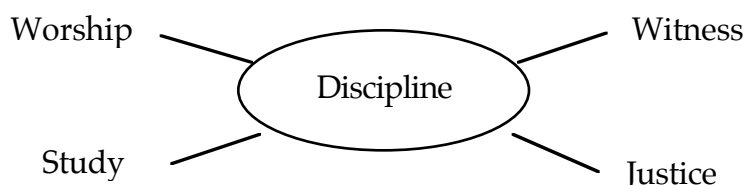


Session 5

Nurture, Mission, and Discipline

So what are the everyday dynamics of a vital Christian community? This can be described as a balance between Nurture and Mission held together by Discipline. There are two overall dynamics of Nurture: Worship and Study. There are two overall dynamics of Mission: Witness and Justice. These five dynamics can be pictured in a diagram that my mentors and colleagues in The Ecumenical Institute affectionately named “the bug model.”



Worship

Worship includes any practice done together that emphasizes participation in religious symbols. It includes the performance of rituals, the telling of stories and myths, and the use of icons of art, and space arrangement.

Ritual is a dynamic that can take on very simple forms: sitting in a circle, lighting three candles, singing a song that has good poetry, sharing a bit of life confessed by each person followed by a statement of our universal forgiveness, reading scripture followed by its application to our own lives, sharing our concerns (intercessions for others and for the world). Ritual is a primary practice of humanity that reaches back to the dawn of human consciousness. Picture a pre-human, humanoid species walking around the dead body of a fallen companion. Perhaps such a moment was the dawn of religion as well as the dawn of the consciousness of consciousness and the origin of that uniquely human, symbol-using consciousness that led to art and language.

Icons are art forms of sculpture, painting, or architecture that aim to enhance the ritual practice. Such items are not idols if they are windows into the impenetrable Mystery, rather than objects of worship. In a living room meeting the use of icons can be very simple: chairs in a circle, a cloth and art piece on a coffee table, some candles. From tiny statues to huge temples, icons have accompanied religious life longer than humanity can remember.

Myth or religious story telling is also a primal practice. In a living room meeting the study and interpretation of scripture can recapture the power of myth. From the stories of Genesis to the stories of Jesus we can be nurtured by the power of this artistry, provided that we move beyond our literalism into an existential interpretation of mythic forms.

Our super-rationalistic culture downplays the importance of ritual, icon, and myth for the nurture of our lives. But these are powerful practices, and in their perversions they can be powerfully destructive. With skillful, sensitive use, however, these religious practices awaken and nurture our essential being.

Study

If the worshipful nurture of our soul is of first importance, the theological and ethical study by the human mind is a close second. For many the nurture of the mind opens up a willingness to worship. Further, the well-trained theological and ethical mind enriches worship and rescues it from decay into misunderstood language and sheer superstitions.

Studying contemporary theology gives us a solid grounding in our tradition. Expanding our minds with good ethical material prepares us to appropriately engage in the world. Nurturing our mind with devotional content awakens deep aspects of our soul. Good methods are important for successful study. In our experience a study period of 45 minutes to an hour has been about the right portion of a two-hour meeting.

Witness

Christian community is not an ingrown circle but a coming apart from the world in order to go back refreshed and ready to serve that world with Trust, Love, and Freedom. Full and vital Christian community maintains a balance between nurture and mission. If we do not properly emphasize mission, we are not doing an optimal form of nurture. If we do not properly emphasize nurture, we will be pursuing a mission that is less than that of Trust, Love, and Freedom.

The witness aspect of mission is the interaction with individual persons about the common journey from illusion and despair to our true essence of Trust, Love, and Freedom. Witness can happen in a course on Christian theology, but it can also happen in an informal gathering, a private conversation, a meal, a workshop, a retreat, or a group study on any subject whatsoever. Whenever communication on a Spirit level takes place, witness may happen. The word "witness" refers to "telling others" out of our own experience about the Spirit life. This witnessing is particularized to the other persons' actual illusions, despairs, and needs for forgiveness and restoration.

Witnessing includes three dynamics: (1) challenging illusions about the deep and mysterious dynamics of living, (2) pointing out the welcome that Final Mystery offers those who return to their authenticity, and (3) beckoning returnees to courageously live realistically. This secular dynamic applies to any situation and is simply the way our deep life is healed, whatever language we use to make our witness.

The Gospels are filled with stories about witnessing love. When a guilty tax collector climbs a tree to view Jesus, Jesus chooses to eat lunch with him, and the man, sensing his forgiveness in Jesus' acceptance of him, accepts his acceptance, turns his life around and repays what he has stolen. Witnessing love requires no specific religious content. This witness can be made in whatever language the hearer can hear. That might be the language of Christian heritage or it might be any other. And we teach Christian theology not to impart dogma, but to witness to how the great poetry of the Christian tradition makes contact with our everyday lives.

Finally, witnessing is not the same as seeking church members (or Christian Resurgence Circle members). We witness in order to heal lives. Inviting someone to join a Christian community is secondary. Joining a Christian community is a step toward becoming a dedicated witness who brings healing to the lives of others.

