

The Practice of Christian Mindfulness
as an Imaginative Challenge in Parish Ministry

by

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Abstract

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In an age when anxieties around church attendance and participation prompt pastors and lay leaders alike to explore myriad leadership resources, there is another, more prayerful way to address this challenge. Within the broader spiritual climate of church decline, there nonetheless exists a keen interest in mindfulness practice as long-taught in the Eastern religious traditions. Rather than ignoring or dismissing this interest, we can engage the practice through the Christian contemplative tradition. By bringing Christian ascetical theology and practice to bear on a version of Christian mindfulness, we can more faithfully and effectively address the pressures we face as leaders within congregations.

Grace Episcopal Church in Gainesville, Georgia, has encountered its own particular struggles with leadership, growth, and attendance. After difficult transitions over the past couple of decades, the resource-sized parish reached a pivotal point in its common life. During the last four years—a time span including the search process that brought me to Grace and my early years there as rector—the leadership of the parish reoriented Grace Church by exploring what we call the “mindful church

model.” Rather than continue the long-standing program-maintenance model that focused on a more business-style approach to parish leadership, the community has risked a way of leading and ministering that is steeped in prayer and the contemplative practices long held by the Christian tradition. This paper lays out a theological reflection on our communal development, paying special attention to a Christian understanding of mindfulness practice.

Chapter One lays out the particular challenges within this parish community. These include the discernment process in the search for a new rector as well as initial conversations about persistent mistrust from previous years and the burgeoning potential for growth and expansion within the community. Chapter Two delves more deeply into the dynamic of “discernment and imagination.” Drawing on insights from my ongoing work with the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation as well as the founding documents of the Ignatian tradition, the chapter advocates for a more imaginative engagement with both leadership and discipleship in the church. In Chapter Three, there is a more thorough exploration of mindfulness practice in general, noting the intriguing juxtaposition between various concepts of mindfulness and Christian perspectives on conversion of life. Chapter Four focuses on patristic development of the notion of “watchfulness,” comparing and contrasting it with Buddhist understandings so that one can appreciate both Eastern perspectives on mindfulness as well as the potential for growth through the Christian

contemplative tradition. Chapter Five explores how such a transfigured awareness, shaped and informed by the ascetical dimensions of discernment, imagination, and conversion, awakens our desire for God; at the same time, we begin to perceive God’s desire for our fullness of life. This chapter highlights the contributions of Anglican theologians as well as others in the broader Christian tradition.

While the precise experience of Grace Episcopal Church is unique to our community, this paper seeks to lay out a theological reorientation possible within any Christian community. The Christian Church faces challenging days, to be certain, with decreases and distractions from many angles. We would do well to focus more intently on the contemplative dimensions of our tradition as we address the pressures and anxieties that we face. By seeking a transfigured awareness, we come to rely more fully on the Holy Spirit’s guidance in our individual lives and in the lives of our communities of faith.

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The Practice of Christian Mindfulness as an Imaginative Challenge in Parish Ministry

Chapter One

Context and the Challenge

“We’re wondering when you’re going to be more aggressive,” my Junior Warden told me six months into my cure as rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Gainesville, Georgia. I had invited him to lunch to discuss the overall ministry situation of the parish, paying particular attention to the financial health of the community. Over the previous six months, I had come to realize that I had “inherited” a community with enormous potential as well as deep and lingering shadows of mistrust from experiences with the two previous rectors. Some on my staff shared stories of how decisions were made without much collaboration from other parties. Such a “lead from the front” leadership style enabled quick decisions, yet it also fostered misunderstanding and mistrust among many in the parish.

My warden’s question about being “aggressive” was a clue to me that we had an extraordinary opportunity to reflect on spiritual leadership. Did the vestry and staff expect me to “lead from the front”?

The conversation around leadership styles was a sign that I needed to be particularly discerning in the dynamics of this community of nearly one thousand parishioners. How could we envision our common life? Would they be willing to step into the vulnerable shared space I imagined possible?

When I arrived at Grace, I saw the same basic leadership structure as exists in most church communities: rector, parish administrative staff, program staff, and a vestry whose members were organized as *de facto* department heads of the various ministries and committees. I was looking to hire an associate priest in the next nine or ten months, and I knew that decision would give me an opportunity to develop further our clerical responsibilities and ministry development.

Ours was a rigid structure in many ways, but the very rigidity lent itself to a comfortable predictability. As new vestry members were seated each January, they would take the places of those who rotated off. The staff continued to make sure that the finances, communication, and building management aspects were taken care of. The new vestry members worked with committees to maintain the various ministries and opportunities the community supported. I realized quickly that my role could easily focus solely on maintaining this organizational structure, working with my parish administrator and senior warden to make sure all the ministries were supported—while the parish members were made

adequately aware of the entire enterprise so to continue with their pledges.

I would vouch that my situation mirrored many if not most others in the church. I experienced a well-known model that I had come to describe in previous parish experiences as the “program-maintenance model” of congregational and spiritual leadership. So long as the programs were maintained to an effective degree and ample communication and pastoral care were provided, the parish’s ministries could indeed continue. But was there a more dynamic, Spirit-conscious way of sharing in spiritual and congregational leadership? Was there a way to embody a degree of risky faithfulness within our common life that invited the entire community into a space of shared ministry and vocational discernment?

When I was in the search process, I was very open about my interest in contemplative leadership and practices. I told the committee about my time with the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation and how grateful I was for Tilden Edwards’ challenge to trust explicitly in the Holy Spirit’s guidance and presence within a church community—and within all of life. Edwards and I had shared many conversations about what it might be like to become even more conscious of the Spirit’s presence within the life of a community of prayer. I opened up and told both the search committee and the vestry about my hopes for a “way of being a rector” that was more intentional in practices of prayer, in community-

centered discernment, and in a way of being together that fostered appreciation and participation within the entire parish. I spoke of how I saw the simple yet profound experience of Benedictine spirituality as an inspiring guide for our own development as a church—a church that wanted to move, in organizational language, from being a program-sized church to a resource-sized congregation centered in prayer and worship.

The committees were sincerely interested. They were excited about the possibilities of new explorations, and they were curious about what such a spacious and Spirit-conscious approach might be like in the particular context of Grace Church. As excited as I was by their curiosity and interest, I also cautioned them that such a communal endeavor would carry enormous risk. It would ask for a level of vulnerability and communication that, heretofore, may have been lacking. It would entail the development of new skills and a willingness to become more proficient in our own theological language and ability to articulate our encounters with God’s presence. It would require us to identify places of resistance even as we reminded ourselves of our belief that the Holy Spirit was inviting us to respond even more fully into our call to “grow into the full stature of Christ.”¹

I remained curious about the Grace community and our common interest throughout our conversations over the next eight months. During that time, we grew closer to one another in this deep, trusting

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 302.

communication. They spoke with me about their frustration at feeling stagnant as I shared my hope to lean into a practice of spiritual leadership that was indeed beckoning me. I expressed my hope and prayer to hold such a space of risk and vulnerability as they conveyed their intention to support an imaginative space of shared leadership and spiritual reflection. When they invited me to be their rector, I felt empowered to step into this space we had imagined together. When I went to see the bishop the next morning, his first response to me was, “This is going to be extremely interesting.”

To gain a wider perspective on the experience of the search process, I invited the three former senior wardens, each of whom was serving on the vestry that called me, to share their thoughts on how they hoped, dreamed, and wrestled both in the search process and in the transition time. When I was called to be the rector of Grace Church, I was the 27th in a long line of missionaries, vicars, priests-in-charge, and rectors over a history of almost two centuries. Each of these remarkable individuals helped me see the opportunity for shared leadership grounded in prayer and discernment. Their reflections on the search process show how the vestry was hopeful and aware of the parish’s potential. First is a reflection from the Hon. Kathy Gosselin, the Senior Warden who invited me to come to Grace. Kathy’s presence meant so much to me when I first arrived. Due to the timing of Grace’s Annual Meeting, Kathy rotated off the vestry one month after I arrived, yet we

continued to meet. Her support and counsel were vital during that first year of my cure—and continue to be so.

When I was Senior Warden during the search process, much of the initial work was prescribed for us by the Diocese. So my job involved administrative work to make sure we scheduled the meetings with candidates in a timely fashion and at such time that all members of the Vestry could be present. All Vestry members completed their homework of reviewing all the material about each candidate. Then I ensured we had our questions prepared, and we decided which Vestry member would ask them for each candidate's visit. This work was extensive and detailed, was entered into thoughtfully and mindfully, and with prayer. I asked Cheryl, one of our members, to start our sessions as a Vestry and our interviews with the candidates with prayer to focus us appropriately. But this preparatory work, for me, was not something out of the ordinary.

