

RENOVATING THE SPIRITUAL HOUSE

What's the gospel word on monasticism?

1 Peter 2:1-12

It's hard to be a Christian.

We *know* it's hard to be a Christian in some *other* parts of the world.

Where Christian activity is severely limited,
because government bans such activity.

Or where there is outright repression, persecution, or violence
directed at Christians.

But *that's* not what I'm talking about.

It's hard to be a Christian . . . *here* . . . *today*.

At least if we take our faith *seriously*.

Oh, it's easy to take the name, and even wear it publicly,
engage in worthy Christian activities

like regular church attendance, communion,
doing mission and service,
being active in Sunday School and small group.

But living as an intentional Christian—*that's* a challenge.

Which is *exactly* why there is such a thing as monasticism.

And exactly why you and I should consider such a thing.

I imagine many, if not most of you here, don't have a clue
why I included in this series on contemporary cultural issues,
a Sunday to explore the gospel word on *monasticism*.

I imagine some of you think I might lecture on this
quaint, old, small, minority expression of the Christian life,
and draw on a few inspirational examples,
and find some way to

take some poignant lesson *from* them,
lift it out,
and apply it to our complex American life.

I don't imagine *any* of you thought I would come here this morning,
and encourage all of you to *consider* monasticism.

Surprise!

Now, before any of you husbands and wives
grab onto your spouses' sleeves for dear life,
let me assure you I am *not* going to say to anyone,
“Get thee to a nunnery!” as Shakespeare said,
or “Get thee to a monastery!”

That may be a noble calling.

But I think for that, only a very few are called.

But I want *all* of us to consider . . . *deeply* consider . . .

what monasticism is, why it keeps emerging in new forms,
and what elements of it we might, in fact, be called to practice.

I had us listen to a reading of 1 Peter 2 this morning,
because this is a wonderful metaphor for the Christian life,
that we have much to learn from.

In this letter, the writer is appealing to the members of the church
to put away the sinful practices that so many of them
had fallen prey to.

He starts the chapter that way: “Rid yourselves, therefore,
of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.
Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk,
so that by it you may grow into salvation.”

At the end of this section, he repeats his concern,
“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles
to abstain from the desires of the flesh
that wage war against the soul.

Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles.”

And in between these two similar appeals,
this passage paints a picture of how to structure our lives
to make this *possible*.

It's summed up in this phrase, from verse 5:

“let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.”

And no, this cannot be re-interpreted—

as many individualistic American Christians have done—
to mean just an *inward* spiritual house, within my own soul,
where Jesus lives quietly, and privately.

The letter writer's instructions are for the church, as a *community*. We need to hear the plural "you," clear in the original Greek, but invisible in English, unless you read it in the *Southern Revised Standard Version*:
"Y'all rid yourselves of malice, envy, slander, etc . . .
so that y'all may grow into salvation.
Y'all come to Jesus, the living stone,
and all y'all be built, like living stones,
into one spiritual house."

The letter writer is telling the church how to structure its life together, so as to be one strong spiritual household. Putting away these sinful practices, and experiencing a holy life, is *not* something you can do alone. It's too hard. So get together and help each other out.
All of you; be a royal priesthood.
That is, be each other's connection to God.
Be a holy nation.
God chose you as a people. So *be* that people of God.

V. 10:
"Once you were *not* a people,
but now you *are* God's people;
once you had *not* received mercy,
but now you *have* received mercy."

V. 11:
"You are aliens and exiles in this world."
And the only way to survive as aliens,
and maintain your identity as a people,
is to be built into this spiritual house.
A strong house that can both safeguard this treasure,
and be a place of welcome and hospitality,
for others to experience the treasure.

This is monasticism at its best.
The building of a spiritual house,
as a place to treasure the gospel,
to serve the needs of the world,

and to welcome the stranger.

