

(put small baggies of dirt on each chair)

## I. New Monasticism and the Daily Office

Some of you may have heard of the Neo- or New Monasticism movement.<sup>i</sup> If you have not heard of this movement, you may have heard of a few popularly associated names, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Taizé Community, and more recently Shane Claiborne.<sup>ii</sup> In general, these geographically bound and mostly Protestant communities value catholic forms of liturgy and contemplative prayer, generous hospitality, and missionally engaging those on the margins of society.

Um....This should sound familiar to those with traditionally Episcopal ears.

Think: mid-1500s, Cranmer, Church of England, Book of Common Prayer.

In the birthing of Anglicanism, there was a hope that all people could meditate and worship God with their whole lives, as only the Benedictine Monks among them did. Monasteries were closed and in their place came the Book of Common Prayer to outline a middle way between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism and to guide communal worship, and not just on Sundays.<sup>iii</sup> With Cranmer's version of Daily Office, now everyone could join in daily prayers that were once practiced by the religious elite, yet a rich aspect of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

These Daily Offices create an arch from examination and penitence to praise and thanksgiving.<sup>iv</sup>

In fact, we could make a long list of our shared liturgical moments of praise for who God is and thanksgiving for what God has done in our lives.

Can I get a witness?

## II. Matthew's Invitation: Thanksgiving for the work of God

That's what 'thanksgiving' is about: responding to what God has done in our lives and for what God is able to do!<sup>v</sup> And not limited to Sundays. The Psalms, for example, are scattered with Monday through Saturday testimonies – not just nouns and pronouns in reference to God but lengthy praise songs about who God is and what God's been up to.<sup>vi</sup> Even the Bible can be seen as a collection of testimonies of people's understanding of, experience with, and expectations of an awesome God!

Tonight's reading of Matthew challenges us to give a testimony of thanksgiving.

To repeat the last bit using the Message (paraphrase of the Bible),

What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way [God] works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how [God] works.

A few of the communities with whom I worshipped over the years had a time in the service for testimonies. A wireless mic was passed around, and people stood up to give thanks for the work of God in their lives – not as a bragging session or to get attention but as part of our worship together. These were real stories from real people about the active, real presence of God.

Now, can I get a witness?

### **III. BUT: Stuck in Examination**

I have had the honor of hearing lots of stories over the years. No doubt you have heard a lot, too! It is interesting to listen for the arch of these personal and communal stories.

- There are stories of resounding thankfulness for all that has happened over the years and the steadfast love and presence of God.
- Some stories sound like people are hovering in the midst of change and newness. Life together is not as it used to be, and the future is still not clear. They are grieving, yet holding onto hope.
- But then, there are those stories that just sound stuck in negative repeat. Instead of following the trajectory of the Daily Office from penitence to thanksgiving, they seem to have stopped at disappointment, anger, and doubt. (Not only have I heard these stories, to be honest, I have told them myself many times.)

It's not uncommon to get stuck in the mud of complaining and seemingly righteous examination of our selves or of others. But if we are not on the way to a place of seeing what God is doing and responding with thanksgiving, as one of my sisters likes to say, we may be pitching our tent in the wrong camp. We may need to pull up some of those comfy weeds to make room for the work of God or, at least, for a response of thanksgiving. And some of us also need help to get there.

Dare I ask, can I get an honest witness?

### **IV. James' Invitation: Making Room for the work of God and response of Thanksgiving**

This Thanksgiving Eve, we are invited to move from the disappointment, anger, doubt, spoiled virtue, and even real sorrow toward God's newness in our lives and our new response of thanksgiving.

The reading from James challenges us in this, again paraphrasing from the Message,  
Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger. So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. ...let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.

The poem *November* by Monica Regan echoes this invitation.<sup>vii</sup> As I read it, you are welcome to close your eyes and try to imagine yourself in this scene. You may also want to substitute "we" for "I" as you listen:

Cleared out again  
of the future I planted  
in careful rows,  
I straighten my back  
and watch the remnants  
of my intention  
lift and fall in the wind  
like so much scattered straw.

The sharp scent of churned earth,  
roots cut,  
still hangs just above the ground  
and already  
the worms are at their work.

But in the quiet violence  
of a landscape changed,  
there is something strange and lovely—  
as if even this spare and emptied field  
could be enough.

And though the fruits of  
this season are bitter,  
they are mine.  
I eat gratefully  
at the crossroads—  
one eye on the horizon  
and a fistful of soil  
darkening my finger[nails].

## V. Responding to the Invitation(s)

The small bag of dirt you received (and are encouraged to take home) is a visual invitation this Thanksgiving week moving into Advent to clear the ground for something new – to keep one eye on the horizon and one fist filled with soil.

For those who have experienced the presence of God and are being invited to start giving descriptive voice to what God has done, so let it be.

For those who have been stuck in negative repeat and doubt and are being invited to make room for newness, or at least a new response of thanksgiving, so let it be.

Together may we watch for, discover, and give a grateful witness to God's goodness, as *The General Thanksgiving* from the Daily Office invites, "...not only with our lips, but in our lives..."<sup>viii</sup>

So let it be.