Once we had concluded the visits with all three candidates, my challenges began. I believe I spent more concentrated time in conversation with the Spirit during this phase than at any other time in my life. I also shared my thoughts and vision with other members of the Vestry, who aided and guided me with great suggestions. The evening we were to meet to decide on our new Rector needed to be one of serious, careful, open and calm discussion leading to consensus. Shaping the evening so as to make sure we were guided by God as well as each other was a daunting task. And knowing we were doing this for the entire parish

made it all that much more of a consuming conversation in my head. We were presented with very diverse candidates, appealing to different members of the Vestry, and I wanted to make sure everyone was heard, and all aspects of the decision were considered. As our process had had to be more prolonged than any of us wanted, I wanted to make sure we could all recall the details of our first meeting. I made posters of the notes I'd taken after the interviews, with feedback from all Vestry members. These included each candidate's strengths and challenges. I also decided that we would pass around a ball of yarn that each person speaking would hold while they spoke. This meant they could not be interrupted. (Yarn is important to me and we were meeting in my knitting room). I tried to prepare for any questions I could put to the group to have them look deeply at this decision, without trying to focus on a particular candidate. And I kept alert throughout the evening's conversation in order to catch the Spirit in action, pointing it out as subtly as I could. (Wow, that sounds way more intentional than it was.) I felt a heavy weight of responsibility to be "on," guiding us to a decision that brought joy and peace to our expectations. Cheryl started our evening with wonderful prayer and reading, and each member spoke politely about their views. After four hours we were agreed in our decision. I feel this may have been one of the times I actually experienced the peace of the Lord and was aware of it. The evening had a very organic feel to it, if that makes sense. It was a great privilege to serve in this way. Calling the Bishop, calling Stuart, and

announcing the decision at church were just the delights I was fortunate to savor after our critical evening. My delight was well founded as every year since Stuart started at Grace has been a blessing.

Next is a reflection from Becky Whitmire, my second Senior Warden and former coordinator of pastoral care at the parish. Becky's presence continues to ground me and those who work with her. Her calming spirit was reassuring during the year she served as Senior Warden.

As I think back on the search process that brought Stuart to Grace Church, the first thing that comes to mind is my initial concern over who we as a Vestry would choose to serve on the search committee. While it was important to choose a diverse group of parishioners in terms of their ministry involvement and experience at Grace, I also felt it extremely important that those chosen be good listeners and able to work well together. As it turned out, I was quite happy about those who were chosen for the committee and felt confident that they would do a good job of choosing candidates. Once the search committee handed the selection process over to the Vestry, my concern moved to my own personal ability to be true to the needs of the congregation as expressed through the parish survey as well as to those needs of which I was aware through my Vestry involvement. In addition to the attributes every church is looking for (someone who can inspire, teach, grow the church, etc.), it was important

that Grace find a rector with strong personal engagement, pastoral care, conflict resolution, and personnel management abilities. The good news is that the search committee provided three very strong candidates. The Vestry was in agreement that either of two of those candidates would be a good fit, although in different ways. Stuart was at the beginning of his career, and the concern was about both his depth of experience and the response he might receive from the (many) older Grace parishioners who might discount him because of his age. The other candidate had many years in the priesthood and would be well received by the congregation in terms of his personality and experience, but the concern for me was that if he was not able to inject energy where needed then we would continue on as an older, shrinking congregation. In making our final decision, there was much talk about the difference in age and experience of the candidates. What it kept coming back to for me, though, was the excitement I felt about Stuart and his answers to our questions during his formal interview with the Vestry. I remember thinking that that excitement would most probably translate to very good things for Grace Church, and so it has.

Last is a reflection from Cheryl Kelley, my third Senior Warden. After rotating off the vestry, Cheryl and I continued having conversations about opportunities for spiritual formation and Christian education at Grace. When a staff position opened up, I was able to hire Cheryl as Grace's new Director of Christian Formation.

My three year term on the vestry began just as the search committee finished the parish profile and began receiving applications. I felt honored to be asked to serve at such an important transitional time, and took that responsibility seriously. It was weighty and exciting at the same time!

Our search committee did an excellent job recruiting and screening candidates, and ultimately recommended three candidates for the vestry's consideration. They refused to endorse any one of them over the others—insisting that any one of the candidates would be a good choice. And they were right. Each candidate brought different gifts: one had obvious administrative strengths; one had a huge pastoral presence; and one had a kind of joyful enthusiasm that was infectious. The last one was obviously Stuart.

I was looking for someone who could breathe new life into the parish. We had been in a “holding pattern” for a long time, and we needed someone to could attract new people, and feed existing ones in ways that helped them get re-engaged. It was obvious to me that Stuart had the kind of personality that was perfect for that, and I really liked some of the creative things he had done at his previous parish. I read his book on the Obedire Project, and was very intrigued. I thought it sounded much like what I had been hearing parishioners say they were hungry for. He had enjoyed great success growing his previous parish and engaging new, young families. I thought he had what Grace needed.

The part that made it feel risky was that he was so young and had never served as rector before—ever! Not just never at a parish our size. There was concern about whether he could manage the staff and difficult personnel issues. There was concern about whether he would have the necessary “credibility” with the older members of our parish. There was concern about maintaining our “traditional” sense of liturgy and worship. Stuart gave us examples of some his experiences that spoke to those issues, but he’d never really done what we would be asking him to do. We were all intrigued by the possibility we saw in Stuart, but it was equal parts exciting and scary.

I felt the Holy Spirit nudging us along in the whole process, creating a sense of calm under everybody’s “what ifs.” The tipping point came, though, when near the end of our final voting meeting, our senior warden asked, “When you imagine calling a candidate, which one makes you feel excited about Grace’s future?” The answer was unanimously Stuart. A sense of recognition, then calm, filled the room. We had our answer.

When I arrived at Grace on the Feast of the Epiphany in 2014, my calendar was filled with folks who wanted to visit. They wanted to share their stories of pain and disappointment in twenty years of complex and sometimes troubled leadership as well as their hopes for a new time of refreshment, growth, imagination, and joy. Over dozens of pots of tea, we entered into a period of listening together. I was vividly aware of how my role as their rector could “set a tone,” as I had heard it described.

Rather than rushing in to identify problems and suggest changes, I invited them to dream with me.

From my time with Shalem—and in my own spiritual practice and conversations with both Christians and Buddhists over the years—I had become interested in mindfulness practice. I began reflecting with parishioners on how mindfulness practice might, indeed, be a way to enter into a shared conversation around ministry and congregational life. We approached “mindfulness” in the terms of renowned teacher Bhante Gunaratana. That is, we asked ourselves how might we share a certain degree of “non-egoistic alertness” and an “awareness of change”² when it came to our shared ministry in the parish. I invited them to risk reflecting on our common life in a way that connected intriguingly with Gunaratana’s definition of mindfulness:

It is observing the passing flow of experience. It is watching things as they are changing. It is seeing the birth, growth, and maturity of all phenomena. It is watching the phenomena decay and die. Mindfulness is watching things, moment by moment, continuously.³

When it came to their past experiences as a parish community, how were they aware of areas of growth, struggle, invitation, resistance? How were they aware of their desires, fears, and hopes? How could we practice together and learn to share these insights with one another as a parish?

² Bhante Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2011), 134-135.

³ *Ibid.*, 135.

As Gunaratana suggests, “Mindfulness is participatory observation. The meditator is both participant and observer at one and the same time.”⁴

Beginning the first month, I invited the entire parish into a four month-long series of weekly conversations. These “Listening Circles” were designed to foster relationships as much as to find clarity and direction. Each Wednesday, for ten weeks, over a hundred people gathered around tables in the parish hall to share dinner together. Each week, I invited them to consider a question: “As a member of the community of Grace Episcopal Church, what have been your most meaningful experiences with ____?” Together, we explored the many areas of our common life, from pastoral care to choir and music, to community ministry partnerships to children’s ministries.

As they sat in small groups, one of them recorded what was shared so that we could find a way to gather the many images of ministry—wondering how the Spirit’s guidance would be perceived. I encouraged them to speak honestly and deeply, while avoiding any urge to “vent” about what had simply frustrated them. I told them that we would not carry forward any comments that were rooted in anger or frustration but only those that could foster dialogue and our call to live into our Baptismal covenant as a community of faith. Knowing their history as a community pitted against itself after affairs and mistrust, I acknowledged that I knew they could sabotage this process at any time. I also admitted

⁴ Ibid., 135

that I could sabotage this as well by yielding to any impulse within myself to revert to a more business-centered leadership style whereby I simply “made decisions” rather than listening deeply to how the Spirit of Christ was at work within our shared community. We were being invited to trust and risk.

