

A Circle of Quiet

Sixth sermon in the series: What the Church Has Forgotten, AA Remembers

Text: Isaiah 26:3-4; Psalm 46:10; Romans 12:1-2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"Be still, and know that I am God..." Psalm 46:10

"Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusts in Thee. Trust in the Lord for ever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock." Isaiah 26:3-4

"...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, ...which is your spiritual worship...be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God..." Romans 12:1-2

Madeleine L'Engle writes,

...often I need to get away completely, if only for a few minutes. My special place is a small brook in a green glade, a circle of quiet from which there is no visible sign of human beings. There's a natural stone bridge over the brook, and I sit there, dangling my legs and looking through the foliage at the sky reflected in the water, and things slowly come back into perspective....The brook wanders through a tunnel of foliage, and the birds sing more sweetly there than anywhere else; or perhaps it is just that when I am at the brook I have time to be aware of them, and I move slowly into a kind of peace that is marvelous....If I sit a while, then my impatience, crossness, frustration, are...annihilated, and my sense of humor returns.
(*A Circle of Quiet*, p. 4)

She wrote that in a book entitled, *A Circle Of Quiet*. From that passage she named the book after it was finished and the title is a happy choice. It describes the book which, in journal fashion, records Madeleine L'Engle's deepest thoughts and intuitions, the kind of reflections that come to one who has developed a circle of quiet in her life.

I borrow the phrase "a circle of quiet" for this message, which deals with *the importance of solitude, meditation and prayer in the nurturing and sustaining of the new life in Christ, a truly spiritual existence.*

Once again, what the Church has forgotten, AA remembers. In the wonderful logic of the Twelve Step Program for recovering alcoholics, AA recommends a daily practice of meditation and prayer. I am jumping over steps eight and nine which have to do with making restitution for whatever wrongs one has done, where amends can be made without doing further injury, and step ten which encourages a continued moral inventory such as we have earlier discussed in step four. I turn now to Step 11, which deals with the discipline of a devotional life:

We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

Such a practice is not new to us in the Church. Perhaps it is not fair even to say that the Church has forgotten it. I think, however, we would not be far wrong if we said that for most of us in the Church it is a practice not practiced. Here again perhaps the recovering alcoholic is more fortunate than those of us that do not share his particular problem. His problem is such that, once having been rescued from his plight, he knows he can continue on the road to health and wholeness only by the daily appropriation of the power and peace of God. That is why we speak of a recovering alcoholic, not a recovered alcoholic. He is never cured; he lives one day at a time – indeed, moment by moment.

The Power - God, as he understands Him - has set him free from the tragic slavery that held him bound. But that freedom is nurtured one day at a time and the secret is a day-by-day conscious cultivation of the power and peace of God.

I hope you know by now that this series is not primarily for recovering alcoholics, nor is it for the purpose of advertising AA, although I am happy to do so. I have stressed throughout that the alcoholic is not unique. He has a particular problem but then, we all do of one sort or another. The Steps of the AA program are simply borrowed from the Scripture and translated into the language of one particular group of people. But the steps follow diagnosis and remedy of the human condition found in the Scripture and they go on to counsel how that new life must be nurtured and sustained.

What the recovering alcoholic knows to be absolutely essential, too many of us believe to be optional.

He cannot make it without daily prayer and meditation. None of us can, but because we don't necessarily fall on our face without it, we think we can get by. But we are only fooling ourselves, or, I should say, cheating ourselves out of the richest dimension of human experience - *the practice of the presence of God*.

Let me suggest to you today that every life needs a circle of quiet. Let me encourage you to set about developing for yourself the habit of devotion, a time for solitude, meditation, prayer.

AA provides practical helps for the development of the discipline of devotion. There are several publications which are very helpful. What I suppose one could call the AA Bible is a little pocket-sized book entitled *Twenty Four Hours A Day*. There is a brief paragraph on some aspect of life, a meditation and a prayer. For today's date, for example, this is what is written:

We cannot get along without prayer and meditation. On awakening, let us think about the twenty-four hours ahead. We consider our plans for the day. Before we begin, we ask God to direct our thinking. Our thought lives will be placed on a much higher plane when we start the day with prayer and meditation. We conclude this period of meditation with a prayer that we will be shown through the day what our next step is to be. The basis of all our prayer is: Thy will be done in me and through me today. Am I sincere in my desire to do God's will today?

In another AA publication, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Step Eleven is discussed in a very practical way. Recognizing that for many a daily practice of meditation and prayer may be totally new, simple hints are given as to how to begin. The suggestion is made that one take the Prayer of St. Francis, "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace..." and let it soak into one's consciousness. Read it. Read it over. Read it slowly, thinking about every phrase, savoring every word.

This, of course, is but one example of how devotional material can be used to get us started. The literature available is immense and the devotional suggestions many. The aim of all our striving must be the practice of the presence of God, the developing of conscious contact, communion with God.

For us who would nurture and nourish our spiritual life, our life in Christ, the greatest source of devotion, the greatest aid we have is the Bible, and the practice of daily Bible reading is indispensable for one who would have his life conformed to the image of Christ.

