do the same for me. Can we let the power and love of God be the peace between us, not a human made peace of one of us succeeding to convince the other to be on our side, but the peace of Christ, beyond our understanding and manipulation?

And it was so.

Loretta F. Ross



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Fr. Meninger is a founder along with
Thomas Keating of the Centering Prayer
Movement. He lives at the Benedictine
monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. At
82, Meninger only comes out from the
monastery a few times each year to teach
about contemplative practice. In June of
2015 he will be presenting worships in
Kansas City, Topeka, Emporia, Wichita,
Warrensburg, Columbia and St. Louis.

Books by Fr. Meninger include *The
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The river of the water of life...flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...On
either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... and the leaves
of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22: 2-3

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included.

I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. I've given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. I'm in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me.

John 17: 21-23

Do keep in mind that love begins when nothing is expected in return. In this prayer of love we seek nothing – that is, nothing less than God who is everything.

William Meninger



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