

## **DOMESTIC SPIRITUALITY: FINDING GOD IN THE ORDINARY, THE MUNDANE AND THE IMMEDIATE**

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Being isolated atop a pole on the edge of the Syrian desert would not be my chosen path to godliness, and yet that is precisely the course chosen by Simeon Stylitis, the 4th century ascetic. For 30 years Simeon lived bound by a rope to the top of a column 60 feet in height and 3 feet in diameter, complete with a short cross-bar to keep him from falling off in his sleep. His disciples would come from time to time with a ladder to bring him his food and remove his waste. There, seated alone on his pillar and far removed from distraction, Simeon set about pursuing unobstructed communion with God. This was not the beginning of Simeon's pilgrimage. In fact, for the 6 years prior to this he lived atop a pillar of just 6 feet in height. Apparently Simeon became embarrassed at the smallness of his perch and what that may reflect about the seriousness of his intentions. He therefore moved to a more worthy abode.

As you wander through the pages of church history, you discover countless individuals, both women and men, who have gone to strange and yet inspiring lengths in search of an unhindered connectedness to God. There are those who lived in caves; those who chained themselves to crosses and wandered for years in the desert; many who confined themselves to secluded monasteries and lived according to strict vows of silence and separation; still others who passed their years isolated on rugged pinnacles of granite in the middle of the Atlantic ocean. Whatever course these figures of history chose, they lived with a

desperate passion for the presence of God. In the grip of this passion they felt compelled to relinquish all responsibilities, ambitions, relationships, possessions, and commitments, perceived as peripheral to or obstructive of their pursuit.

As I read these stories, I feel conflicting responses within. At one moment I feel inspired. These testimonies are compelling, stirring, even convicting. They seem to capture something of the intensity of David's prayer in Psalm 27: "One thing I ask of the Lord and that is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple." I cannot help but be impressed by the intent of their hearts and the focused nature of their pursuit. At the same time, I feel frustrated. The spirituality of these devotees is one which, for the most part, hinges upon the act of withdrawal; to pursue the presence of God, one must leave behind the pursuits of ordinary life. It is a model of spirituality which centers upon solitude, isolation, quietness and retreat, and has so little to do with the constant and busy ebb and flow of everyday life.

I am not an ascetic or a desert recluse. I am a husband and a father. I have made certain life-choices which mean that acts of withdrawal will always be the exception for me and never the rule. I cannot run off to the desert or climb an isolated peak in the middle of the Atlantic. I certainly cannot live perched on a pole for the next 30 years. I have a marriage to nurture, a family to provide for, children

who wake in the middle of the night in need of comfort. I have responsibilities in the workplace, friendships to maintain, neighbors to relate to, and study commitments to fulfill. Because of this, the spirituality of the desert will always draw my attention as a distant and even admiring observer, but never as a full participant.

I may well be able to brush this sense of frustration off as an aside if this spirituality of withdrawal did not have the pervasive influence it has today upon the Christian community. Almost everywhere I look I see spirituality defined by images of withdrawal. In the tradition in which I was raised, the ultimate measure of one's personal spirituality is the daily 'quiet time'—a period of personal solitude for Bible reading, meditation and prayer. Depending on our tradition, this may be broadened to include other experiences such as liturgy, eucharistic celebration, charismatic worship, and days of 'spiritual retreat'. Though we may speak of discipleship, mission, social action and witness as activities important to the Christian life, when we speak of spirituality more often than not we revert to images of personal piety, inner reflection and solitude.

It would be foolish to suggest that spirituality and withdrawal have no connection. Certainly they do! One needs only to scan the gospel accounts of Jesus to see this exemplified. Furthermore, even a cursory awareness of the rich traditions of spirituality in church history remind us of the value of solitude, silence and retreat. This is precisely why the testimonies of pole-sitters like Simeon attract us. My contention, however, is this: if a spirituality of withdrawal is *definitive* of our understanding of spirituality, then we will be sold short when it comes to our experience of the presence of God. Those of us for who can only withdraw

momentarily and occasionally can end up feeling side-lined, having to content ourselves with being observers while others take center-stage with God.

Ernest Boyer Jr. makes a constructive contrast between two contexts for spirituality.<sup>1</sup> The first he calls "life at the edge." This is the context for the more traditional desert spirituality, a spirituality of relinquishment and separation. The second he calls "life at the center." Here we discover a spirituality of the home, neighborhood, and workplace. Fuller's Ray Anderson has described spirituality as a "domestic skill."<sup>2</sup> At first sight this seems like an unlikely term, but as we begin to discover the routine centers of life as rich contexts for spiritual pursuit, we may find that spirituality has as much to do with the domestic settings—the ordinary, mundane and immediate place of life—as it has to do with mountain tops, deserts, and 60 foot poles.

