

Have you found the rhythm?¹

The texts

Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
she has also set her table.
She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls
from the highest places in the town,
“You that are simple, turn in here!”
To those without sense she says,
“Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.”

– Proverbs 9:1-6

[Jesus said,] “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

– John 6:51-58

Introduction

Next Thursday, the 20th of August, marks the day of commemoration for Bernard of Clairvaux, a Christian monk of the 12th century. Bernard was a real piece of work: he was both an other-worldly *mystic* and a this-worldly *meddler*. He was better at the mysticism, writing widely-read spiritual books and widely-sung hymns. We’ll sing one of those hymns following this homily. Bernard came closer to the ideal of Christian monasticism than most and, what’s more, he shared with others how to do it.

However, he batted no better than .500 when it came to meddling in secular and ecclesiastical matters. On the one hand, Bernard was one of the chief promoters of the 2nd crusade, a mistake from its conception and a disaster in its execution. His reputation suffered for that, I should think rightly so.

On the other hand, at one point Bernard's candidate for the papacy – a former student of his – won the election and became a relatively good pope. At that time, popes exercised not only ecclesiastical power but also great secular influence.

It seems to me that there are several lessons here, but please allow me to continue by focusing on just one: I think that Bernard of Clairvaux modeled the basic rhythm of the Christian life better than one might expect of a medieval monk. What is this rhythm? It is a rhythm whose beat is punctuated by alternating periods of engagement *with* the world and disengagement *from* the world. It is an ongoing rhythm of involvement with the world and its marketplaces of goods and services, of ideas and aspirations, of cooperation and contention; and then of withdrawal from the world to places of peace and quiet for the purposes of reflection and regeneration. Engagement and disengagement; involvement and withdrawal. This is the rhythm of a healthy Christian life.

My favorite icon for this rhythm of Christian life is the mathematical symbol for infinity. Think of that symbol as a hiking trail, a bike path, or even a motor speedway. And think of the two loops as, respectively, religion and culture. We need to keep alternating between those loops. We need to be both a gathering and a dispersing community. And we need a caution flag if we shortcut either loop and spend excessive time and energy in just one of them.

It might appear that if we stay on this infinity track, this endless reclining figure 8, that we'll never get anywhere. But I am convinced that God's word to us about this matter is that this rhythmic life will get us exactly where God wants us: grounded in a gathered community that shares and nurtures faith, and active in the world as dispersed agents of love and justice. These two rhythmic movements are, from my current perch toward the end of life, what I hear God saying will give meaning and purpose to our lives.

The movement of disengagement

First, let us focus for a few moments on the movement of disengagement. The purpose of disengagement is to re-calibrate and re-center our lives, lives that often become eccentric – or off-center – in that they are no longer centered on God. For Christians in particular, these times of withdrawal from the harsh realities of the world are occasions for the revitalization of faith and of hope.

However, such disengagement is not a Christian invention. The first creation story in the book of Genesis, the 7-day account, is a ringing endorsement of the weekly sabbath rest. After all, if God rested on the seventh

day should not we who are made in God's image do the same? That creation story may be less about how the world began than it is about how to manage life in crisis situations. The circumstances of the Israelites around the time this story was written were certainly critical: the Israelite leadership found itself in exile in Babylon. They and their children were no doubt tempted by the sophistication of Babylonian religion and by the pleasures of Babylonian culture. They were in grave danger of losing their faith in God, who seemed so irrelevant to their new circumstances, and their hope for a future with God, who seemed so distant from their new dwelling-place. Periodic disengagement – withdrawal from that inviting world – was essential for the survival of their community, for the restoration of their faith and hope.

I learned the lesson about the need for disengagement from life's busyness when I studied for a degree at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. I was at the time, the nineteen sixties, trying to do a three-year doctoral program in just two years – before my finances ran out. I worked long days, Monday through Saturday, in order to accomplish this goal. And I was strongly tempted to add Sunday to my work schedule, reasoning that it would give me a better shot at completing the degree according to my accelerated plan. However, and there's no doubt in my mind that this was by the grace of God at work in my life, I resisted the temptation. Instead, I took a sabbath rest each week. It helped me to stay centered, both on God and on those two great gifts God had given me by that time, my wife and our daughter. And it regularly restored the stamina and focus needed to complete my project on time – which I did.

This congregation has very wisely and generously provided a summer sabbatical for its pastor. I think you will find that it will pay good dividends: that he will be rested and refreshed when he returns in September; and that you will be even more fond and appreciative of his ministry after its absence of three months. If Pastor John is still here seven years from now, please give him another sabbatical leave. It will work to both of your advantages.

We're talking here about a sabbath rest, a periodic and temporary withdrawal – not a total and continuous disengagement from the world, its challenges, and its problems. That's the other danger here: to become in effect a recluse from the world, its people, and their needs. We're quite expert at it. We do it in quite refined ways, reasoning that churchiness and personal spiritual growth are surely forms of piety that God will recognize, affirm, and perhaps even reward. And, because we're Americans, we tend to think that more is always better: more churchiness, more personal spirituality, more frequent and longer times of disengagement, more retreat from life. We even plan our secular lives so that we can avoid ugly realities and unat-

tractive people through our housing patterns and transportation system designs.

This can lead to eccentricity, or off-centeredness, of a different sort: paradoxically, in the effort to improve our spiritual lives, we may become less God-centered and more self-centered; we may become less regularly clothed with Christ's cloak of righteousness and more often clothed with our own garments of self-righteousness. Good Lord, we're tempted to think, aren't we relieved that we're not like one of *them* – the sinful and impious folks, especially the noisy and noticeable ones.