Over these weeks, we listened, we spoke, we shared meals, and we grew to trust more deeply. We heard stories of pain and loss illumined by hope and love. We learned that we could step into a space of vulnerability and honesty. We paid attention—we were mindful—of how we felt. We were curious, and we realized what a gift that truly was.

At the end of the ten weeks, we had collected almost two hundred pages of hand-written notes, dreams, stories, and ideas, and we compiled all these into a binder to use for further discernment and reflection. We wondered together, “How do we see the Spirit of Christ leading us and inviting us?” Immediately, a few areas came into focus: greater community partnerships in the city and wider area, deeper pastoral awareness, the need for further work to foster trust within the parish community, and the opportunity to develop a rich space of creative expression within our shared ministries.

We quickly learned that such mindfulness practice—as embodied within this shared experience—enabled us to focus both on what the community had experienced in the past as well as how we were being invited to step into the future. We had become more aware of those

things that had wounded the community, those experiences that had impeded spiritual growth, and the attitudes and behaviors that we needed to release. In other words, mindfulness practice was a practice through which parishioners might engage in the dynamic of conversion within the community's life.

Remarkably, if there was one focus point that repeatedly arose during the conversations, it was the opportunity for creative expression, for the cultivation of imagination in all areas of the parish's common life. Grace is a community that contains many artists: painters, sculptors, writers, poets, dramatists, musicians, and singers. It is a place full of wonder and experimentation, and all of those gathered in the small group conversations immediately noticed how this was a dominant theme woven into many of the community's various ministries and committees. Recognizing this common point, we intentionally held it up as a charism of our community. It is an element of faith that inspires every aspect of our shared life, and we pledged ourselves to find ways to participate imaginatively with this dimension of the Spirit's call on our life.

The entire community realized we had the opportunity to anchor our ministry within such an imaginative endeavor. They did not want this to be some tangential activity or merely some vague, ethereal element within the details of ministry and life. Rather, they desired to seek ways to live imaginatively, to pray imaginatively, to worship imaginatively, and to manage imaginatively. The staff and vestry realized

that, if we were to embody the discernment of the community more fully, we were being called to reimagine how we organized the very leadership framework of the parish.

After praying about our shared discernment experience and wondering about ways to reorient our leadership framework, the next vestry election gave us the opportunity to embody it. We worked as a staff and vestry to plan a transition from the more traditional management structure to one that was centered in a mindful, imaginative, and creative space. Whereas the prior vestry and staff configurations were configured on the program-maintenance model, aligned with various ministry departments such as pastoral care, outreach, children and youth, and stewardship, we wondered what it might be like to structure our ministries into collaborate networks we called “mindful ministry clusters.” These clusters would foster the ongoing imaginative, collaborative, and discernment-based work that the small group listening circles had begun.

After praying with the two hundred pages of notes about our conversations, we identified five broad areas of ministry within the Grace community: Administration, Compassion, Formation, Participation, and Creative Expression. We purposefully noted how worship and prayer—our Common Prayer—weave throughout all of the clusters and continually invite us into a greater awareness of God’s love for us. Every ministry we have at Grace finds an anchor in one of these cluster spaces.

The vestry and staff resonate with various ones of them as they work together to invite the entire parish to share their gifts and experience our common identity as part of the Body of Christ.

To help organize our life, I asked five key staff members to function as coordinators for the clusters, based on their ministry role and gifts. The vestry members reorganized themselves into the clusters (either one or two) based on their interest, gifts, and skills, rather than focusing solely on one aspect of the parish's life. For example, the Outreach vestry liaison became a crucial member of the Compassion Cluster and the Stewardship vestry chairperson serves on the Administration Cluster. Rather than only going to meetings that pertain solely to their specific committee, the clusters regularly meet together and share ideas on how the various ministries within them are connected. Immediately, the Outreach and Pastoral Care committees realized that they both were seeking to embody Christ's compassion in the world, albeit it in two different focus points. After meeting together, they realized they had never before understood how we are called to live into concentric circles of compassion within our parish, city, state, and global communities.

When the new vestry class arrived, one of their first decisions was to create a new "seat" on the vestry specifically for Creative Expression. They realized how meaningful it would be to have a vestry member present at every meeting to remind us to lean more into our imaginative vocation. The traditional Buildings and Grounds vestry position was

eliminated and was replaced with a liaison for a reoriented Campus Vision and Development Committee. The former Stewardship chairperson realized that he actually resonated with the Participation Cluster and its hope to foster greater involvement from the entire community just as much as he did with the Administration Cluster and its focus on the financial health of the parish. Greater connections were made between the entire vestry and staff team, and we entered into a time of deep conversations. To help coordinate all this reorientation and support the conversations, the Senior Warden's role became a key focus point. This person worked (and continues to work) alongside me in fostering communication, coordinating planning, and enabling even greater participation from the entire community. Together, we make an incredible team!

To be sure, we utilized many flow charts and graphs that helped lay out the logistics of this transition. We made sure that everyone was comfortable with the details of the structure, and we continually clarified expectations with staff, vestry, and ministry chair persons throughout the community. Transitions are never easy, yet this one has truly fostered a stronger connection with parishioners. Over three years, membership has grown rapidly and pledging has increased by almost thirty percent, a reality which I attribute to this increased mindfulness of our common life in Christ.

The transition into such a leadership model has not been entirely easy. We have shared many conversations around expectations and the risk entailed when we move from a well-known framework to one that feels much more vulnerable. Some in the parish wondered why any reorientation was necessary, while others welcomed it wholeheartedly. When I hired my remarkable associate priest, the Rev. Dr. Cynthia Park, I shared with her my hopes for continuing this exploration of a mindful way of embodying leadership within the community. She brought invaluable insights from her background as both a therapist as well as a Biblical scholar with a doctorate from the Catholic University of America. Her reflection on her experience helping shape this mindful leadership model are insightful:

I was deep into the interviewing process with two other congregations on the day Stuart called. "Hey, friend. I need you." For months I had danced something between the "Seven Veils" and the "Tango" with these different search committees, each "side" trying to read between the lines, frame things positively, and figure out whether "this" might work. When I heard Stuart's voice, my soul resonated with the possibility of sharing a yoke with a wondrously grounded colleague. I accepted the invitation to join him without ever hearing any details about what he wanted me to do or be. I was in the process of moving house from Atlanta to Gainesville before a colleague told me he'd seen my job title in

the diocesan news. “Apparently, you are going to be in charge of something called ‘ministries of compassion.’”

Stuart’s vision of “Mindful Church” unfolded for me after I arrived during the course of heart to heart conversations about our lives and our vocations. I answered his invitation to come join him not because I was impressed by his ideas, but because I was impressed by his life, his character, and his generosity. Many older and more experienced rectors are famously stingy and territorial about sharing parish ministry. Capable of doing so many things well, Stuart is surprisingly generous with ministry and praise, and not just with his clergy colleagues but with every leader in the congregation. I am convinced that it is this generosity of spirit that allows room for others to imagine, and imagination is, I believe, the essential resource needed for mindful practice to be generative.

Even so, in practical terms, his “mindful Church” model appeared cumbersome to me, at the beginning. I had been trained to exercise more authoritative and individual leadership by fiat, which appeared to have the effect of greater efficiency. What I came to realize is that this appearance of efficiency comes at the high cost of limited personal investment from parishioners. Under Stuart’s model, consensus building derives from a period of mutual discernment and prayer. Initially, I experienced this as needlessly slow and inefficient. Within the first quarter, however, my experience of personal investment on the part of the parishioners percolated to the surface. This positive culture of personal

investment in an idea or a program accomplished three necessary achievements that are historically hard to achieve under the model with which I was more familiar. The first is that folks are not afraid to “fail quickly.” If an idea does not generate an interested group to pray about it, then we move on without any sense that the idea was “bad,” but rather that the time for the idea was not “good.” The result is that, conversely, when an idea does generate a sizeable number of folks to consider its creation, there is higher energy around that discerning season.

The second achievement is that there is a sense of accomplishment in doing fewer things well rather than doing many things merely for the sake of appearing busy. The result is that we no longer expect that an idea will be launched into perpetuity, but rather we expect it to have a season, the end of which will open the space for the next idea. But the most significant benefit is that, because of the personal investment of the parishioners, I am able to exercise my ministry in such a way that when God calls me away from this place, the core work that we have done together will enable the congregation to continue its work without needing my participation to drive it. I am free to be an advocate and a facilitator, which is a ministry model that many of my colleagues have never enjoyed.

