

## INTENTIONALLY NURTURING THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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### Texts:

Matthew 6:33, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

I Cor. 2:13, “We teach spiritual things spiritually.”

I Cor. 2:16b, “But we have the mind of Christ.”

II Cor 5:16a, “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view.”

II Cor. 4:7, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”

### Introduction

- A. Last semester, my wife and I enjoyed a sabbatical leave from our work at MVNC.
  1. I want to share with you this morning something of our sabbatical journey; especially some insights I gained on nurturing the spiritual life within us.
  2. The word “sabbatical” as a noun refers to a break or change from the normal routine.
  3. The sabbatical year in the Bible refers to a year of rest for the land observed every seven years in ancient Judea.
  4. A sabbatical leave is given for rest, travel, or research.

5. Sabbaticals for college presidents are given to study, to retreat, to dream and gain a new vision for the institution.
  6. My sabbatical became a window through which to view leadership ministry for the next ten years.
- B. I identified four goals for my time away from MVNC:
1. A continuing education experience
  2. An overseas ministry opportunity
  3. A writing project
  4. Personal growth: physically, emotionally, spiritually
- C. And my time away exceeded by goals for the sabbatical:
1. I was a research fellow at the Yale University Divinity School
  2. My research project focused on the writings of the late Henri J. M. Nouwen, a Dutch Roman Catholic pastoral theologian who taught Christian spirituality courses at Yale and Harvard. I researched the area of spirituality and leadership in the context of a Christian college.
  3. Anne and I traveled to Moscow, Russia, where I taught a one-week intensive class on Christian leadership.
  4. While at Yale, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment in an international missions center known as the Overseas Ministries Study Center.
- D. The truth is that I really needed the sabbatical.
1. Much of last year, I felt like the Canadian CEO whose company specializes in conflict mediation:

*She made a last minute dash to the airport. She was to meet with an angry group of health care administrators who had been informed of an impending merger, and the subsequent termination of their employment.*

*She traveled from Toronto to the west coast of Canada. Soon after arrival, she was engaged in a “tense series of sessions” with the health care administrators. Upon completion of this painful and demanding assignment, she returned to Toronto.*

*Upon arriving at the airport, she reached for her car keys, but could not find them. The van driver from the airport to the parking lot didn’t help when she told him that she didn’t have her keys. Rather loudly, so all on the van could hear, he proclaimed, “No problem, lady—lost keys? I’ll just take you last.”*

*When she was finally driven to the car, she found no keys inside. She proceeded to the main office. There, on a large piece of tagboard, in the company of dozens of other lost keys, was her key ring, wrapped in a crumpled piece of paper with a rubber band around it. She opened the note and read, “Keys locked in car. Motor running.”*

2. This illustration characterized me last year.
- E. Early in the sabbatical I wrote the following words about the fundamental question I need to be asking myself.
1. The wrong question I had been asking myself was: How and where can I, in the next ten years, make the greatest impact for the Kingdom?
  2. I began to realize another question was far more important: How and where do I need to change, inwardly and in relationship to others, so that in the next ten years I become a more faithful witness to Christ, wherever God chooses to use me?
- F. I then determined that I would intentionally focus on nurturing the spiritual life within and among us, beginning with myself.
1. Three spiritual disciplines became the centerpiece of the ministry of Abba Arsenius.

- a. He was a well-educated Roman tutor in a royal household in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Rome.
  - b. He asked the Lord what he should do to save his soul.
2. The Lord responded—twice—to Arsenius, “Flee, be silent, and pray always.”
- a. Arsenius and other monks went into the Egyptian desert during the fourth and fifth centuries to escape the pollution, as they saw it, of the culture and society of which they were a part.
  - b. Their writings comprise what we call today “Desert Spirituality”
  - c. These desert fathers, especially Arsenius, have something very timely for us today as we seek to intentionally nurture the spiritual life within and among us.

**I. The Lord said to Arsenius, “Flee” or embrace solitude.**

- A. Solitude—a time of inner stillness and “aleness” before God—provides for us the opportunity to shift our attention from our restlessness to the peace of God.
1. These 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century monks—the Desert Fathers—withdraw to the Egyptian desert to escape the “shipwreck” as they saw it, of their society.
  2. They were men who revolted against passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as the society of their day.

3. Thus, they withdrew to the desert to solitude—aleness before God.
- B. The desert as a geographical space offers intense solitude
- Our son, Stephen, is in the Middle Eastern country of Jordan
  - Anne and I traveled through the Jordanian desert in December 1998 when we visited Stephen.
1. Such profound stillness and aleness, however, is not easy for you and me today.
  2. For us, solitude must become a quality of the heart, an inner disposition.
    - a. In the midst of noise and many people, we have to find within ourselves a place of quiet and solitary presence before God.
    - b. Since we do not have an opportunity to enjoy lengthy experiences of solitude, we have to find the essence of these experiences within.
    - c. Solitude is only a means to facilitate inner stillness and aleness before God.
- C. During the sabbatical, I was convicted by God about the “busyness” of my schedule, and how little time I plan to withdraw in solitude before Him.
1. God seemed to say to me, “If you plan a year in advance in detail the meeting time and dates for your Cabinet meetings, why not plan just as diligently for solitude with me?”
    - Cabinet meetings—every other Tuesday afternoon, 1:30-4:30 p.m.
    - Quarterly all day planning meetings
    - An early June, post commencement, Cabinet planning week

- A mid-August “pre-school-opening” Cabinet planning week
  - 2. I am in process of working with my assistant and the Cabinet to plan my schedule for at least as much time in solitude with God as I spent in meeting with the Cabinet.
- D. During January term, Dr. Brad Fox taught a class on “Psychology of the Contemplative Life.” The course included five days at a Trappist Monastery in Kentucky. I hope he offers the course each January, and that many of you will take the course.
- E. In solitude, we find space for God.
- Speak to us, Lord, regarding our need for times of solitude with you.

