

Going Beyond Yourself with God

At the very least, most of us need someone to tell our stories to. At a deeper level, most of us need someone to help us forget ourselves, a little or a lot. The great wisdom traditions of the world all recognize that the main impediment to living a life of meaning is being self absorbed.

Barbara Brown Taylor
An Altar in The World; p. 91.

If you have a chest full of clothing, and leave it for a long time, the clothing will rot inside it. It is the same with the thoughts in our heart. If we do not carry them out by physical action after a long while they will spoil and turn bad.

Abbot Pastor¹

There is an interesting movement and progression in the following story about a day in the life of Jesus. See what you notice [Luke 6:12-19, NIV]:

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles...He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over ...who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

What did you notice?

Henri Nouwen comments:

Jesus spent time on the mountain at night in solitary prayer. He came down in the morning and formed his community. Then in the afternoon, with his apostles, he went out and healed the sick and proclaimed the good news. I've been fascinated by the sequence of prayer at night, community in the morning and ministry in the afternoon. Notice the order—from solitude to community to ministry...these are the disciplines we are called to practice...communion with God...recognizing and gathering together in community...ministry or compassion in the world.²

¹ Found in Thomas Merton's *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p.42; [New York: New Directions, 1970]; also quoted by Barbara Brown Taylor in *An Altar in This World*; p. 93.

² *Spiritual Direction, Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*; Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen & Rebecca J Laird; pp. 110-111.

Solitude, community, and ministry—this is spiritual life. The lives of mature Christians exhibit all three. Solitude is the place we attend to God and become known as we are in our weaknesses and talents and sins, yet beloved of God. God leads people from their personal relationship with God into community and into service or ministry. Community, in Nouwen's words,

...is not loneliness grabbing onto loneliness. That can't satisfy a need that only solitude with God can fulfil. Community is "I am beloved; you are beloved; together we can create space for God and others".³

There is much to learn in a faith community and lots of spiritual maturing that takes place. At Cap our motto is *Call, Celebrate, Change--Called to Celebrate Christ and Change Lives*. We believe that change or emerging maturity in Christ is a life-long process in which solitude; community; and ministry all play vital parts. Without community spiritual maturity is hampered.

By community we do not mean church as an organization or institution—we mean relationships with people around whom you can learn what it means to live as one of God's beloved. Community is not always comfortable place—it is *often the place where the person you least want to live with always lives*. Community is not some sentimental idealized place where everyone is comfortable, always loved and always gets along. Community is real. If you expect some sort of perfection, then you will have no end of disillusionment.

Joan Chittister⁴ brings some valuable insights into community from the ancient Benedictine⁵ practice of community:

Neither communities nor families exist for themselves alone. They exist to witness to Christ and in Christ; their purpose is to draw us always into the center of life where values count and meaning matters more than our careers or our personal convenience.

Living with people does not by itself create community... even liking one another is not enough—we have to share a common vision: life with other persons in the Spirit of Christ to support them, to empower them and to learn from them. The work of life is concentration on God and service to one another...life without others is only half a life.

³ *Spiritual Direction, Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*; Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen & Rebecca J Laird; p. 114

⁴ *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily, Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*, Joan Chittister, pp. 39ff.

⁵ Benedict of Nursia was a 6th century Christian monk who founded a monastery in Italy around 529 AD. Today those who follow his spiritual disciplines are known as Benedictines. One of the spiritual practices of Benedict has come to be known as the **Rule of Saint Benedict**, a book of precepts [rules of conduct] written by Benedict for monks [and later, women] living communally. Over the last 1500 years it has become the leading guide in Western Christianity for monastic living in community for many Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Christians. Benedict sought to foster an understanding of the relational nature of human beings, and to provide a mentor to support and strengthen spiritual growth. There is no evidence to suggest that Benedict intended to found a religious order. His Rule is written as a guide for individuals and autonomous communities.

Community demands that we make relationships a priority; that we share ourselves, our minds, our insights, and our time with one another. Most of all, it demands that we allow the people in our lives to be who they are and grow as they can.

Another function of community is to enable us to be about something greater than ourselves. Community goes astray when it begins to be seen simply as a jumping-off point for our own personal ambitions instead of an arena in which I am meant to give my gift to the rest of the human race so that we can all live better together.

[In community] we do not expect perfection; we expect growth, in ourselves as well as in others. Everyone hold a privileged place. There is a reverence for uniqueness. Conformity is not the end. Possessiveness goes when uniqueness is understood. The gift of individuals in our lives must be given as God gave them freely and recklessly. We don't have the master plan for everybody else's life. We learn to trust our own gifts but not for their own sake. We develop our gifts when we use them for the good of others.

[In community the] basics are love of God and fun and companionship on the long, dark roads of life. We have to learn to be for one another. Everything in life can't be cured or resolved or eliminated. Some things must simply be endured...borne...accepted. Community and relationships enable us to do that.

In community all ages live side by side and each learns from the other. Here we find out who we really are—I learn to soften hard spots and to reconcile and to care for someone besides ourselves. I learn that theory is no substitute for love. This is how relationships sanctify me—they show me where growth is for me. Alone I am what I am, but in community I have the chance to become everything that I can be.

According to Romans 12, finding your place in the community of faith is part of God's will for your life. Placing your life before God as an offering includes your relationships and service among God's people.

...Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering... fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you... The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

... we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body... let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.

If you preach...; if you help, ...; if you teach...; if you give encouraging guidance...; if you're put in charge ...; if you're called to give aid to people in distress...; if you work with the disadvantaged...