Finally, by virtue of its focus on intentionality, a deliberative model of discernment in ministry resists obfuscation and deceit, building trust instead. In too many congregations, efficiency-driven models of clergy leadership have fostered deceit and secrets. This insufficient trust level

creates doubt and insincerity in parishioners, as well, as they doubt each other's motivations and loyalties. The Mindful Church model is able to highlight genuine transparency as not only essential to the process but also as an affirmation of the work of the Holy Spirit, focusing human energies toward glorifying God.

As a priest, I know that my relationship with Stuart is enviable. I am unapologetically happy to the core of my being to enter this season of my vocation as his partner in ministry, and the joy I experience in this role fuels all that I do.

In recent months, after almost three years as rector, the momentum around an imaginative embodiment of mission has continued with a new phase of our shared life. We realized that we are on the verge of celebrating Grace's bicentennial in 2028. The vestry has worked hard to manage the finances well, and we will soon be debt-free. This debt-free position enables us to step even more fully into a new stage of community-oriented discernment and prayer as we wonder what God is leading us to explore as a spiritual community. Given this space to pray and reflect, our new guiding question has become "Who is God inviting us to be as a community in our third century of shared ministry and prayer?"

All five clusters, with their staff, vestry, and committee leadership, are stepping into this expanded space of mindful discernment. After meeting with the bishop and consulting various diocesan leaders, we

have committed ourselves to beginning a formal Bicentennial Vision Process that will allow ten years for deep listening, prayer, discernment, and planning. When I asked the leadership how we could take advantage of this opportunity, the conversation immediately focused on our prior experience with the Listening Circles in 2014. What if there was a way to expand this experience of conversation and discernment even wider throughout the community? What if we engaged in a conversation that was grounded in “present-moment awareness” and “non-egoistic alertness”?⁵

Working in consultation with the wardens, vestry, and key staff persons, I called together a diverse committee of twelve individuals, chaired by my first senior warden. The men and women on the Bicentennial Vision Committee span seven decades and represent the full spectrum of the parish’s life and ministry. We realized quickly that the vestry alone was not able to contain the full breadth and weight of the conversations, and having the vestry take sole responsibility for this task would risk a loss of institutional memory, especially given the annual turnover the vestry experiences in the election process. By having this group of twelve commit themselves to listening to these wide-ranging conversations, they can then work alongside the vestry to ensure that adequate attention is paid to the discernment process.

⁵ Gunaratana, 134-135.

The Bicentennial Vision Committee immediately recognized the potential they had to continue the work of the Listening Circles, whose mindful conversation and prayer had been so formative in the parish's life. They recognized that a ten-year commitment was a heavy burden for anyone to bear, so they committed themselves to a two-year process of listening and gathering insight in conversations. After this two-year listening and discernment period, the Bicentennial Vision Process will shift its focus toward embodiment, wondering how the Spirit may be guiding us to act, given what we have discerned as a community. The current members can choose either to remain on the committee or rotate off, opening a place for new parishioners with different gifts and strengths.

For this initial phase of listening and prayer, the committee is focusing on ways to invite conversation. We first sent a survey out to the entire parish with only one question, centered on our common life as a Christian community with an invitation to reflect on what we value most as we live into that identity.

“As a member of the Christian community of Grace Episcopal Church, I value...” Every member of the parish from sixth grade onward is sending in five responses that will be gathered and used to form a “word cloud,” a visual representation of our common discernment. The most commonly used words or phrases will be larger in the image, focusing our attention as we ponder where the Spirit is at work in our midst.

Rather than rely only on this survey, the Bicentennial Vision Committee also made a list of every ministry group in the community—quite a lengthy list! From knitting groups to homeless ministry to finance to the Altar Guild, the committee divided itself up and scheduled visits to every single ministry group in the parish. In their conversations, the committee recognized the importance of listening first, so the initial task of their first visit will be “simply” to be present and listen deeply, writing down the words or images that catch their heart. In a follow-up visit to the group, they will invite them to consider in a contemplative spirit where God seems to be at work through their particular ministry experience. In a flash of insight, the committee asked its fifteen-year-old member, a young woman full of joy, to be the liaison to the Finance Committee, an experience that was beautiful and profound!

We learned a great deal from our initial experience with Listening Circles, and we realized that we could, in essence, form a “mobile Listening Circle” of committee members who gave of themselves and journeyed out into the community in a spirit of love and curiosity. Through this extraordinary group of dedicated people, we have consciously sought to root our entire vision process in an awareness of God’s “wanting-to-be in our lives”⁶ rather than in our own ambition and ideas.

⁶ Sebastian Moore, “Some Principles for an Adequate Theism,” *The Downside Review*, July 1977, 206. Rowan Williams references Moore in his reflection on how the core of the Christian faith lies with the complex relationship of desire, rather than in a more severe notion of “God’s will.” See Rowan Williams,

By centering ourselves in this way, being mindful of our call to “grow into the full stature of Christ” and participate in God’s mission in our world, Grace Church has made an extraordinary commitment. Our imaginative reorganization has slowed down the decision-making process, yet the decisions that are made are ones that come from the heart of the entire parish—a heart that seeks to ground itself in the presence of Christ. It is not an easy process; however, it is one that we hope bears much fruit in the future. It is an experiment, if you will, of willingness, of yielding to God’s call on our lives.

Such was the broad experience of our common life over the past three years. Underneath it all, what dynamics, theologically, are at work in our community? How can we better articulate our own formative process as a parish? What language and images can we utilize that may help us gain some insight to the Spirit’s work among us and our participation with it? It is to this task of theological reflection that I now turn.

The Wound of Knowledge (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1990), 130. Moore’s image of God’s “wanting-to-be” in our lives underscores God’s desire for us, and our reciprocal desire for God and participation in God’s mission and purpose within our lives. This image of desire is a crucial one that will become central in later chapters of this work.

Chapter Two

Discernment and Imagination

It is at the level of imagination that the fateful issues of our new world-experience must first be mastered. It is here that culture and history are broken, and here that the church is polarized. Old words do not reach across the new gulfs, and it is only in vision and oracle that we can chart the unknown and new-name the creatures.

Before the message, there must be the vision, before the sermon the hymn, before the prose the poem.

Before any new theologies however secular and radical there must be a contemporary theopoetic. The structures of faith and confession have always rested in hierophanies and images. But in each new age and climate the theopoetic of the church is reshaped in inseparable relation to the general imagination of the time.⁷

In his insightful work, *Theopoetic: Theology and Religious Imagination*, Biblical scholar Amos Wilder argues that the church can adequately confront the challenges of our current day only by a deeper engagement with the more imaginative elements of Christian practice. Leaders in the church today, whether ordained or lay, find themselves facing immense pressure from our consumeristic and hyper-individualistic society. As the Pew Research data consistently shows, participation in organized church activities is declining. It is easy to become anxious every time this data is published, yet the data itself holds intriguing insights. Given the leadership pressures we face, we may find ourselves asking—as we did at Grace Church—how could we

⁷ Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and Religious Imagination* (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press, 2001), 1.

possibly organize our life so that we might experience growth and renewal? How can we more fully embody our identity as the Body of Christ and thus live into our Baptismal vocation “to grow into the full stature of Christ” (BCP, 302)?

The Pew Research Forum data itself can be quite helpful. Even though the percentage of individuals who describe themselves as having no religious affiliation—the “nones”—has increased relative to the population as a whole, within this “none” group, a continued spiritual yearning remains evident. Fully two-thirds (68%) say they believe in God and one-in-five (21%) say they pray each day.⁸ Thus, the category of “spiritual but not religious” that we hear so often in descriptions of contemporary church dynamics is quite complex. We cannot simply conflate church attendance with one’s propensity toward spiritual and religious practice. More attention must be paid to the dynamics within this population demographic, and the assumptions of the institutional church may be enormously challenged.