## **II. Secondly, the Lord said to Arsenius, “Be Silent”**

- A. Bonhoeffer, in his book, Life Together, identifies seven expressions of ministry
1. The ministry of listening
  2. The ministry of holding one’s tongue
- B. In his book Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry, Nouwen states:
1. “When the door of the steambath is continually left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it.”
  2. How often we open our mouths and speak about events of the world, about people, or circumstances, and how seldom we close our mouths and listen to God and to others within the body of Christ?

3. I am often reminded of Ps. 39:1, which states, “I will keep a muzzle on my mouth... I will not...let my tongue lead me into sin.”
- C. We need silence... for spiritual reading, starting with the Bible.
1. Last semester, I was drawn especially to two New Testament books, I and II Corinthians
    - a. I Cor. 2:16b, “But we have the mind of Christ.”
    - b. “Teach spiritual things spiritually” (I Cor. 2:13) or lead a Christian College Christianly
    - c. II Cor. 5:16, “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view.”
    - d. II Cor. 4:7, “Jars of clay” to show this is from God, not from us.
  2. I read and re-read I & II Thessalonians; I was challenged anew with the Christology of Colossians; the Gospel of John reminded me of the life and teachings of Jesus.
- D. We also need silence ...for spiritual writing or journaling
1. Again, the question for me is not “where will I make the greatest impact or greatest contribution to the Kingdom,” but “how can I grow in faithfulness and obedience?”
    - a) I am committed to a new level of consistency with daily prayers: early morning/late evening
    - b) I am intentionally focusing on alternatives to TV, telephone, radio--reading devotional classics, books that nurtured me strengthened

me in my daily walk with Christ (example: Disciplines for the Inner Life)

2. Starting this semester at MVNC,
  - a) The chapel will be open every morning at 7:00 a.m. for silence and meditation;
  - b) Every week, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper will be celebrated. Chaplain Sivewright is working on this initiative, and the details will be given to you soon.
- E. St. Francis said, "We witness all the time, sometimes with words."
- F. Speak to us, Lord, regarding our need for silence before You.
  1. Flee (embrace solitude);
  2. Be silent.

### **III. The Lord said to Arsenius, "Pray always"**

- A. How can we follow the biblical injunctions to...
  1. Pray constantly
  2. Pray unceasingly
  3. Pray always
- B. Obviously, there are speaking prayers
  1. For example, intercessory prayer
    - a. You can use a prayer journal for your ministry of intercessory prayer.



- b. It includes a date of entry in one column; specific people and concerns in the second column; and then the third column includes specific acts of love, encouragement, and ministries of service. We seek to answer the question: What does God want me to do? We must be specific and include the “when,” “who,” “where,” and “how.”
  - c. If you want a copy of the intercessory prayer form that I use, please let me know on the back of a chapel response card.
2. And there are prayers of praise and thanksgiving.
- a. Read aloud the Psalms
  - b. Read from prayer books; such as The Diary of Private Prayer
  - c. In the book, Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer
    - 1) The author talks about how we can live here and now as people who can be constantly surprised by God, and who can let an inch of surprise become a mile of gratefulness.
    - 2) It’s a great book, and a great thought!
- C. We have already mentioned listening prayers,
- 1. Samuel prayed, “Speak, Lord, for thy servant is listening.”
  - 2. And so should we!
- D. And there are thinking prayers!
- 1. Nouwen: “To pray, I think, ... means to think and live in the presence of God... What I mean is that we convert our unceasing thinking into

unceasing prayer when we move from self-centered monologue to a God-centered dialogue.”

2. We can live a life of prayer, if we view prayer as our thoughts becoming expressions of prayer and praise to God.
- E. Regarding our vocation of prayer, Nouwen states,
1. “When I speak of prayer, I refer less to saying prayers than to living a prayerful life in which eating and drinking, sleeping and waking, working and praying are all done to the honor and glory of God.
  2. He quotes a Russian Orthodox monk, who defined prayer as “standing in the presence of God with our mind in our heart.”
- F. Listen to a prayer of Dr. Kenneth Grider, a former professor of mine:
- Father, I am Your bread. Break me up and pass me around to the poor and needy of this world.*
- I am Your towel. Dampen me with tears and with me wash the feet of people who are weary with walking and with working.*
- I am Your light. Take me out to where the darkness is thick, there to shine and let Christ shine.*
- I am Your salt. Sprinkle me on all the things that You want for people, so that my faith and love and hope will flavor their experiences.*
- I am Your water. Pour me into people who thirst for You but do not even know that it is You for whom they thirst.*
- I am Yours, Lord God. Use me up in what You will, when You will, where You will, for whom You will, even if it means that I am given responsibilities that are considerable and costly.*
- G. Speak to us, Lord, regarding our need to live with open hands a life of prayer before You...constantly.

**Conclusion:**

- A. Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God [put first things first],  
and all these things will be added unto you.”
- B. Embrace solitude, be silent, and pray constantly—three disciplines by which  
we nurture the spiritual life within and among us.
  - 1. Will you join me in this intentional quest?
  - 2. Let me know. Let’s find ways to support each other as we become more  
intentional about nurturing, fostering, and forming the spiritual life  
within and among us.

Amen!