### **The Ordinary**

I have long been fascinated with the domestic nature of Jesus' spirituality. Time and time again in the Gospels, Jesus embraces the most ordinary of circumstances and places, finding within them rich sources of spiritual meaning. Of course, moments of withdrawal are an important aspect of Jesus' relationship with the Father, but they are always the exception. Jesus spends the largest part of his time in the most everyday settings—homes, neighborhoods, and marketplaces—identifying and responding to the presence of God. Jesus does not call followers out to the desert. Rather he fleshes out the nature of the spiritual journey right at the center of ordinary, daily life.

Furthermore, in the midst of the ordinary Jesus constantly describes the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Bypassing images of angelic choirs,

palaces, and centers of power, Jesus describes the Kingdom in the most everyday language. He tells stories of vineyard workers, fishing, family meals, homemakers, household chores, seed-sowing and neighborhood parties. More often than not, it is seated at a dinner table that Jesus expounds the nature of grace, discipleship and Christian hope. Routinely Jesus paints a very domestic and accessible picture of the Kingdom of heaven by bringing truth into the domain of ordinary life.

My wife loves her garden. She has spent the last year cultivating a thriving vegetable patch in our back yard. Gardening is a domestic task. Knees are scuffed and fingernails get caked with grit. But in the midst of turning the dirt, pulling the weeds and running the hose, my wife often notices the voice and presence of God. Parables of her own come to mind, pictures form and allegories become clear. Spiritual truths are tangible and transformation happens without ever having to leave the ordinary behind.

### **The Mundane**

What images come to mind for you when you think upon the nature of discipleship? In my tradition, one of the most dominant New Testament images is that of the soldier. It is a military image which conveys a sense of discipleship as relinquishment, leaving and transience. With Jesus as our captain, we are called to give up civilian pursuits (2 Tim. 2:4), relinquish all ties, responsibilities and possessions (Mt. 19:21), put on the armor for battle (Eph. 6:10-18), and be packed and ready to move at a moment's notice (Mt. 9:9; 10:1-42). It is a discipleship of surrender, readiness and movement. It is this particular image of discipleship which has moved so many into missionary service and other forms of 'full-time' Christian ministry, for it often involves a

surrendering of family ties, career and, in many cases, financial security. It is also this call to relinquishment that beckons so many into monastic-type orders where spirituality takes on a prescribed, ordered and focused form. More often than not, it is this image of discipleship that carries with it a strong sense of personal 'call,' for the soldier always awaits the commander's orders. Thus, the clergy, the missionary and those in religious orders will often speak comfortably of their response to the call of God.

There is, however, another image of discipleship in the New Testament: that of the farmer. While the image of the soldier encompasses that sense of relinquishment, leaving and transience, the image of the farmer speaks much more of the mundane—of settledness, putting down roots, the routine and repetitive rhythms of life. It is, in essence, a much more domestic image. Traditionally, the farmer is the one who gives a lifetime's investment in one piece of land, working that same ground year in and year out. This is the work of sowing, weeding, nurturing, and harvesting. The annual cycles of the land are routine and predictable.

The imagery of the farmer could be interpreted as the less glamorous and exciting of the two, and often the sense of God's call for the farmer is harder to define. Regardless, it encompasses so much of what everyday spirituality is about, and for many who live out their faith in the mundane environments of home, neighborhood and workplace, it may be easier to identify with. Of course, these two images are not mutually exclusive, as if we live out an either-or spirituality. Both speak to every disciple at different points in his or her journey. The farmer must relinquish and surrender just as the soldier is called to do, and the soldier must endure the routine and repetitive. It is only how

these experiences are applied and embraced that differs. The tragedy lies in the fact that the soldier image is sometimes held up as the higher calling of the two, as more reflective of genuine surrender to Christ. The average Christian who lives out his or her faith in suburbia, employed in the marketplace, and paying the mortgage, can often be left to gaze longingly at the pastor, missionary or monk as the one who has chosen the higher path. This should not be so, for however we live out our discipleship, and in whatever context we discover implications for God's call, we are assured of God's presence, even amidst the most mundane tasks.

### **The Immediate**

Australian John Williamson's captivating song "Cootamundra Wattle" describes an interaction between an elderly man and his wife. Surrounded by tokens and objects of the past, the woman is seated inside longing for the happiness of times gone by. Her husband's response is to invite her outside with these words:

*There's all the colors of the rainbow  
in the garden, woman,  
And symphonies of music in the  
skies.  
Heaven's all around us if your  
looking.  
How can you see it if you cry?*

"Heaven's all around us if your looking." That simple line captures so much the mystery and wonder of the incarnational faith we profess as Christians: God with us! Heaven is not only a future hope but a present reality. Through the birth of Jesus Christ, God has entered into the ordinariness of our earthly existence. He is not only the God enthroned on high, but he is the God of the immediate. As Eugene Peterson translates John 1:14, "The Word

became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood." It is his presence in our neighborhood that forever seals the domestic settings of our lives as places for divine encounter. Through "God with us" we are now able to touch the eternal through the immediate.