To be sure there are societal pressures that affect the Church’s approach to mission and ministry, yet the fault does not lie only with the external pressures. Terry Valing quotes Abraham Heschel in his Forward

⁸ See recent research from the Pew Research Forum for a thorough analysis of the situation around declining church participation. Specifically, the article “‘Nones’ on the Rise” from October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>. You may also research “The Decline of Institutional Religion” by Luis Lugo, from March 18, 2013, <http://www.eppc.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/LugoPresentation.pdf> and “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” from May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. The Pew Forum delves deeply into the data, showing the complexity of the phenomenon both within the United States as well as the broader Western world.

to *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer*, as Heschel calls the religious institution itself to account:

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion—its message is meaningless.⁹

Hence, the church itself can neglect (many would argue it has indeed neglected) the deeper currents of its own potential, thus exacerbating the frustration and anxiety we experience. It is far too easy to fall prey to the pressures and anxieties of perceived decline, and church leaders quickly attach themselves to what Ronald Heifetz would call “technical fixes” in times of stress and strain.¹⁰

In my own context at Grace Church, it was tempting to rely on pre-packaged leadership modules that might help guide our conversation rather than Christian practice and prayer. Given the anxieties we faced as a community, the hopes carried by so many people to step into a space of growth, and the expectation for something new and exciting, like many other pastors, I felt enormous pressure to “succeed.” Given this

⁹ Terri A. Valing, from the Forward to *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* by L. Callid Keefe-Perry (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), xvi. The quotation itself is taken from Heschel’s *God in Search of Man* but is not referenced in Valing’s work.

¹⁰ Ronald Heifetz et al, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 71-73, 307. I find this particular work useful in its differentiation of “technical” and “adaptive” techniques of leadership development, but I argue the need for a fuller recovery and practice of the contemplative and transformational aspects of leadership and practice within the broader Christian tradition.

common hope for success, leaders often turn to techniques and tactics, and there are many such tools produced by publishing companies seeking to address the concerns and pressures felt by churches and religious institutions. Such products may be helpful in many regards, yet as Wilder suggests, “all recipes and programmed strategies fall short of accounting for the full mystery of language where deep calls to deep.”¹¹

Given the complexity within the Pew Forum polls and other venues, we would do well to pay attention to the persistent yearning found within so many people in our world. When we dig deeper into the data itself, we may find that there are ample grounds for hope within a more prayerful approach that engages the spiritual imagination of the tradition. In a prescient observation, Wilder notes that in the face of our hyper-individualistic behaviors and our consumer-obsessed culture, such a deeper dimension often rises to the surface:

The more our scientific technoculture ripens the more it seems to call forth, as a kind of shadow, a mentality compounded of magic and mythology. But this new climate reminds the church of its own deeper dream and here we have the intramural aspect. What forms will a theopoetic take today which will both quicken the tradition and at the same time speak to the general imagination of the age?¹²

The pressures are both external and internal in origin. For those of us within the Christian tradition, we find ourselves with a rich opportunity for insight and renewal—even as we experience institutional resistance and suspicion of any perceived threat to the status quo.

¹¹ Wilder, *Theopoetic*, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6-7.

Given the challenges we face, we could indeed reflect more intently on how we understand our common life through the lens of God's dynamic and triune nature rather than persist in rigid patterns of behavior. As Callid Keefe-Perry cautions us, "I believe that if Christians accept the articulation and explanations of God that have come before simply *because* they have come before, then what is being practiced is not some kind of reverence for tradition, but a form of idolatrous traditionalism."¹³

When we encounter practices, beliefs, and communities which we believe ought to be life-giving, and discover them to be suffocating instead, then it behooves us to ask how it is that God is at work: to explore for ourselves whether that which we have encountered is a faithful, hope-filled, and loving manifestation of God's movement, or if it rings false, hollow, and wooden.¹⁴

The greatest challenge within the breadth of the Christian tradition is not a loss of membership or a rapid decrease in budgets or a loss of prestige or cultural sway; rather, our greatest danger rests with a loss of spiritual imagination and the willingness to cultivate a practice of faith that harnesses the potential within our own religious tradition. When we neglect our more substantive identity and are driven instead by superficial notions of "success," the Christian community becomes starved of the more profound hope found within the Gospels. The failure to cultivate our imaginative capacity greatly impedes leadership development and religious practices within all our religious communities.

¹³ L. Callid Keefe-Perry, *Way to Water: A Theopoetics Primer* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

As frustrating as it is for us, this struggle is nothing new to religious communities. The Hebrew prophets faced these same challenges centuries ago as they faced the pressures of outside powers on one hand and the complacency of the religious institution on the other. The prophet Jeremiah is a striking example of creative faithfulness: he can imagine God's saving presence even in the face of potential annihilation. The temple cult had failed to live up to its own call to trust wholly in God's presence, and the actions of the entire society set the entire nation on the path of defeat. However, even in the midst of such pain and anguish, Jeremiah is able to imagine hope:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.
With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.¹⁵

It is Jeremiah's inspired imagination that allowed the people to see what was possible, and his capacity for hope in the midst of catastrophe can encourage us to catch a glimpse of God's grace in our circumstances as well. His willingness and openness to God invited a hopeful perspective on God's actions in the world.

¹⁵ Jeremiah 31:8-9, *New Revised Standard Bible*.

Jesus also offers his disciples the possibility of a re-imagined reality when he overturns the tables of the money-changers and physically upends the socio-religious status quo, demanding eschatological reflection on the nature of God's in-breaking presence. Those who resisted this intrusion asked Jesus for a sign to warrant his actions. Jesus' answer is illuminating:

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scriptures and the word that Jesus had spoken (John 2:19-22).

By inviting them into such a disorienting space, the disciples were able to imagine a new perspective on existence: one that offered hope and restoration in the midst of breaking down old patterns of thought and behavior.

In 2010, I began a two-year residency with the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation called *Going Deeper: Clergy Spiritual Life and Leadership*. Over the course of those two years, and after an additional year of follow up study, I had the opportunity to share deeply meaningful conversations with Tilden Edwards, other teachers, and fellow clergy. The twelve clergy participants shared a common desire: to rest more fully in the Holy Spirit's guidance and help lead our spiritual communities from this more imaginative space of prayer and trust. We came from many traditions, including the Presbyterian Church, United Methodist Church, and the Anglican Church of New Zealand, yet we shared a

common yearning to experience a more imaginative and deeper practice of spiritual leadership.

My time with Shalem was invaluable for me as I continued to discern my own vocation to explore contemplative leadership models within my parish context. I did not know if what I sought was even possible. Was the only “way” of parish leadership one that relied heavily on the program-maintenance model? What could I learn from the richness of the Benedictine tradition, and how might I be able to translate this into my parish community? As Edwards often said, “What would it look like to experience a radical trust of the Holy Spirit’s guidance?”

In many conversations in my parish and diocese, I had felt like an outlier. My clergy colleagues around me seemed to have ample management skills that I lacked, and I chafed at some of their assumptions about how to approach pastoral conflicts within their communities. It seemed there was a right answer—or a more appropriate and typical one—that I lacked. My frustration reminded me of a marvelous poem by Billy Collins called “Introduction to Poetry”:

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem’s room

and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.¹⁶

In my conversations with Edwards and the other leaders, I came to learn that there is a direct relationship between the dynamics of an imaginative approach to ministry and our willingness to trust the movements of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ that invigorates the life of the Church today. In 2010, Shalem published a short monograph that had originally been included in Edwards' larger work, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth: Gifts for Contemplative Living*. This shorter monograph, *Valuing and Nurturing a Mind-in-Heart Way*, focused specifically on the dynamics of what "the promise of a contemplatively-oriented seminary" might hold, as the subtitle indicates. It has been an invaluable resource for me as I focus my ministry here at Grace Church.

In this work, Edwards contends that enormous opportunities could come with renewed emphasis on "new ways of teaching, learning, leading, and living," leading to "deeper spiritual formation of both

¹⁶ Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry," from *The Apple that Astonished Paris*, 1996. I found this poem on the Poetry Foundation website <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176056>.

ordained and lay spiritual leaders.”¹⁷ This contemplatively-oriented model calls us to set aside other dominant models that may be in place, such as the predominant academic model that Edwards highlights within seminary education. As he argues, “This shift would involve a fuller appreciation of mind-in-heart contemplative awareness as a different way of knowing reality that can ground and complement the rational mind’s way of knowing. Such an integration is particularly vital for perceiving spiritual reality, which involves a distinctive way of seeing and being present.”¹⁸ Edwards’ challenge to the predominantly academic orientation of seminary education resonated deeply with my own struggles with the prevalent program-maintenance organizational model for parish leadership.