No, I *don't* believe that all Christians are called to live under one roof, out of one purse.
We *may* not be called to live in an intentional Christian community.
But we *are* called to live in a community of intentional Christians.

Say it either way.
But the Christian life was never meant to be lived alone.

Kyle Childress is a serious student of monasticism,
and—you might find interesting—
is a married pastor of a Baptist church in Texas.
He wrote an essay in the journal *Christian Reflection*,
in which he stated things pretty strongly.

Listen to him:
"If our people are going to live the Christ-like life, then they had better do it as a body or else they will never make it. Lone individuals trying to live faithfully cannot stand against sin, death, the Powers, and the overwhelming pressure of society. Church members, as individuals, are easy pickings for the Powers of Death; they will separate us, isolate us, dismember us, pick us off one at a time, and grind us down into the dust."

You know, the earliest Benedictine monasteries were the result of Christians trying to figure out a sustainable way of living the Christian life while society as *they* knew it—the Roman Empire—was crumbling around them.
St. Benedict developed what came to be known as the *Rule of Life*.
In a society where people struggled to get by, just survive, Benedict organized a counter-culture way of life that became like an island of stability.
He called these communities,
"Schools for the Lord's service."
Their way of life was summed up in the Latin phrase,
ora et labora . . . to pray and to work.

St. Benedict's *Rule* became a model for community life.

In these communities,
people lived a life of prayer,
they served each other,
and they served the community around them.
And they welcomed others into their community.
They practiced hospitality.
It was a radical alternative society to the so-called
Dark Ages.

There is something similar, yet very different, going on today.
We *also* live in what might be described as a crumbling Empire.
The Christianized West, *Christendom*, is on its last breath.
The church has been pushed aside as irrelevant.
All citizens of our society, including *Christians*,
are being well-trained in the school of individualism,
and materialism,
and autonomy,
and self-determination.
We live hectic, and fragmented lives.
We *don't* have the kind of communal life that can sustain
a consistent, Christian, moral life,
even at the most basic level.

Philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre, in his famous book, *After Virtue*,
said that a turning point in early history occurred when people
abandoned the task of shoring up the Roman Empire,
and gave up believing that civility and moral community
depended on maintaining that Empire.
So under St. Benedict's leadership,
they created a kind of monastic community that changed Europe.
So MacIntyre ends his book by saying we *too*
have reached that turning point.
We need local forms of community within which
civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained
through the new dark ages which are already upon us.
And [quote] "if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive
the horrors of the dark ages,
we are not entirely without grounds for hope.

This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting on the frontiers;
they have already been among us for some time."

He says our problem is our lack of consciousness that this is happening.
And his closing line is,
"We are waiting . . . for another—doubtless very *different*—
St. Benedict."

In a similar vein,
theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his brother in 1935, saying,
"The restoration of the church will surely come from a sort of new
monasticism which has in common with the old only the
uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on
the Mount in the following of Christ. I believe it is now time to call
people to this."

In fact, there is a growing movement in the Christian church *today*,
especially here in America,
called "new monasticism."

And it is gaining traction.

It is being taken seriously by young adults,
and by pastors, and academics, and others.
Perhaps the most well-known face of "new monasticism"
in evangelical circles is Shane Claiborne,
who has had high-profile visits to EMU
twice in the last few years,
and was one of the preachers in the adult worship
at last year's MCUSA assembly in Columbus.
Less well-known, but even *more* influential among the movement,
is Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove,
a well-educated 30-year-old living at Rutba House,
an intentional Christian community.

He could *easily* have built a name for himself in academics,
but instead is living with his wife and family
in this small Christian community with other singles and couples,
in a poor neighborhood in Durham, NC,
practicing radical hospitality,
welcoming recovering addicts,
engaging in a rhythm of morning and evening prayers,

raising food and sharing meals with their neighbors,
practicing economic sharing,
and teaching, preaching, and writing for the larger church.
His latest book is *The Wisdom of Stability*,
in which he as . . . *yes* . . . a 30-year-old young adult,
is promoting the idea of staying put, as a spiritual discipline,
not running off to something newer and bigger and better,
but working out your faith where you are *now*.
As an early desert father, Abba Anthony, said,
“In whatever place you live, do not easily leave it.”

