

25 April 2021

Guides on the Journey: Brother Lawrence

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

Most of Paul's letters follow a basic outline. He starts with a greeting, then deals with whatever theological question had prompted the letter, and then he closes with some general encouragement and advice on living the Christian life. Our reading today comes from one of those final sections. We read 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, verses 12-22:

¹²But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; ¹³esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. ¹⁵See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. ¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

We are embarked on a biographical sermon series. I've been presenting to you various "Guides for the Journey" from history – people in whom the Spirit of God was living and active – as possible models for us. But the first two "guides" I presented don't necessarily make that easy, do they? Hildegard of Bingen, whom we talked about two weeks ago, was a flat-out genius. She was one of those irritating people who seemed to be able to everything she tried, and better than anyone else. Most of us have some trouble relating to people like that. Then, last week, we talked about Julian of Norwich, whose spiritual life was jump-started by heavenly visions, and who then locked herself away in a tiny apartment to pray and write for 60 years. Again, not a lot of shared life experience here. I held Hildegard and Julian up as examples of expressing faith through creativity and resting peacefully in the love of God, and that stuff is accessible to everyone, but the reality is that both of these women were extraordinary people, and most of us feel pretty ordinary most of the time. Aren't there any ordinary followers of Christ?

Yes. Let me introduce you today to Nicholas Herman, a poor and uneducated commoner who lived in 17th century France. We don't know much about his early life, just that for a while he worked as a footman (sort of an assistant butler) in a nobleman's house, but he was gawky and clumsy and kept breaking things and that later he served for a while in the army. Finally, in 1666 he joined a Carmelite monastery in Paris. He could read but was no student, so he didn't even try to be ordained, but there were roles in monasteries for "Lay Brothers," people who did most of the menial work for the monks, and so Nicholas took those vows and assumed the name "Brother Lawrence." For the rest of his life, he served the monastery, most of the time in the kitchens. Occasionally he got sent out to do purchasing – especially wine. French monasteries in the 17th century apparently needed a lot of wine. Because France. So Nicholas started out a servant, and ended up as Brother Lawrence, still basically a servant.

How do we even know about this monastery drudge? Well, after several years in the monastery, Brother Lawrence came to the attention of an important priest, a M. Beaufort, who had been Grand Vicar to a Cardinal, and M. Beaufort was struck by how different this Brother Lawrence of the kitchen staff was from every other brother. M. Beaufort began interviewing him, and after each conversation, he sat down to write out summaries of what Brother Lawrence

had said. Meanwhile, others who had met him began writing Brother Lawrence letters, asking his counsel. Brother Lawrence didn't like writing letters, and so his responses were short and reluctant, but many of those letters, too, were saved and treasured. After Brother Lawrence's death, M. Beaufort collected his conversations and as many of the letters as he could find and published them under the name, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. So, Brother Lawrence lived and died in complete obscurity. He saw no extraordinary talents, performed no miracles, never (intentionally) wrote a book. And here we are, some three hundred years later, and I'm holding him up as a model. Why? What's so special about him?

Let me tell you how Nicholas decided to join the monastery. He says that he had a vision. He was walking in the forest on a winter's day when he looked up and saw, silhouetted against the sky, a tree without leaves on it. That's it. That's his vision. A leafless tree in winter. If you can imagine. But when Nicholas saw it, he thought about the leaves that would burst from those bare branches in the spring, and he was filled with wonder at such goodness in creation. So he dedicated his life to God. It's the perfect origin story for this man, because the greatness of Brother Lawrence is not the amazing things that he did or experienced. His greatness is that he found God in all experiences, most of which are emphatically ordinary. Everybody on that road that cold day saw the same tree. Only he saw God.

Brother Lawrence saw God everywhere and lived his life in a constant conversation with his Maker. He made a point of it, a deliberate practice. He says that before beginning any task – chopping vegetables, washing dishes, whatever – he would offer that task as a gift to God. He would pray, “O God, since I must now apply my mind to outward things, grant me the grace to continue in Thy presence, and I ask you to receive my work as a gift.” Then he would do the task as if it were an offering, enjoying God's companionship while he worked, and then – when he was done – he would pause to give God thanks before turning to the next task. He did this for *every* chore, and he encourages us not to be ashamed of doing small tasks for God. Why would we think God is only interested in our “important” works? For that matter, why would we think that washing dishes is less important than anything else? God, he says, is far more pleased with a small job done as an offering than in a great and impressive deed done for your own glory. In fact, Brother Lawrence says that God doesn't care *what* we do, so long as we do it for God.