The Old Testament lesson is Psalm 46, one of the most familiar and best loved of the Psalms, which are the favorite source of devotional reading in Scripture. Psalm 46 celebrates the safety and security of God's people because of His presence with them. Perhaps it was written to celebrate the preservation of Jerusalem from the Assyrian hosts. But the historical situation is not important. In itself, it breathes of the security that comes to God's people because of His presence with them.

The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge.

How many times have not these words brought calm and peace to those in peril, confusion and fear?

Be still and know that I am God.

What steadiness comes to one who repeats those words and with those words comes into the conscious presence of God?

The Psalms are full of such comfort and strength and not only the Psalms. I added another example of the promises of God's words from Isaiah:

Thou dost keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusts in Thee. Trust in the Lord for ever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.
Isaiah 26:3-4

That statement was inscribed on a plaque and hung in our living room when I was growing up. It promises precisely what AA knows the recovering alcoholic needs. It promises what each and every one of us needs. It promises peace to the mind concentrated on God. It calls us simply to trust in God, the Rock of Ages.

Christian hymnology has taken up texts such as these and enabled us to sing our faith. Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is based on Psalm 46. Augustus Toplady based the familiar "Rock of Ages" on Isaiah 26:4, where "everlasting rock" is literally "rock of ages."

Rock of ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.

These two hymns are directly based on words of Scripture and the hymnal is a great source of Christian devotion, providing much substance for meditation and prayer.

The Old Testament texts I offer as examples of what one finds in rich supply in the Scriptures, great statements that, once imbibed and appropriated, bring peace and calm to the heart. But I selected the New Testament text as the biblical parallel to Step Eleven, *the call to spiritual worship, which leads to the transformation of life*.

Paul urges,

Therefore my brothers, I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very lives to him; a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Adopt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your mind be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect. Romans 12:1,2

The Apostle with his "therefore" moves in this great statement of Christian faith to the practical application of Christian truth in the everyday life of the believer. He appeals on the basis of all that has been set forth as the foundational truth of Christian faith for a life wholly offered up to God. The sacrificial system of the old cultic worship is now superseded. Jesus, the Lamb of God, has been offered over for all -the perfect sacrifice. No longer do we come with sacrificial offerings as the token of our lives offered in worship. Rather, as new creations in the Risen Christ,

we offer ourselves in the totality of our lives to God. Our worship is the offering of our whole being, the worship of mind and heart in the practical affairs of our every day.

A change has taken place; a transformation. The mind is remade. The whole nature transformed. Now all of life's energy is focused on learning to know and do the will of God.

In his paraphrase, Phillips renders Paul's words thus...

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves toward the goal of true maturity.

I submit to you that no statement could better reflect what AA suggests is the goal of human existence than this word from Paul. Step Eleven counsels prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand Him and the focus of prayer is the knowledge of His will and the power to carry that out. Living out God's will for our lives by the power of God is an excellent statement of maturity, of full human existence.

If one would read the rest of this twelfth chapter as a prelude to every day, one would find its shaping impact on one's life and this, of course, is the purpose of a life of prayer and meditation, the purpose of practicing the presence of God.

Let me speak personally for a moment. Over the years I have spoken on the subject of prayer and spiritual formation. I did so because it is a subject that from time to time should be addressed in the course of one's preaching. I have tried to do so honestly, never claiming to have cultivated the art of Christian devotion with great skill, nor to have achieved great success in the practice of devotion. In fact, what stands most vividly in my mind about my attempts to speak to this area of Christian life is that I was most helpful because I admitted my own failure, neglect and inconsistency in the life of prayer and meditation. After an experience of regular prayer with a prayer list, a weary morning appointment and a sense of heavy obligation during my years in seminary, I backed off any kind of regular devotional practice. I think there was some negative reaction on my part as well as recognizing, in a more positive vein, that the devotional life cannot flourish under legalistic constraint. After all, I reasoned, one can pray any time, anywhere. And it is true. Yet I think it is also true that one does not pray "without ceasing," any time, anywhere unless one has some more purposeful, disciplined pursuit of prayer and meditation.

I have had another barrier to meaningful devotion. I have wrestled with the theology of prayer and have too much made prayer a matter of the head than the heart.

Now as I speak to you on the subject of practicing the presence of God, of a circle of quiet in your life, I can speak of that circle of quiet out of the experience of a circle of quiet in my own life. I want to share with you what I have found rich and meaningful. I sense finally in my own life the real joy and richness of a daily experience of solitude, prayer and meditation.

I simply recommend it to you - not on the basis of legal constraint or religious duty, but rather as a way to be human, whole, at peace with self, others, the world and God.

Step Eleven puts the central concern of such prayer and reflection into sharp focus -

Show me thy will and give me the power to do it.

There, too, I have battled with God. I have not always wanted to say, "Nevertheless, Thy will be done." Yet when we really sense the grace of God, the graciousness of God, then what better can we desire than His will? What better can we ask than His power? His will fulfilled in our lives through His power. Is that not life's highest possibility? And that will is made known to us in the circle of quiet; that power flows through us as we move out of the circle of quiet into the demands of our ordinary days.

He will speak gently to us all.

Be still and know that I am God.