This happens when we lose the rhythm, when we spend too much time and energy in withdrawal, when we lose sight of the neighbor. Periods of disengagement must always be followed by times of engagement.

The movement of engagement

So now let's focus on the other beat in the rhythm of our lives: the movement of engagement, of involvement with the world and its full range of beauty and of beastliness.

What is the purpose of re-engagement with the world after a period of disengagement? Its purpose is singular: loving service, which is our baptismal vocation. Its aim is to express love and to work for justice. Its goal is to embody and enact the story of the Good Samaritan and the message of the prophets. Isn't it interesting that one of the primary models for an authentically Christian life was exemplified by someone from a despised ethnic group and religious community – a Samaritan? If Jesus were to tell the tale today, it might well be about the Good Shi'ite or the Good Socialist.

Again, this is not a Christian invention. The prophets of old spoke frequently and forcefully about obligations to family, to neighbor, even to aliens and sinners. We also have many stories about Jesus' encounters with people widely held in contempt: harlots and tax collectors, who consorted with the despised Roman oppressors; women, including a ritually unclean Israelite woman and alien women from Syrophenicia and Samaria; food-law and sabbath-law breakers, who populated Jesus' circle of followers.

These were very often people on the bottom of the social, economic, political, or religious heap. Sometimes they sought out Jesus; sometimes Jesus sought them out. And then he befriended them; he extended a helping hand; he intervened on behalf of those who were used to victimization, not justice; and he strongly criticized those who were quick to disparage or condemn, not quick to embrace, protect, and love.

We must engage – involving ourselves with the world, its problems, and its people – if we want to be taken seriously as disciples of Jesus. We

must engage, lest our disengaged gatherings for worship and refreshment turn into mere theater, mere play-acting, mere façade. We must engage, because congregations do not have social welfare and social action simply as options for the socially sensitive; they are obligations for any community claiming to be a part of the body of Christ.

But there are dangers here, also. One of the principal dangers is burn-out. We must not remain engaged with the world constantly – without taking time outs, without regular withdrawals for the renewal of our energy, our inner resources, our commitment to stay for the long haul. We must keep moving on the infinity track; we must keep the rhythm of engagement and disengagement.

There is another danger. Sometimes, like Bernard of Clairvaux, we will get it wrong when meddling in a messy world. Our best efforts won't always work out; our best-laid plans won't always have the intended result of helping, of realizing justice and peace and well-being for all. This should not keep us from trying, but it should signal that all our attempts to aid the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed need constant monitoring and modification. Last century's solutions, even last year's solutions, may no longer be relevant or beneficial. We are called upon to become more mature in our faith, more motivated by our hope, and more creative in our love.

The rhythm: which beat comes first?

Finally, let me ask a question that is akin to the chicken and egg controversy: which comes first? Which movement has the priority: disengagement or engagement?

The *mystic's* answer is that disengagement or withdrawal takes precedence. That has also been the answer – historically – of Lutheran Pietism, of American Evangelicalism, of Pentecostalism, and generally – at least until this past generation – of conservative Christianity. Charge the spiritual batteries before charging into the world, they say. This seems consistent with our gospel text for the day from John. The text speaks of the need to take spiritual nourishment through participation in the Eucharistic meal. It cites the personal and eternal benefits of ingesting the body and blood of Christ. The mystical gospel lauds the mystical meal, which is what a sacrament is by definition: a mystery to be experienced and explored, not – as I said in last week's sermon – a puzzle to be solved.

On the other hand, the *meddler's* answer as to which has the priority is engagement, involvement, down and dirty participation in the world and with its hurting people. This has been the characteristic answer of Christian activists and liberation movements, and generally and historically of liberal

or progressive Christianity. The first act of discipleship is to walk the walk, to follow the way of Jesus. The second act is to reflect on that walk and to refuel for the next segment. But the point of life is the walk and the way, not the reflecting or the refueling.

This seems consistent with our Old Testament lesson from the book of Proverbs. Proverbs have – in the first instance – to do with moral action, not spiritual reflection. The call of Wisdom in Proverbs 9 to “come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed” has as its clear goal that we “lay aside immaturity, and live and walk in the way of insight.” In other words, the author of Proverbs is a meddler, an intruder, an intervener. He is full of practical, down-to-earth advice for ordinary people with real problems living in a confusing world. Was his advice always sound, always on target? No, as the book of Job makes clear. But the effort to deal with this-worldly issues is essential.

Conclusion

Which comes first: disengagement from life or engagement with life; withdrawal as a community of faith and hope or involvement as a community of love and justice? Don’t spend too much time trying to figure it out. Spend your time, rather, on improving the rhythm of your life.

Do you hear the beat? Have you found the rhythm? Are you on the infinity track, the track of involvement and withdrawal, of engagement and disengagement? We *should* gather with the faithful for the refreshment of word and sacrament or isolate ourselves in prayer and meditation. But we should also disperse for service to the nearby and distant neighbor, to the complex world of culture, and to the fragile world of nature.

Christian living involves both discipline and discipleship. It involves the discipline of meeting our own needs for personal growth through worship, meditation, study, and prayer. And it involves active discipleship: meeting the needs of others through solidarity and service. These two movements need to be held in creative tension as a never-ending rhythm of our lives. By God’s grace may we all get better at hearing the beat, at dancing the rhythm, at finding our groove on the infinity track of life. May we all, in our own unique ways, be both mystics and meddlers. Amen.

¹ Presented by Tom Wilkens at Peace Lutheran Church in Charlottesville, VA, on 08/15/09 and 08/16/09.