Justice

The second aspect of mission is justice -- that is, the ongoing work of making human society appropriate and workable for living on planet Earth. Human beings are more

than individuals, we are members of societies. We practice the languages, arts, styles, moralities, and modes of association of a given culture. We participate in the political decision making within a particular network of political structures. We contribute to and benefit from a particular economy. To love human beings includes loving the societies within which we human beings dwell. Justice implies providing for every person the social supports that each needs. Justice is more than fairness or an approximation to fairness. The broad meaning of "justice" is indicated by this familiar phrase: "the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The laws, the courts, the employment patterns, the educational and healthcare systems, and every other social process are "just" to the extent that they provide opportunities for all of us to be sustained, to have viable choices, and to find well-being and Spirit fulfillment.

To do justing love means to involve ourselves in social structures, sociology, history, the competent functioning of social agencies, fair dealing, contributory work, team efforts, social change movements, prophetic actions, consensus building, and in anything and everything that makes for a workable and beneficial society. Justing love includes care for the whole community of living species and their material supports.

Discipline

Discipline has become a burdensome word associated with moralism and punishment. But the discipline we have in mind here is more like the glue that holds together a body of people. This glue holds nurture and mission together in a workable and enabling pattern of practical living. Each Christian body needs to work out its own patterns of nurture, mission, and discipline. While there are no eternal rights and wrongs we do need meeting times and places and commitment to attend and attend on time. If we study together, we may want an agreement to read material beforehand and come prepared. We soon realize that even the simplest rules are not always kept. We need ways of holding one another accountable and encouraging one another to put forth the effort to make workable communal life actually happen. This includes helping each other address whatever blocks this effort. Such discipline may be hard for some groups of Westerners who have been over-trained in rugged individualism.

The key to a non-moralistic discipline is to state all agreements openly so that everyone understands them and makes a clear choice to commit or not commit to them. And we need to have ways of being accountable to our agreements that are predicated upon forgiveness. The forgiveness we need does not imply that transgressing our agreements does not matter. Rather, forgiveness means a restoration to the realism that the agreements were crafted to support. When the agreement breaker comes home to this realism, he or she is not punished, not put on probation, but restored to full commitment to the original agreement (or to decide that this is not their agreement – perhaps it is time for a new agreement.) The skills for doing this discipline have a learning curve, but learning this practice can be a blessing and a reminder that forgiveness is the good news at the core of the Christian breakthrough.

Without seriously working through our patterns of discipline, we are not a Christian community or a functional community of any sort. We are just a scattering of people who happen to show up at the same place once in a while.

Still deeper, Christian nurture, especially in small group meetings, counts on every person's regular presence. Absence is a loss not only to the absentee, but to the entire group and to its ongoing journey as a communion of saints, as a body of Christ, as a body of true humanity that nurtures others and contributes to the world.

The Vocation beneath the Vocations

Being a Christian and therefore being a member of a Christian community is a special type of vocation. It is a vocation that points beyond itself to the vocation of being our Spirit being. Being our Spirit being is not one more vocation alongside all our other vocations but rather, it is the vocation that sets the context for all our other vocations.

Each of us can be said to have many vocations – vocations that pay us money and vocations that do not. We may be a massage therapist, a grant writer, a computer expert, a religious teacher, a writer, a community organizer, a volunteer working with inner city youth, a house builder, a husband, a wife, a student, a political worker, and so on and on. Each of us may have four or five key “vocations” that take up most of our time. We may not call them vocations and may wish to be rid of some of them. We may call them burdens or necessities. But if they are what we are doing with our lives, they are properly called our vocations. Perhaps we would like to change them; but for the time being, these are our core contributions to the history of the planet.

Being a Christian or a Buddhist or some other religious practice can be one of our key vocations, but it is only one among many. None of these “limited” vocations, including our Christian vocation, is our Spirit vocation. Our Spirit vocation is something deeper than any of the ways we spend our time.

Our Spirit vocation is the context in which we spend all of our time. This vocation may be grounded in the practice of Christianity or some other religion, but our Spirit vocation is something even deeper than our religious practices. Our Spirit vocation is the freely disciplined living of every moment in Trust, Love, and Freedom (or whatever terms we use to point to our essential Spirit nature).

Our Spirit vocation may be invisible to most onlookers, but it is not without outward manifestation. Its presence means that all our other vocations derive from and witness to our Spirit Being. We will surely find ourselves having to confess our falling away from this high calling; nevertheless, this “high calling” is a vocation beneath all our vocations. This Spirit vocation is also beneath the vocation of practicing and promoting a renewed Christianity.

Understanding what it means to live this Spirit vocation is necessary in order to understand the next overall form of Christian community. That next form will have flexibility and diversity, but this manyness of expression will not be arbitrary. The next form of Christianity needs to be obedient to what best expresses Spirit. It is our personal and communal vocation to manifest the Holy Spirit of Trust, Love, and Freedom.

This same Spirit motivates us to create a next form of Christianity. Spirit is not something achieved by human beings or even defined by human beings. Spirit defines us in our true humanity. “Spirit,” “Trust,” “Love,” and “Freedom” are more than just words; they point to the true nature of humanity – to essential states that are foundational for every human. Our Christian vocation provides us and others with the option of a Christian way to access this Spirit vocation, the vocation beneath all our vocations.