

Spiritual Practices and the Ordering of Desire

Gregory V. Palmer

The Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams in *Resurrection, Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, says: “The notion that faith involves the purification of desire is deeply embedded not only in Christianity but in other religious traditions.” Thus this conversation about our spiritual practices and our desire[s] in the context of the overarching conversation about character is right on target. The potential difficulty and discomfort of addressing this particular subject may speak favorably about the need to address it. Our human frailty in general and the boundary-less culture in which we find ourselves would be at least two other good reasons not to shrink from the topic. Those who would have their desire purified and ordered after the things of God must know who they are. Let me begin with a story.

In 1984, the film version of Charles Fuller’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *A Soldier’s Story*, came out. It is a powerful story. It is a story about race and racism, a story about hatred and murder, a story about unbridled power and low self-esteem, a story about social stratification within a particular racial/ethnic/cultural group in the U.S. Army during World War II.

The story revolves around an African American unit that has been formed into a baseball team and their sergeant. Sergeant Waters is an African American man filled

with self-loathing mostly directed toward other black enlisted men over whom he has authority. He is especially harsh and judgmental toward the southern recruits whom he looks down on and often refers to with degrading and derogatory terminology such as slow talking, shiftless, and lazy. He uses far worse language than can appear in this publication.

The contentment we are called to is the gift of our wanting God’s purposes to unfold fully in our lives. It is the fruit of the seeds of God’s peace in our hearts that saves us from discontent. It is not a denial of want or an unwillingness to acknowledge desire. It is desire in the service of God’s mission.

Following a baseball game in which this unit of soldiers has been victorious, the men are enjoying some leisure time and refreshments in the mess hall. They are pictured in the film as laughing and joking with and about one another in word and song. Some of this is directed at Sergeant Waters, who walks in unexpectedly and takes issue with their version of fun. The sergeant focuses his attention on C.J., the unit’s star player and the one who embodies everything that Sarge, as he is referred to, despises. He launches into one of his berating tirades. His anger and energy are focused on C.J. It is the kind of scathing,

venomous put down that makes others cringe in emotional pain for C.J. In fact another soldier named Peterson verbally comes to C.J.’s defense and hurls a few verbal epithets in Sarge’s direction. But the gentle, mild-mannered C.J. will have none of it and speaks for himself, not in defense but in compassion and deep understanding about Sarge. Peterson says to C.J. “You ain’t even got enough sense to stand up for yourself.” To which C.J. responds, “It’s all right Pete, I know who I is. Any how any man (referring to Sarge) who ain’t sure where he belong has to be in a whole lotta pain.”

C.J. is the real hero in this story, albeit a tragic hero. What strikes me as noble and heroic about this character and what is instructive for us on the journey of ministry is captured in the phrase “I know who I is.” This kind of self-knowledge is essential for survival and for thriving in ministry. It is a knowledge born of the ongoing discipline and spiritual practice of basking in the love of the God who has loved us with an everlasting and unconditional love. God’s love toward us calls forth our capacity to love God and neighbor. Our love of neighbor makes incarnate our claims of loving God.

This leads to C.J.’s second helpful insight. Because he knows who he is, he is able to deal generously and act mercifully toward one who has acted so harshly toward him. C.J. is able to look at Sarge and see a fellow human being who is in

enormous pain because “*He ain’t sure where he belongs!*.”

To not know we are loved is to live without a sense of place, of true belonging in the world. When we have no sense of belonging or “at homeness” with God, self, and others, we are prone to live without appropriate boundaries, to desire what will not help us on to grace, and to overreach. Archbishop Williams suggests, “The root fact that I am not ‘at home’ in myself and my world stirs me to desire; but if that desire is a wanting to be in possession of self and world, a wanting not to lose the ego’s imagined pivotal position, it can only intensify my sense of disease. I have to learn another kind of desire.”

If healthy self-knowledge and “at homeness” rooted in love sets a course for our desire to be ordered by the gospel, then contentment is one marker on the journey. The apostle Paul’s words about himself to the saints in Philippi have vexed, convicted, and instructed me. In Philippians 4:11-12 Paul writes, “Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.”

Paul’s single-minded focus on the spread of the gospel enabled him not to allow personal comfort and agenda to so define him that he lost sight of what he was called to do. But it must be noted here that Paul’s words, focus, and dedication to his ministry are subject to abuse. It is a poor use of Paul’s words here to support the bad life and ministry habits that we may have developed over time. Paul was testifying to a personal discipline, not inviting us to abuse ourselves or others by living unhealthy lives.

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Elinore Pruitt Stewart (1876-1933) was the first woman to homestead her own land in Wyoming. She knew a lot about life’s ups and downs, about dreams and disappointment, about hopes awakened and hopes dashed. She was one of nine children, had been married at age twenty-two, yet she continued her work as a news-

paper writer for the *Kansas City Star*. Within four years her husband was killed in a railroad accident leaving her with a young child, Jerrine. Elinore answered a newspaper ad in 1909 for a housekeeper in Burnt Fork, Wyoming and within six weeks married the house owner, Clyde Stewart. She had three more children, tended her home and the farm and homesteaded her own property—her lifelong dream. Toward the end of her life there is a telling quote in one of her letters to a friend. She says “*I want a great many things I haven’t got, but I don’t want them enough to be discontent.*” True contentment deals openly and honestly with our hopes and dreams but refuses to let any desire snatch peace and joy from us.

It will come as no surprise to you that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is our best example on this journey of ordered desire. Who more than he oozed healthy self-knowledge, a sense of “at homeness” and contentment? The days of Jesus’ passion are perhaps the crowning example of his complete devotion to God the Sovereign. But this devotion could be seen throughout his earthly ministry. “Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work’” (John 4:34). Our desire is best ordered after God’s purposes. We want what God wants. That alignment gives us a genuine sense of well-being. In the anguish and turmoil of finding his praying ground in Gethsemane’s garden, Jesus’ desire for God to move to Plan B is not hidden, but his desire yields to God’s will. “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

Howard Thurman would likely have understood this to be the discipline of commitment. In his *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Thurman says “Commitment means that it is possible for [one] to yield the nerve center of consent to a purpose or cause, a movement or an ideal, which may be more important than whether [one] lives or dies.” □



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