Reflecting on the way education and formation takes place here, Edwards asks a crucial question: “Can [these models and frameworks as they exist now] help a student touch the intrinsically mystical ground of the faith’s founders and movers through a process of rational conveyance of information and interpretation?”¹⁹ For him, it is a question of epistemology, in asking if the ways we currently know and are organized are “sufficient to help student’s inner openness and digestion of that reality.”²⁰

¹⁷ Tilden Edwards, *Valuing and Nurturing a Mind-in-Heart Way: The Promise of a Contemplatively-Oriented Seminary* (Washington, DC: Shalem Institute), 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

It is not that we must neglect the crucial aspects of rational thought and analysis, or of structured organization and strategic planning. We must organize ourselves well, and we would do well to remember, as the adage goes, “good administration is good pastoral care.” Thomas Oden raises a cautionary note when it comes to how church communities approach administration:

Having borrowed heavily from programmatic management procedures while forgetting much of their traditional rootage, church administration has become an orphan discipline vaguely wondering about its true parentage.²¹

As Oden explains later in his book, we must remember that embedded within the very word *administration* is the call to a fuller appreciation of *ministry* within all members of our spiritual communities.²² Our rational minds and organizational schemes are useful and necessary for the function of our communities, yet our hearts are called toward something deeper still. As Edwards reminds us,

There is a dimension of our being where names are lost and communion/union is found. There in graced moments our whole being is drawn and tintured with confident, revealing, “enlightening” love. This radiant love spontaneously spills into our daily lives, however limited by the fractures in and around us that hide our true Home.²³

Such a focus is the call to a contemplatively-oriented practice of spiritual leadership, a way of being and guiding that facilitates an engagement with the Spirit’s call upon our lives. This Spirit draws us into

²¹ Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1983), 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 153.

²³ Edwards, *Valuing and Nurturing*, 7.

communion not only with one another but with the Triune God in whom we encounter the interconnected and dynamic pattern for our own existence.

At the end of the monograph, after reflecting on specific challenges and opportunities within the seminary context, Edwards offers an insight that has changed my understanding of parish leadership. It is this challenge that led me to explore such a reorientation in my parish. This emphasis on a contemplative grounding is necessary in our current situation, recognizing the complexities of the social and religious environment in which we live. Edwards' argument is this:

If such a contemplative orientation and its imaginative living out does not show itself more fully in seminaries of the future, this formational and modeling task then necessarily would fall more fully to congregations and other spiritual centers of religious/spiritual life.²⁴

Given Edwards' thoughts, my response would be as follows: Why not *begin* with parish churches? Why can parishes not be the initiating ground for such an orientation that seeks more fully to trust the Spirit's guidance? This was the challenge that resonated with me, a particular vocational discernment within my own pastoral leadership.

At the root of this entire contemplative orientation of leadership and formation lies a recognition of the call to live, as Edwards describes it, from our "spiritual heart": the capacity within the entire community to lean into God's presence in our lives rather than trust solely in our own

²⁴ Ibid., 40.

strengths and agendas. The spiritual heart can be nurtured and cultivated in such a way that the entire community encounters God, provoking further reflection on what it means to trust the Spirit's guidance. Such glimpses of divine grace can become habitual, leading to "an expansive, intuitive capacity that draws us to an immediate, participative, pre-cognitive awareness of what is."²⁵

Interestingly, Edwards' work on such a contemplative orientation has strong connections with the imaginative element within Ignatian spirituality as well. The Jesuits have a long history of communal discernment for decision-making within a community of faith. Whereas Edwards describes the reality and nurturing of the "spiritual heart" within a faith community, Ignatian spirituality emphasizes the explicit presence of the Spirit in the life of the group. How is the group aware of the Spirit's guidance in their approach to making a decision?

In "Communal Discernment," George J. Schemel, SJ and Judith A. Roemer describe the Ignatian approach to such a Spirit-oriented leadership. Echoing much of Edwards' description of a community conscious of its grounding in the Holy Spirit's guidance as well as Amos Wilder's call to an imaginative approach to the challenges of community existence, they argue for a posture that holds "an explicit attitude and atmosphere of faith":

Communal discernment is not another group method along with Robert's Rules, management by objectives, paternal or maternal

²⁵ Ibid., 5.

guidance, or any other such process or structure. Discernment demands that we ask the further question: “Where is God leading me and my group in this concrete situation?” This is an important feature of communal discernment, because in discernment we are weighing and deciding among goods rather than choosing between good and evil. We are not asking how much money we can save, how much profit we can accumulate, where we can sacrifice now in order to get ahead later. We are asking quite simply: “Where is the invitation of grace? In what choice do we find God?”²⁶

When a group needs to make a decision, the object itself is not the primary focus. The experience of the community’s awareness and grounding in the Spirit’s guidance is of utmost importance. Whereas my own experience has been that groups too often push for a quick decision around critical issues or concerns, the Ignatian perspective resists any decision making that may have its roots in anxiety or fear. As the authors argue,

Part of learning to live with communal discernment is learning to live with process. The group needs time and patience to work with its own real agenda and to be satisfied with the sometimes small, but clearer truths that surface from it.²⁷

Any clarity that is gained in such a process is a clarity that is infused with the Spirit’s guidance rather than any individual’s or group’s agenda. Such an experience affirms God’s presence in the reality of the community as it celebrates the group’s participation with God’s direction. This is prayerful decision-making. As the authors explain, “Discernment rests on the belief that the human organism is made rightly, and that

²⁶ George J. Schemel, SJ and Judith A. Roemer, “Communal Discernment.” *Review for Religious* 40, no 6 (July 1992): 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

God actually works perceptibly in one's symbolic and affective consciousness."²⁸

“Communal Discernment” itself reflects the method of discernment articulated in the larger, foundational work, *The Deliberation of the First Fathers* or *Deliberatio primorum Patrum*, which lays out key elements in the establishment of the Ignatian approach to discernment. Written in 1539 as the early founders of the Jesuits met to organize their common life, *The Deliberation* describes the way those few men sought to anchor their decisions in the guidance of the Spirit. Facing the demands and fears of a dispersed community, they hoped to find clarity on the shape of their ministry. Although almost five hundred years old, their descriptions of their situation readily echoes contemporary situations.

Some of us were French, others Spanish, Savoyards, or Portuguese. After meeting for many sessions, there was a cleavage of sentiments and opinions about our situation. While we all had one mind and heart in seeking God's gracious and perfect will according to the scope of our vocation; nevertheless, regarding the more readily effective and more fruitful ways of achieving God's will for ourselves and others, we held diverse views.²⁹

Who has not experienced such a “cleavage of sentiments” in vestry meetings or finance discussions? Rather than seeking to find an easy or quick clarity based on their own deliberative skill, those several men spent three months in prayer and conversation. The fruit of their

²⁸ Ibid., 7.

²⁹ Jules J. Toner, SJ, “The Deliberation that Started the Jesuits: A Commentario on the *Deliberatio primorum Patrum*,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 6, no. 4 (June 1974): 185.

experience, in turn, has helped shape the development of such a discernment model throughout the entire Church.

The reality of discernment within a community takes time. It is a process that cannot be rushed in hopes that one can “get on” to the work at hand. As Schemel and Roemer point out, any group will experience temptations to avoid the risk and vulnerability entailed in such discernment work. In reflecting on how all “sides” of an issue are equally discussed in a posture of prayer, they describe how a group should be cautious as it draws near to a point of decision-making: “One of the biggest temptations at this point in the communal discernment is to ‘form consensus’ instead of reading the consensus that is actually forming in the group.”³⁰ I think of Kathy Gosselin’s reflection on the vestry’s discernment process at Grace and the way they took their time, passing the ball of yarn and listening to one another and to the Spirit. Indeed, Kathy caught a glimpse of this dynamic at work when she wrote, “And I kept alert throughout the evening’s conversation in order to catch the Spirit in action, pointing it out as subtly as I could.”

Thus, the discernment process is much more about gaining an awareness of the Spirit’s guidance in a community’s life than it is about the community taking initiative to succeed in making a decision. We participate with God, and we are called into a relationship through which

³⁰ Schemel, “Communal Discernment,” 16.

and in which we grow in our awareness of the Spirit of Christ at the heart of our own being. As Tilden Edwards notes,

Thus, what's important is not the search for some particular experience but bringing to every moment a simple desire to be present to Reality as it is in God, or to put it more personally, present for the divine Beloved through whatever happens.³¹

Perhaps it is only through yielding a sense of control that one can step more fully into this space of discernment. This is what Edwards describes as “relinquishing a sense of self-centered control of life as a larger identity in living radiant Love emerges.”³² Put another way, perhaps Billy Collins’ description of the poetic experience can be applied to the decision making process as well. Perhaps communities and groups approach the decision-making process much like Collins’ students approach poetry. Rather than yielding to the Spirit’s guidance and trusting the invitation to participate in God’s will for the community’s life,

... all they want to do
is tie the [decision] to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.³³

So, we are left with the challenge to engage in a different way of being, a fresh way of relating to one another and practicing our faith within community. We cannot deny the pressures we face in our myriad

³¹Tilden Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth: Gifts for Contemplative Living* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 49.