(That sounds a little odd, doesn't it? God doesn't care what we do? But there's a sneaky trap in that statement, I think. In reality, if we're offering everything we do to God, then there are certain things we just won't do. I don't imagine it's possible to lie, cheat, steal, harm innocent people, gossip, run a pyramid scheme, or take revenge as a gift to God. Try it if you want, but my guess is that if we start out offering everything we do to God, then we'll make different choices in *what* we do, too.)

Living life in this way shaped Brother Lawrence's personality. His fellow brothers reported that he was never flustered. A kitchen for a large group is going to be a place of frantic activity and stress, but Brother Lawrence became famous for never rushing, but rather continuing to work at a steady pace and consequently getting more done than others. He also appears to have lived a life free from guilt. Not that he never did anything wrong. He did. But he says that whenever he failed in some virtue, he would simply say to God, “This is what will always happen if I try to do something on my own, without you.” And then, he says, he didn't let it bother him anymore. Nor was he troubled with regret over failures. When he had finished a task,

he would examine himself as to whether he had done it well. If so, he would give thanks to God for his help, and if not, ask pardon and put it behind him.

You should read *The Practice of the Presence of God*. It's the shortest of short books, and for all that, it could be even shorter. There's a lot of repetition. Brother Lawrence had a simple formula for life – well, simple to explain, anyway – and he doesn't mind repeating it. But just getting to know this man is a treat.

But here's what I want to focus on: I called Brother Lawrence "ordinary" earlier, but his very ordinariness is extraordinary. You see, he didn't develop this "practice of the presence of God" intentionally. He sort of stumbled into it. Brother Lawrence says that he joined the monastery originally with a strong sense of his own sin and guilt, half hoping that the rigors of monastic life would punish him as he deserved. There, he threw himself into the rigorous monastic schedule: prayers scheduled every three hours, even through the night; fasting and subjecting himself to other harsh disciplines designed to break the carnal spirit; and obediently doing prescribed meditations on the depths of his own sinfulness. All these were standard practices for monks, as they tried to put aside the world.

Brother Lawrence hated it, and it didn't do a thing for him. When he dutifully meditated on his sinfulness, his mind wandered. When he fasted, it didn't make him think of God but of food. The rigorous prayer schedule became a routine inconvenience. He tried to read theological writings but found them confusing and didn't really see what they had to do with God. (Fun fact! This remains true of many theological writings today.) But he trusted his superiors and diligently gave himself to these disciplines, finding his only relief in his menial job in the kitchen. There – not expected to be focused on the God of the formal prayers, he was able to think about the God who brings leaves out of branches in the Spring. So, as he worked in the kitchen, he began trying some of the practices that I've just described – inviting God into his mopping and chopping and so on – as an escape from being religious, and in them he found contentment. Finally – because he was uneducated, not dim – it struck him that all the spiritual exercises were driving him away from God, while maintaining a constant conversation as he went about his life was bringing him back. So he stopped the spiritual exercises. Of course, he still went to the prayers, because they were required, but in one of his conversations he admits that he didn't pay any attention. He just did the same thing there that he would have done in the kitchen: chat with God. He says, "It is a great delusion to think that times of prayer ought to be different from other times."

Think about that for a moment. How much of our religious practice is focused on carving out a special time in our schedules to think about God? We call for morning devotions, daily quiet times. We sing about it: "Sweet Hour of Prayer," "Take Time to Be Holy." But what if there's another way? What if it's not about remembering to include God at a set time on your daily calendar but about taking God with you through the whole day? What if being close to God is less complicated than all the books seem to imply? What if it's not about being religious?

And so, I close today by returning to our reading from 2 Thessalonians. As I read from that again, hold Brother Lawrence in your mind. *Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

A final word. As some of you know, my parents were missionaries in Singapore. One day, shortly after they got there, my father was at a church event and – unlike most Singaporeans – he had a car. For some reason, the group was going together from one location to another, so my father said that he could take some people with him but, “I don’t know where I’m going.” One of the Chinese church members said to him, “Ah, not to worry, lah! I can follow you!” Now some of you are already noting a problem in that plan, right? My father was confused, too. But that was only because he was new to Singapore English. In Singlish – probably because of a translation from Chinese – the English word “follow” is often used to mean “go with.” We are called to follow Jesus. The genius of Brother Lawrence is that he shows us we can follow Jesus side by side.