

Theme for Day Four: Sustaining and Extending the Spirit of Assisi

Derived from *The Tenderness of God: Reclaiming Our Humanity*, Chapter 5: “Cultivating Tenderness: The Ground of Our Belonging”

“For love to grow, it must be rooted and grounded in a community oriented to cultivating and nurturing the growth of all its members. We have already seen elements of the kind of growth we are talking about: growth in integrity, in maturity, in wisdom, courage, honesty, solidarity and love. In the previous chapter, I suggested that no single quality could capture the meaning of *miser cordia*, but that it was best understood as the antonym to hardheartedness. In this chapter, I will attempt to articulate some of the relational practices, traditionally understood as prayer and contemplative practice, which give us eyes to see the world and others around us from a space of loving connection. It is this contemplative stance that grounds the *communio* that Francis and Clare embodied with others and that many continue to seek today.” (p. 104)

“Contemplation is, first and foremost, a disposition, a willingness to engage a process, to change and be changed. Whatever our background, we can probably appreciate the multiple benefits—to ourselves, to the people we love, and to the world around us—that contemplation offers. A contemplative person is one who never stops asking ‘what is real?’ The converted, contemplative person values simplicity, integrity, and relational honesty so much that nothing else really matters to them. This clarity about what truly matters to them manifests itself in courage, calm, warmth, and vitality as their inner access to radical love radiates outward. A contemplative community brings wisdom, discretion, inspiration, and visionary leadership into the world. Like Jesus and his earliest companions, such a community nurtures growth and calls us to be accountable to the impulses that stir us toward the common good.” (p. 105)

“Contemplation is less about leaving the world and more about becoming real. As more of us dedicated ourselves to the process of becoming authentically ourselves and sharing our giftedness with others, the world becomes a different place.” (p. 105)

“Contemplation is not an individual process but a relational one: it is an integral part of the process of falling in love with the One whose love is beyond all telling. No one can fully embrace a relationship with God without contemplation. Engaging more deeply in our relationship with God is inherently transformative, helping us to reshape our priorities, values, daily practices, and capacity to see ourselves and our world anew.” (p. 106)

“We have already seen that one of the most primary insights of the Franciscan way is that human life is meant to be deeply relational. By ‘relational’ we mean that life is best lived in solidarity and communion with one another and with God. The most critical relationship, of course, is the relationship that exists between the individual and God, a relationship that concurrently invites us into a deeper, more holistic relationship with ourselves and others.” (p. 107)

“Contemplation is an invitation to experience the God who is at the center of our being and who walks with us out of the margins of our own existence.” (p. 107)

“Francis made continual recourse to his relationship with God not only by means of ‘conversation’ but also in wordless embodied ways that actuated the promise of Christ in the Gospel of John that those who love Christ and keep his word will know the indwelling presence of God. The process of becoming a dwelling place for God

sacralizes our experience of self, other, and world; as we ‘begin to understand ourselves as dwelling places of God, we can then take more seriously the possibility that our life, our selfhood, and our relationships with others are all sacred spaces to be cultivated.’” (pp. 111-2)

“Creating a dwelling place for God, a suitable home—in our hearts, our communities, and our world—for the One whose love gives life, is at the very core of the Gospel way. We participate in the making of places sacred as we attend to the presence of God that already dwells there and as we open ourselves to our own graced capacity to be vessels of that presence in our world.” (p. 112)

“Clare’s mature theological vision suggests that a profound, vibrant, and fertile love relationship with God incarnates itself within us and, through us, in the larger world around us as we gradually enter into the living experience of God through Clare’s simple method: gaze, consider, contemplate, imitate. As we gaze, we see the love of God extending itself toward us, inviting us into a new understanding, both of who God is and who we are. For to gaze is not simply to see; to gaze is to be drawn into the one we see... The art of gazing is a form of true beholding. The gaze, by definition, involves a disposition of reverent attention and tenderness of heart. This more open stance predisposes us to be able to learn from what we see, to be in relationship with what we see, to be transformed by what we take in from the gaze. The act of gazing is an act of the heart through the eyes, not of the eyes alone. The mind attends, too, but in reverent silence, there to ponder rather than to dissect through analysis. If we have spent enough time in nature beholding creation and natural beauty, this practice is more natural to us. The gaze opens up a space in us to meet and be met in a transforming encounter, to share mutually in another’s genuine presence, and this practice is critical, both for our relations with God and our relationship with one another.” (pp. 115-6)

“Contemplation is the grounding for us to learn how to collaborate with the divine in every facet of our lives. Contemplation is the space in which we learn not only God’s aliveness but God’s desire to make us partners with God in the work of making the world a better place. In this sense, there is no real tension between contemplation and action. The contemplative life moves toward prophetic action, and the active life craves the contemplative grounding that is so necessary for apostolic witness.” (pp. 117-8)

“This way of life helps us to become ‘capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbor, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others... We are called to bear witness to a constantly new way of living together in fidelity to the Gospel.’” (p. 132)

How does this chapter help you to understand the idea of “engaging contemplation in action”?

What is the relationship between tenderness, as it has been defined in chapter four, and justice?

How do you experience your relatedness to others in the ordinary facets of life? How would you like your experience of relationships to change and what practices can you adopt to cultivate greater tenderness in those relationships?

How do we deepen and sustain a sense of kinship and mutuality known as we share vulnerability, joy, challenges, hopes, dreams and desires?