Thomas Howard, in his book Hallowed Be This House, grieves the fact that our modern scientific worldview has rendered our daily lives devoid of any sense of divine mystery. Everything can be explained apart from religious faith. Consequently, even the church has embraced the resulting and tragic division between the sacred and the secular. Expression of religious faith, therefore, is removed from the ordinary contexts of life, relegated to the imagination, places of withdrawal and retreat, and the ritual of Sunday worship. In contrast to this de-hallowing of the more immediate parts of life, Howard calls us back to an awareness that "we do, in fact, walk daily among the hallows."<sup>3</sup> Not only is God present in all the places of life, but his eternal purposes find root in the most immediate settings. As the gospel story and the story of the early church weaves in and out through the houses, neighborhoods, and lives of ordinary people, there is a sense in which these ordinary places and happenings are forever validated as legitimate avenues and contexts for response to the transforming presence of God.

A spirituality of the immediate does not make light of the future hope of the Kingdom that is yet to come. It does, however, take seriously the Kingdom of God that is of the here and now; a Kingdom that is found within us and potentially within all the places of daily life. God's Kingdom is present when I sit down to the evening meal with my family, when I meet my neighbors around our mail boxes and we chat

together about our day, and when I sit my daughter on my knee and read a story before she goes to sleep.

### **Conclusion**

Spirituality is a popular term today. Bookstore shelves are increasingly stocked with titles addressing the popular longing for personal meaning, self-fulfillment, and reconnection with the mystery and 'beyondness' of life. As Christians we believe that this reconnection is made available to us through Jesus Christ. The task remains ours to promote and nurture this connection, to deepen and strengthen it. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that there is more than one way to do that. Certainly we need to withdraw from the hustle and bustle of ordinary life, to find moments of stillness and solitude through which to reestablish perspective and intentionally focus on our relationship with our Creator. But withdrawal is not our only path. We can also find rich sources for spirituality in the midst of the daily and routine. I will always be a distant admirer of people like that pole-sitter Simeon Stylitis, and the many disciples of history who have given themselves so unreservedly to the pursuit of God. But I can never be a full participant in their spirituality of withdrawal. I need help to identify other models of spirituality, models which enable me to discover and respond to the presence of God at the center of life. Moments of withdrawal will always be the exception for me, and therefore a spirituality which does not embrace the ordinary, the mundane and the immediate as fertile contexts for divine encounter simply places me on the spiritual side-lines.

Each afternoon I take my little girl for a walk around our local neighborhood. She is just 3 years old, and I am constantly fascinated by what she sees

as we walk. She can be transfixed by the rays of light coming through the trees, or the shape and 'crunch' of the fallen leaves as we walk over them. She watches as the water trickles through the drains and delights in touching the hedges as we walk by. Her eyes will follow the path of a small black beetle crossing from one side of the path to the other and she giggles when we see our neighbor squirting the cat with the hose. And then when we are home, and she stands on a kitchen chair next to me as I prepare the dinner, she loves to run her hands over the chicken fillets and splash her palm in the little puddles of water on the bench. My little girl observes and notices things that I have long since brushed aside as insignificant. And yet with her help I am learning to see again. For I cannot help but feel God's pleasure as this little person, in her own simple way, acknowledges the wonder and the mystery of the most ordinary stuff of life.

As we move into a new Millennium, Jurgen Moltmann calls us to a *new spirituality* which he defines as a *new lifestyle*: "The whole of life as it is lived is seized by God's vital power and is lived 'before God', because it is lived 'out of God'."<sup>4</sup> Moltmann's spirituality is distinctively inclusive for it finds expression in "the whole of life," not just some aspect of religious experience set apart from the dailyness of living. It is a domestic spirituality, for it discovers and nurtures the presence of God right where we are. It does not live from retreat to retreat, but finds rich sources of life in the now of every moment and every task. It is the spirituality that my daughter lives out so naturally. Times of withdrawal will always be a necessary part of our spiritual journey. However, as we nurture all of our spiritual senses in the midst of the ordinary, the mundane and the immediate, we may well find

God breathing new life and purpose into all the crevices and corners of our lives. Spirituality is about all of life and all of who we are. It has to do with moments of retreat and rush-hour traffic, with periods of silence and the noise of little children, with the communion table and the work bench, with hushed

Sunday worship and frantic family dinners. The promise of "God with us" is not confined to the mountain-top. It is, in fact, an invitation to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection" right where we are. It is a journey not just for pole sitters in the Syrian desert, but for all of us!

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1. Ernest Boyer, Jr., *Finding God at Home: Family Life as a Spiritual Discipline* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).
  2. Ray S. Anderson and Dennis B. Guernsey, *On Being Family: A Social Theology of the Family* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), chapter 9.
  3. Thomas Howard, *Hallowed Be This House* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1979), 13.
  4. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (London: SCM, 1997), 81.