

St. Francis of Assisi Lenten Mission Talk 2
Cliff Knighten, PhD

St. Augustine: “Our entire task in this life consists in healing the eyes of the heart so that they may be able to see God.” This is, of course, a reference to the beatific vision on Matthew 5:8: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Thomas Merton: “There is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find [God], I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find [God].”¹

St. Irenaeus: “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.”

I will use these lines from the poet **Maria Rainer Rilke** as a touchstone for tonight’s talk:

I’m too alone in the world, yet not alone enough
to make each hour holy.

I’m too small in the world, yet not small enough
to be simply in your presence, like a thing—
just as it is.

I want to know my own will
and to move with it.
And I want, in the hushed moments
when the nameless draws near,
to be among the wise ones—
or alone.

I want to mirror your immensity.
I want never to be too weak or too old
to bear the heavy, lurching image of you.
I want to unfold.
Let no place in me hold itself closed,
for where I am closed, I am false.
I want to stay clear in your sight.²

What emerges in this text?

1. Notice the theme of **solitude** in the opening lines: *I’m too alone in the world, yet not alone enough to make each hour holy.*

In solitude, we give time and space to be alone for the purpose of deepening our relationship with God. There are various ways of cultivating solitude including, e.g., the practices of Centering Prayer (Thomas Keating), Christian Meditation (John Main), being alone in nature, Eucharistic Adoration, and individual directed retreats.

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 38.

²Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).

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The key here is to take up a regular *contemplative practice*. A contemplative practice is one that helps you to...

...let go or detach from the reasoning mind and the normal discursive stream of consciousness.

...become internally quiet and still.

...be in your mind and in your heart.

...transcend the dualities between mind/body and inner/outer.

...integrate your dispersed being into a unified presence or awareness.

...be aware of and receptive to the presence of the Divine/Real.

Thomas Merton writes: Solitude is not withdrawal from ordinary life. It is not apart from, above, “better than” ordinary life; on the contrary, solitude is the very ground of ordinary life. It is the very ground of that simple, unpretentious, fully human activity by which we quietly earn our daily living and share our experiences with a few intimate friends.³

2. **Humility** is also necessary. *I’m too small in the world, yet not small enough to be simply in your presence, like a thing—just as it is.*

Thomas Keating writes:

The spiritual journey is a training in consent to God’s presence and to all reality. Basically, this is what true humility is. The divine action invites us to make the consents that we were unable to make in childhood and growing up because of the circumstances that surrounded our early lives.⁴

Keating goes on to identify four consents...

- ...to the basic goodness of our nature.
- ...to the full development of our being by activating our talents and creative energies.
- ...to the fact of our eventual non-being and the diminutions of self that occur through illness, old age, and death.
- ...to be transformed. This is the shift from the “false self” to the “true self.”⁵

³ Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 23.

⁴ Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 1992), 52.

⁵ Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 52-ff.

St. Francis of Assisi Lenten Mission Talk 2
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What is the false self? The false self is the ego-centric and ego-driven self. It consists, in part, of what we have, what we do, and what others think of us.

Thomas Merton suggests that the “false self” is rooted “in illusion...and the assumption that my false self, the self that exists only in my egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality of life to which everything in the universe is ordered. Thus, I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge, and love, to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real.”⁶

If we truly internalize these four consents, we can *be* in God’s presence “simply” and just as we are – honestly, naturally, without artifice or pretense, and without toxic shame.

Solitude and *humility* are the foundation from which the rest of the poem builds.

3. ***I want to know my own will and to move with it.*** As we practice solitude and humility, over time, we increasingly disidentify with the false self and live from our true self. We no longer live on the surface of life. We connect with what is deepest in us – our fundamental desires and intentions. This is the image of God in us. In the language of Meister Eckhart, “we learn that our ‘ground’ and ‘God’s ground’ is the same ground.”

We learn to act from our own true self - not the expectations and demands of others no matter how well intentioned - not our peers; if we are adults, not our parents; not the various voices of authority that are prone to illegitimately limit our freedom as daughters and sons of God (Rom. 8:21). This is a shift from *external* authority to *internal* authority.

4. We will also grow in capacity to ***bear the heavy, lurching image*** of the Divine. We can learn to remain in the presence of the One who at times seems too remote, too demanding, capricious, uncaring, and oblivious to the suffering that is all around us. It was the Protestant German theologian Jürgen Moltmann who once said that everything changed after Auschwitz. What he meant by that is that all our theologizing must now reckon with the twin realities of the goodness of God *and* the reality of unimaginable sorrow and loss.
5. Finally, we can find the courage to progressively unfold. We can allow the Spirit to touch our emotional wounds and soften our reified defenses and complexes. We can face the reality of our lives and the world with more honesty and more compassion.

To state the obvious, this is not an easy process. The poet W.H. Auden once said that humankind can only bear so much reality. The spiritual teacher Jack Kornfield notes:

To open deeply, as a genuine spiritual life requires, we need tremendous courage and

⁶ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1972), 34-35.

St. Francis of Assisi Lenten Mission Talk 2
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strength, a kind of warrior spirit. But the place for this warrior spirit is in the heart. We need energy, commitment, and courage not to run from our life nor to cover it over with any philosophy – material or spiritual. We need a warrior’s heart that lets us face our lives directly, our pains and limitations, our joys and possibilities.⁷

There is a place for a warrior spirit in the spiritual journey. However, we are not at war with the culture, or at least we shouldn’t be.

This warrior spirit is needed to face the truth of our own lives without avoiding, denying, or repressing what we see. This includes our ego defenses as well as the afflictive emotions of rage, anxiety, envy, shame, grief, etc.

Nouwen once observed: “I will see when I am willing to be seen. I will receive new eyes that can see the mysteries of God’s own life when I allow God to see me, all of me, even those parts of me that I don’t want to see.”

This seeing and being seen requires repentance or *metanoia*. For most of us, this is a lifelong process.

As D.H. Laurence has written:

I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections.
And it is not because the mechanism is working wrongly, that I am ill.
I am ill because of wounds to the soul, to the deep emotional self
and the wounds to the soul take a long, long time, only time can help
and patience, and a certain difficult repentance,
long, difficult repentance, realization of life’s mistake, and the freeing oneself
from the endless repetition of the mistake....⁸

True repentance or *metanoia* is precisely what the Church calls us to in the season of Lent. True *metanoia* involves a radical honesty about one’s life. As our weakness encounters God’s unfathomable grace, we experience healing.

W.H. Auden:

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountains start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man [or woman] how to praise.

⁷ Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart: A Guide through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 8.

⁸ Robert Bly, James Hillman, and Michael Meade, *The Rag and Bone Shop of the Heart: Poems for Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).