

Make a Joyful Silence

Ruth Haley Barton

“On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.” Psalm 138:3

Long ago, a wise spiritual director said to me, “Ruth, you are like a jar of river water all shaken up. What you need is to sit still long enough so that the sediment can settle and the water can become clear.” This was an invitation to “be still and know” beyond my addiction to noise, words, people, and performance-oriented activity.

In Protestant circles at the time, anyone talking about solitude, silence, contemplation, or centering prayer was assumed to be embracing some sort of New Age philosophy, or to be well on their way to becoming a Buddhist. But my previous methods for seeking God—Bible study, prayer journals, more and better preaching, self-help books, small group gatherings—were coming up empty. And as I said yes to the invitation to solitude and silence, as challenging as it was, I experienced powerful results in my life that I could not have experienced in any other way.

Fifteen years later, 3,200 high school-age young people gathered at a Youth for Christ conference in Ocean City, Maryland. In most ways, it was a normal event of its kind: stimulating speakers, great music, and fun entertainment. But the organizers (Protestants all!) had a vision to end the conference with something different. As the young people made their way into the convention hall for the final session, leaders met them with signs asking everyone to enter silently. The music and worship were quiet and focused on just being in God’s presence. I taught from the story of Elijah, speaking about the radical nature of the disciplines of solitude and silence, and then asked if everyone was ready to try it together. The resounding “yes!” was a roar throughout the auditorium.

After some simple guidance, the young people moved out to the edges of the convention hall, some kneeling, some lying flat on the floor, some sitting with open hands in their seats. The worship leader and I knelt on the stage and the lights went down. The atmosphere was electric as the presence of the Holy Spirit filled the room in the sound of sheer silence. For many, it was the highlight of the conference.

In the years after my own invitation to solitude and silence—entered into with such fear, trepidation, and sense of isolation within my own faith tradition—my contemplative spiritual practice has led me to a life of teaching and writing among Protestants about these Christian disciplines. The number of invitations in these arenas is growing so much that on some days it feels like an entire tradition has come to the place of longing and desperation from which I started my own search so long ago.

These days, Protestant Christians are responding to that longing by embracing the classic spiritual disciplines that seekers through the ages have used to enter into the experience of God’s transforming presence. There is a groundswell of interest in solitude, silence, *lectio divina*, prayer walking and labyrinths, fixed-hour prayer, liturgy, Sabbath-keeping, and spiritual direction (see sidebar). Books and teachings about the contemplative life have proliferated in Protestant circles; many are discovering the desert mothers and fathers and the great Catholic authors who have kept these teachings alive for us.

There are still many who are suspicious, even antagonistic. A couple of years ago as I was preparing to speak at Biola University about spiritual disciplines, someone circulated a warning e-mail with the subject line “Buddhism at Biola!” This language was stunning to me, given the biblical nature of everything I was teaching. Those who feel it

is their duty to warn Christendom about contemplative practices also disseminate diatribes, on the Web and elsewhere, against spiritual leaders such as Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, and Brian McLaren.

All of this is somewhat predictable given the fact that, as Protestants, we are known by what we protest. But when the early reformers protested some of the excesses of the Catholic Church, they also threw out elements of the spiritual life that we couldn't afford to lose—and we have been the poorer for it.

Every spiritual tradition has its strengths and its weaknesses, and often our strengths become our weakness over time. One of the strengths of the Protestant tradition is that we are very word-centered—oriented both to the Word that comes through scripture and to our own preached words. As a result, we are often so enamored with creating theological systems to help us make sense out of God that we have lost touch with the actual *experience* of God that engages our whole being—not only our minds, but also our bodies, our emotions, our imagination, our need for symbol and ritual and beauty.

We are also highly evangelistic by nature, placing great emphasis on what we can accomplish *for* God through our activity and service. This has left us uncomfortable and even suspicious of prayer forms that invite us to just *be* in God's presence beyond all of our doing. In our focus on activity, we are not very good at waiting for the work that only God can do. In our wordiness, we are not very good at being silent so we can hear God speak. One day we wake up exhausted, empty, and unable to go on.

The good news is that many Protestants today are not only experiencing solitude, silence, and contemplative prayer, but making a meaningful contribution to

contemplative dialogue as well. Perhaps one of the greatest strengths that Protestants bring is a particular thoughtfulness about grounding these practices strongly in biblical language and teaching.

In my own ministry of teaching and writing about these things within Protestant circles over the last 15 years, I have found it helpful to emphasize biblical references to solitude (including Jesus' withdrawal to the solitary place in Luke 6), silence (Psalm 62:1), being still (Exodus 14:14, Psalm 46:10), finding rest for the soul (Matthew 11:29), and quieting the soul (Psalm 131). Biblical stories that illustrate the power of solitude and silence in the lives of Elijah, Moses, Jesus, Mary and Martha, and Paul have also helped me and others within the Protestant tradition to ease into these practices in a more trustful way.

Another contribution that Protestant writers have made has been our emphasis on giving people bite-sized practices and experiences that help them incorporate these disciplines into their everyday lives, rather than remaining purely at a conceptual level. Protestant writers are often good at offering clarity of language and an accessibility of approach that make it possible for people to actually walk into these disciplines, even if they know they are no Thomas Merton.

At the same time, there are some concerns about the current Protestant approach to ancient disciplines. Sometimes there is a temptation to misapply the trendy language of solitude, silence, and contemplation to quiet-time approaches that are still heavily loaded with human striving, in the form of Bible study and Christian self-help tools. Or we misuse the terminology of spiritual formation to talk about traditional Protestant discipleship models—ones that are heavy on information-gathering and skills training

and light on helping people find ways to really open to God. These compromises in our language impoverish our experience of the reality that these words really stand for.

As well, since a more contemplative approach to spirituality has become more trendy, some preachers and teachers are trying to teach these things before they are practicing them substantively. Because they have read Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, or Richard Rohr, they think they are what they have read. They can craft a sparkling message, but since they have not practiced, they are skating on very thin ice in their capacity to provide real, down-to-earth guidance.

One last concern is that we as Protestants could treat this resurgence of interest in the contemplative life primarily as the current bandwagon that we need to get on, or as something to consume on the way to the next spiritual high. I have seen leaders get a taste of solitude, silence, or contemplation, preach some good messages on it (way too soon!), delegate to someone else the task of setting up a program on the topic, and then ask “What’s next?”—before they have fully experienced these disciplines in their own lives.

Despite these tendencies, what is happening in Protestantism speaks to a great longing for God and a deep willingness to do whatever it will take to meet that longing—and this can only have a positive result for the kingdom of God.

One of the great blessings of renewed Protestant emphasis on the more contemplative aspects of spiritual life is that it can help Catholics and Protestants touch a unity that is deeper than all the ways we have separated ourselves from each other through the years. The longing that all of us share for deeper experiences of union with God is, after all, the truest and most universal thing about any of us. In the place beyond words, where the human soul reaches out to God, where all of creation groans for more of

God than we have right now, where we long for God’s kingdom to come and reign in our hearts and in our world—in that place, we are truly one.

In silence and contemplation, we rest from all of our human striving and division and touch the deeper current of truth that runs underneath everything else—the truth that all things have already been reconciled in Christ. When we are able to re-engage the world and live from that place of union with God and with others, there is indeed a peace that passes understanding and transcends longing.

Make a Joyful Silence. by Ruth Haley Barton. Sojourners Magazine, February 2009 (Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 32).
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