³² *Ibid.*, 124.

³³ Billy Collins, “Introduction to Poetry.”

ministry contexts. The challenges of numerical decline can be frustrating and disheartening, yet we have an opportunity to trust more explicitly in the Holy Spirit's call on our lives. In the Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer, we are asked "What is the Christian hope?" The answer is simultaneously challenging and reassuring:

The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world (BCP, 861).

The juxtaposition of "confidence" and "newness and fullness of life" is indeed the invitation to a faith grounded in discernment and imagination. It is a practice of faith that takes seriously God's action in our lives, becoming ever more aware of our identity and vocation. We seek to embody hope here and now—even as we pray for that hope to be fully consummated.

All this being said, how can we become more aware of the reality of this hope? What images or insights might we explore that could enliven our imaginative engagement with our practice of faith? It is on this question of increased awareness that I seek to focus in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Mindfulness and Conversion

The Sutra of Mindfulness says, “When walking, the practitioner must be conscious that he is walking. When sitting, the practitioner must be conscious that he is sitting. When lying down, the practitioner must be conscious that he is lying down. . . . No matter what position one’s body is in, the practitioner must be conscious of that position. Practicing thus, the practitioner lives in direct and constant mindfulness of the body.” The mindfulness of one’s body is not enough, however. We must be conscious of each breath, each movement, every thought and feeling, everything which has any relation to ourselves.³⁴

The first time I ever met a Buddhist monk, I was visiting the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, Arkansas. I was part of a small group of students from Lyon College who drove there to experience the richness of the religious practice of a group of Tibetan Buddhist monks from, of all places, Georgia. We had the opportunity to explore this exotic tradition that we had learned so much about in our Introduction to Religion class. We had read about meditation and mindfulness practice, and we now had the opportunity to see it firsthand—and to share in the practice ourselves.

³⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 13.

The monks began the session with a chant unlike any I had ever heard. The deep sonorous tones—with each monk chanting a three-note chord—filled the space and helped me relax. As we sat there in the auditorium, a senior monk invited us to sit with our backs against the chair. With our feet flat on the floor and our hands lying gently on our legs, we closed our eyes and began paying attention to our breath. I did not remember having ever paid attention to my breathing in that way, to focus gently when I inhaled and exhaled. We sat there for what seemed like an eternity, gently breathing in and out, learning how to focus our attention on this seemingly simple practice. The monk was teaching us how to notice life in a way I had never before experienced.

It did not take long before a thought came swirling into my consciousness, and the gate that then opened allowed in a flood of thoughts that shattered the focus I had only glimpsed. But, the monk said, this was normal. We are human. We think and we become distracted by all the details of life that surrounds us. Rather than becoming angry at losing focus, he advised us simply to notice that we are thinking and see what happens when we pay attention to the distraction itself. He guided us into a posture whereby we gently acknowledged the distracting thought and then, in his words, released it. We brought our attention back to our breath, that constant teacher and tool that is always present with us. By doing this, he taught us, we were learning what it meant to be truly aware rather than reactive to whatever

surrounds us at the moment. By not grasping the thought as it rose in our consciousness, we could return our attention to the more nuanced reality of existence.

My day there at the university was my first taste of a practice that has since become vital in my own spiritual life. I continued my relationship with Tibetan Buddhism as well as with various Zen teachers with whom I came into contact over the subsequent fifteen years. Throughout my seminary studies, I noticed that more and more people were finding something meaningful in mindfulness practice. There seemed to be an interest in the basic teachings of mindfulness that resonated with many people in a range of life circumstances—including long-time pastors in various Christian denominations. When the Dalai Lama came to visit Atlanta three times over the course of ten years, I would often meet colleagues at Emory University and other venues who had travelled to hear His Holiness speak about the importance of paying attention. In my daily life, I still incorporate elements of mindfulness practice, and the basic tenets have shaped the way I understand prayer and my awareness of the Holy Spirit's guidance in my life.

Mindfulness practice has saturated our culture. A quick Google search yields 40 million search results, one indication of the pervasive interest in mindfulness in American culture. There are classes on mindful eating, mindful parenting, mindful workplaces, and any other variation on the theme one can imagine. Mindfulness practice is offered

by many Fortune 500 companies and other businesses, and has now gone “mainstream” in the culture. In his insightful work, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*, Jeff Wilson describes the phenomenon of mindfulness and the complex effect the growth of this particular spiritual practice has had within American society. Wilson tracks the evolution of mindfulness as it has spread throughout our nation. There have been pivotal moments, he argues, such as when Bill Moyers featured Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction on the 1993 PBS special, *Healing and the Mind*, which helped broaden the appeal of the practice. This increased awareness spurred further engagement with Kabat-Zinn’s work, leading to the foundation of the Duke Center for Integrative Medicine in 1998.³⁵ With the increased visibility of the practice, more books were published, more public teachings were offered, and the practice became more and more popular.

Interestingly, Wilson notes the way mindfulness practice has been medicalized, mainstreamed, marketed, and moralized within American society. Specifically noting the way that American culture is focused on health, youth, and vitality, Wilson describes the dynamic of medicalization as follows:

Being able to approach mindfulness as a technique of personal spirituality and also having the option of seeing it as a biological or psychological process related to health and science extends the

³⁵ Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 39.

possibilities for mindfulness in America, providing familiar access points to most of the population regardless of their individual religious or secular backgrounds. Medicalization specifically grants mindfulness access to many new sites otherwise off-limits for mere spirituality, such as hospitals, schools, and other places where secular culture tends to set the terms of acceptable discussion and practice.³⁶

While one should be cautious of any spiritual practice that is “used” solely to increase one’s prosperity or “success,” it is important to avoid dismissing the depth of mindfulness practice out of hand. As Wilson says, “The mindfulness movement *is*, and because it is, we must each grapple with its manifestations and draw our conclusions.”³⁷ Perhaps mindfulness as a spiritual practice is undergoing the same pressures from a consumerist American culture to which all other faith practices have been subjected. What is clear is that there is *something* in American culture today to which mindfulness practice speaks.

When we reflect intently on the practice, authentic mindfulness can be a profound spiritual tool for one’s life. As Bhante Gunaratana describes:

Mindfulness practice is the practice of being 100 percent honest with ourselves. When we watch our own minds and body, we notice certain things that are unpleasant to realize. Since we do not like them, we try to reject them If we are mindful, we will diligently use our wisdom to look into our own mind.³⁸

It is a discipline of focused reflection in which all the distractions and preoccupations of our lives are laid bare. Through observation, we are

³⁶ Ibid., 77.

³⁷ Ibid., 11.

³⁸ Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, 42.

invited to be honest with ourselves and also compassionate with ourselves. We are encouraged to persevere in the practice by continually bringing our awareness back to a space of greater freedom and peace.

One of the most ancient mindfulness practices within the Buddhist tradition is *vipassana*. This core technique is one of the most readily adapted or translated into our Western world, known to many as “insight meditation.”³⁹ In Pali, a language native to India and Buddhism’s most sacred language, insight meditation is known as *vipassana bhavana*. The word *Bhavana* comes from the root word *bhu*, which itself means “to grow or to become.” The image is one of cultivation and growth; and the word itself, according to Gunaratana, is used only in relation to the mind.⁴⁰ The word *vipassana* itself is made up of two root words: *Passana*, meaning “seeing or perceiving” and *Vi* meaning “into and through a special way.”⁴¹ By placing all these etymological understandings together, Gunaratana explains that

The whole meaning of the word *vipassana* is looking into something with clarity and precision, seeing each component as distinct, and piercing all the way through to perceive the most fundamental reality of that thing. This process leads to insight into the basic reality of whatever is being examined. Put these words together and *vipassana bhavana* means the cultivation of the mind toward the aim of seeing in a special way that leads to insight and full understanding.⁴²

³⁹ See also the many works of S. N. Goenka, one of the world’s foremost teachers of Vipassana meditation.

⁴⁰ Gunaratana, 26.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 27.

Even in this short reflection on the purpose and origin of mindfulness practice, one can begin to see the appeal it would have in a culture bombarded by so many distractions and pressures. How can we see more clearly? How can we perceive what is true underneath the complexities of our lives?