About six years ago, Jonathan and his community
invited persons from new monastic communities all over
to spend some days together at Rutba House,
and share with each other what they were learning.
Out of this came what is known as *12 Marks of New Monasticism*.
They are:

- Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire (that is, the deserts,
the spiritual and economic and social wastelands)
- Sharing economic resources with the community and with the needy
- Hospitality to the stranger
- Lament for racial divisions and pursuit of a just reconciliation
- Humble submission to Christ’s body, the church
- Intentional formation in the way of Christ
- Nurturing common life
- Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and
children
- Geographical proximity to community members who share a common
rule of life
- Care for the plot of God’s earth given to us, and support of local
economies
- Peacemaking in the midst of violence
- Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life

These are *not* new ideas.
Read the book of Acts.
Read the Benedict’s *Rule of Life*
Pull out the founding document for Anabaptists in the 16th century,
the *Schleitheim Confession*.

You will find many parallels.

This way of being Christian is *not* a new invention.
But it is a movement of people *today*, in our *own* culture,
in *our* town, and across our land,
who are saying to each other,
there *has* to be *more* to being Christian
than what the narrative of the American Dream
has been telling us for so long.
They are saying,
the life we’ve been taught to live,
cannot be the life for which God created us.
It’s too empty. And too full, at the *same time*.
It’s too fragmented. Too short-sighted. Too temporary.
They are rediscovering what is at the root of Christian faith.
Root . . . Latin, *radix*. Where we get the word radical.
These are radicals who are *not* fringe religious lunatics.
They are on to something important for us. For *all of us here*.

They are looking at what the “spiritual house”
called the Western church, has *become*.
They see it is broken, and falling down.
And they are seeking to renovate it.
They are trying an Extreme Makeover to our Spiritual House.
And we need to listen to them.

No, I’m *not* calling us all to sell all our houses and possessions,
and move in together,
and open one bank account.
That is not a *wrong* way to live out our faith.
But I *wouldn’t* suggest we are *all* called to that.

But we are—*all*—called to go to the deserts of this world—
to *be with* . . . the land and people
that the world is ignoring and abandoning.
Whether they are in the middle of a big city,
or in a part of our own small town that we usually avoid.
We are—*all*—called to share resources with each other and those in need.
We are—*all*—called to welcome the stranger.

We are—*all*—called to lament division and work for justice.
We are—*all*—called to submit to Christ’s body.
We are—*all*—called to nurture Christian community.
We are—*all*—called to care for God’s earth.
We are—*all*—called to reject violence and build peace.
We are—*all*—called to be disciplined and to contemplate God.

of this world’s broken systems.
And may it spread like kudzu.”

—Phil Kniss, October 24, 2010

The question is *how* we can do that here and now.
If *that* is our common calling,
and the present way of structuring our lives makes that calling
difficult if not impossible,
what kind of *restructuring* might be called for?
How can we find ways to spend more time together,
living out a covenant with each other?
Almost *anyone* can do what it takes to go to church.
But can we *be church* in this way?
Can we *be church* for each other and for the world?

This is what we must figure out, together.
We must talk with one another,
and explore creative and faithful ways
to restructure our lives
so that the good, moral, Christian life is sustainable.
I don’t know what that will look like for all of you.
But I am *certain* it will need to be more than
going to church every Sunday.

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove said
the roots of God’s kingdom are like rhizomes.
They spread beneath the surface, effecting change from below.
It is a quiet revolution, one often ignored,
but it’s how God plans to save the world.
He wrote, “It’s like the rhizome 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.”
And then he concludes, as *I* will conclude,
“May we slip God’s kingdom in the cracks