Love from the center of who you are; ... Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply...; keep yourselves fueled and aflame... Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder...; be inventive in hospitality.

Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody...Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone... Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

²⁰⁻²¹*Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.*

[The Message; selected parts of Romans 12].

Spiritual Exercise: Going Beyond Yourself with God

1. Goals:
 - a. To better understand the role of community in your spiritual growth
 - b. To assess your rhythm of solitude, community, ministry and make adjustments
2. Discussion to be done in the mentoring session
3. Comment on the key points from the material, *Going Beyond Yourself with God*.
 - a. What jumps out at you from Romans 12?
 - b. Comment on where you have experienced these realities and which ones are yet to be experienced in community
 - i. *The main impediment to living is being self absorbed.*
 - ii. *Solitude, community, and ministry is spiritual life*
 - iii. *Community is "I am beloved; you are beloved; together we can create space for God and others."*
 - iv. *Life without others is only half a life*
 - v. *Community demands that we allow the people in our lives to be who they are and grow as they can.*
 - vi. *Another function of community is to enable us to be about something greater than ourselves.*
 - vii. *We develop our gifts when we use them for the good of others.*
 - viii. *Everything in life can't be cured or resolved or eliminated. Some things must simply be endured. Community and relationships enable us to do that.*
 - ix. *Alone I am what I am, but in community I have the chance to become everything that I can be.*
 - c. *Which of the above are most important for you at this stage of your faith journey?*
4. *Discuss your rhythm of solitude, community, and ministry. If you are listening to this description, receive it as it is given; don't critique it—rather ask clarifying questions.*
 - a. *Describe what you currently do to make space for God in your life (solitude).*
 - b. *Describe your closest community of faith and how it is forming you*
 - i. *[by community of faith we mean the place where spiritual belonging happens for you whether it be family, a group of friends, a twelve-step program, a prayer group—it is people you gather with and experience that you are beloved of God; it is your spiritual home]*

c. *Describe where you are using your life and gifts for the good of others (your ministry).*

d. Clarifying questions can include:

- i. "Where are you experiencing God's grace, invitation, and acceptance?"
- ii. "What was that like for you?"
- iii. "In what areas do you need God's provision, comfort or guidance?"
- iv. "Where do you think that God was trying to get your attention?"

5. Optional assignment to do and bring back to the next mentoring session

- a. Find or review a favorite article or chapter or sermon or book on community. Summarize the main points and bring it back to the mentoring session and spend some time in listening prayer around what's next for you in the rhythm of solitude, community, and ministry.
- b. Next mentoring session also discuss
 - i. Who is "in" your closest faith community?
 - ii. What makes your faith community challenging?
 - iii. Which of your hard spots are currently being softened?
 - iv. Who do you need to forgive for not being God for you?

6. Optional Bible Study: What the Bible Says About How We Are To Relate To One Another

- a. The New Testament letters contain many ethical exhortations of life in the Spirit. The ethic of the Spirit may be summarized as the ethic of love. Love is always relational. Paul calls the Christian to a lifestyle of love and service to other Christians who share the same Spirit. The call to love is always based on the prior love of Christ for us.
- b. Read over the list of *one another* verses a couple of times. As you read, notice which ones are actions, which ones are attitudes and which ones are both. What is your initial reaction/impression?
- c. Do you see any common threads running through this list? What do you make of these commonalities?
- d. Paul's exhortations assume a particular view of who a person is and what they need to thrive in new life in the Spirit in community.
 - i. Can you sense what these verses imply about whom we are and our relational needs as Christians?
 - ii. How would you describe a group of Christians that visibly evidenced these things in their relationships?
 - iii. What would you see and hear and feel when observing their relationships? What would you not see?
 - iv. Choose an action and an attitude from the list and brainstorming how these qualities could be more present in your relationships in the week to come.
- e. What does God impress upon you from these verses?

Selected Verses on What the Bible Says About How We Are To Relate To One Another

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| 1. Love one another (John 13:34-35) | 15. Serve one another in love (Gal. 5:13) |
| 2. Encourage one another to love and good works (Heb. 10:24) | 16. Bear one another in love (Eph. 4:2) |
| 3. Pray for one another (James 5:16) | 17. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to one another (Eph. 4:32) |
| 4. Bear the burdens of one another (Col. 6:2) | 18. Submit to one another (Eph. 5:21) |
| 5. Be at peace with one another (I Thess. 5:13) | 19. Do not lie to one another (Col. 3:19) |
| 6. Wash one another's feet (John 13:14) | 20. Teach and counsel one another (Col. 3:16) |
| 7. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love (Rom. 12:10) | 21. Comfort one another (I Thess. 4:18) |
| 8. Honor one another (Rom. 12:10) | 22. Encourage and build up one another (I Thess. 5:11) |
| 9. Live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16) | 23. Do not grumble against one another (James 5:9) |
| 10. Stop passing judgment on one another (Rom. 14:li) | 24. Confess your sins to one another (James 5:16) |
| 11. Accept one another (Rom. 15:5) | 25. Offer hospitality to one another (I Peter 4:9) |
| 12. Instruct one another (Rom. 15:14) | 26. Use your gifts to serve one another (I Peter 4:10) |
| 13. Greet one another (Rom. 16:16) | 27. Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another (1 Peter 5:5) |
| 14. Care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25) | 28. Have fellowship with one another (I John 1:7) |