Within the broader Christian contemplative tradition, one encounters many conversations between Christian mystics and theologians and Buddhist monks and practitioners. The writings of Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington, Cynthia Bourgeault, Richard Rohr, Tilden Edwards, and James Finley, as well as phenomena such as the Centering Prayer movement or the World Community for Christian Meditation all testify to a common passion for a deeper awareness. Many see Thomas Merton's visit to His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1968 as a watershed moment in Christian-Buddhist relations. Merton's interest in Buddhist philosophy and practice, while challenged by many at the time, has influenced many Christian contemplatives in the decades since. Indeed, it is evident that the impact was mutual since the Dalai Lama and several Buddhist monks came to the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1996 to continue studying the rich connections between Christian contemplative prayer and Buddhist meditation.

While recognizing that connections do exist, Gunaratana nevertheless draws a distinction between the practice of mindfulness and

the understanding of prayer and contemplation in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As he observes,

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition we find two overlapping practices called prayer and contemplation. Prayer is a direct address to a spiritual entity. Contemplation is a prolonged period of conscious thought about a specific topic, usually a religious ideal or scriptural passage. From the standpoint of mental cultivation, both of these activities are exercises in concentration. The normal deluge of conscious thought is restricted, and the mind is brought to one conscious area of operation. The results are those you find in any concentrative practice: deep calm, a physiological slowing of the metabolism, and a sense of peace and well-being.⁴³

For Gunaratana, Buddhism's understanding of mindfulness, an exercise cultivating awareness, has qualities distinct from those found in a more Judeo-Christian framework, even while it bears some resemblances to it. As he argues, "Within the Buddhist tradition, concentration is also highly valued. But a new element is added and more highly stressed: the element of awareness."⁴⁴ For Buddhists, the goal or aim is to transcend conscious thought, a concept that persists on the level of the illusory image of a distinct self. As he states:

Conscious thought, at least the way we usually do it, is the manifestation of ego, the 'you' that you usually think that you are. Conscious thought is tightly connected with self-concept. The self-concept or ego is nothing more than a set of reactions and mental images that are artificially pasted to the flowing process of pure awareness.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Through the cultivation of *vipassana* practice, “We learn to listen to our own thoughts without being caught up in them.”⁴⁶

While Gunaratana draws such a distinction between how he understands prayer and contemplation in the Judeo-Christian tradition and the richness of developing awareness within *vipassana*, there still remain significant resonances between the traditions. Indeed, within the Christian contemplative tradition, we can discover a depth of experience that questions Gunaratana’s hard and fast distinction altogether.

Consider how Tilden Edwards describes the contemplative mind:

Within us there is a capacity for touching reality more directly than the thinking mind. It is activated when we’re willing to let go of the thoughts that come through our mind and to sit in the spacious openness that appears between and behind them.⁴⁷

For Gunaratana, the overarching concern is the persistence of the thinking function to guide and direct a person’s life. When our thoughts frame our existence and shape the way we understand and seek to control reality, we continue to fall prey to self-delusions and pride. Tilden Edwards would wholeheartedly agree. As Edwards contends, “When the thinking mind comes into play to interpret that reality through its categories and conditioning, and with the influence of our ego desires for security in that interpretation,” our “pure contemplative awareness” is shattered.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁷ Tilden Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 6.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 7.

Edwards argues that the potential for such an awareness is a gift of the Holy Spirit that rests within each person and draws us into a fuller communion with the Triune God: “We each touch the same substantive reality there.”⁴⁹ Each person has such a “capacity for intuitive direct awareness” in her life, and it shapes the way she comes to understand the nature of community, “because we find everyone and everything present and interrelated.”⁵⁰ His description of this space is illuminating:

If you haven’t done that before, then when you do you’re in for a major discovery. It will be like finding a door that you didn’t even know existed. As that door opens, you are led into the reality before you much more directly than your thinking mind can do. Eventually you may find yourself intimately present *within* whatever you see. You are part of it. You know it as it is, just as when you were a small child and your open mind directly entered what you saw and remained there longer than in later years, when your trained interpretive mind quickly took over what you saw on its own terms.⁵¹

Here, Edwards’ words strikingly echo those of Gunaratana, when Gunaratana describes our struggle to maintain such a degree of awareness. As he says,

It comes from the fact that we are paying so little attention to the ongoing surge of our own life experiences that we might just as well be asleep. We are simply not paying enough attention to notice that we are not paying attention. It is another Catch-22.⁵²

It is crucial to point out that such a focused practice of developing a greater awareness of the phenomena of existence has deep Christian roots. This is not an exercise or tool restricted solely to a Buddhist-

⁴⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 6-7.

⁵¹ Ibid., 6.

⁵² Gunaratana, *Mindfulness*, 25-26.

Hindu world view or religious ethos. Accounts of gaining a greater awareness or insight can be found embedded within our own religious history and practice. When we explore our scriptural texts with an eye to such occasions of insight, we notice the reorienting experience of Jacob's dream (Genesis 28), Elijah's experience of the profound mystery of God while hiding in the cave (1 Kings 19), and Saul's experience of the overpowering brightness of Christ's presence while on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9). Indeed, there may be no better Biblical description of the potential insights of mindfulness within the Judeo-Christian tradition than Jacob's attestation upon waking from his dream: "Surely, the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" (Gen. 28:16).

My own study and experience of mindfulness practice, and my personal acquaintance with many others who find it helpful, leads me to affirm Amos Wilder's contention that "A creative theopoetic is called for, therefore, not only to vitalize a traditional theology but also to relate our Christian experience to the new sensibility of our time and its images and cults."⁵³ Given the complexities, stresses, and expectations of our cultural context, and given the continued yearning for a greater experience of God's presence, might mindfulness practice offer a "door," as Edwards puts it, for Christian communities to delve more deeply into their own practice and shared discipleship?

⁵³ Amos Wilder, *Theopoetic*, 7.

As we continue to seek for a greater awareness of God’s presence, reflection on mindfulness practice might help enormously. When we try to cultivate a greater awareness, it behooves us to spend some time wondering how we do, in fact, perceive the world around us. To restate an earlier question: How can we see more clearly? How might our spiritual imaginations be stretched or expanded as we engage in the world around us?

In the early months of my time at Grace Church, when we were involved in four months of what we called “Listening Circles,” we sought to engage in a conversation around vision and insight. I wanted to learn from those participating about their most formative moments in the parish. I also wanted to take the first steps in discovering where we were being led as a parish. To gain this insight, I needed to frame the question very carefully.

I remembered the detailed work done by Courtney Cowart and Jim Goodmann of the Beecken Center at the School of Theology in Sewanee when they had come to my previous parish, St. Benedict’s in Smyrna, Georgia.⁵⁴ The rector, Brian Sullivan, and I had invited them to help our vestry and staff with vocational discernment. We wondered how we

⁵⁴ Dr. Courtney Cowart and Jim Goodmann previously worked with the Fund for Theological Education. They are now the director and associate director of the Beecken Center at the School of Theology at the University of the South. Their current work, *Living in the Green*, is an insightful framework for helping parishes and communities of faith explore vocational discernment. *Living in the Green* draws on the depth of the Christian contemplative tradition, poetic imagination, monastic wisdom, and the work of Otto Scharmer, professor at MIT, who has developed Theory U, which explores the developmental stages within organizational structures.

might initiate a conversation about shared ministry and discipleship. Cowart and Goodmann spent a long time with us as we framed specific story prompts. We learned that the questions you ask are vital in cultivating a truly reflective and formative space.

As we began the Listening Circles at Grace Church, I chose the framework of *mindfulness* in the hope that the associated images and connotations might assist us in exploring vision and growth. I had central questions in mind: How can we see the history of this community more clearly? How might we see the Spirit at work, leading us into a new place of spiritual maturity and enhanced community? What resistances might we see within the community that could, in themselves, offer opportunities for engagement and growth? I knew that in group conversations such as this, some people would take the opportunity to complain about what they did not like. Others would vent about problems or decisions that had made them angry. Still others might dredge up old wounds, hoping to reframe the narrative by reminding those gathered of pain and frustration.

Our time together was, indeed, an experience of mindfulness. It was an experiment in sharing from our spiritual hearts rather than from our agendas and thinking minds alone. It was a space of risk and potential insight. After much prayer, I offered this question to those gathered: “What have been your most meaningful experiences at Grace with ____?” As described above, each week we rotated through a different

ministry of the parish: children, youth, music, outreach, pastoral care, etc. We spent time reflecting intently and listening to each other.

By framing the question around *meaning*, I hoped we would plunge into a more focused awareness and reflection rather than remain on the surface level of venting and agendas. I hoped that a question grounded in meaning might facilitate a conversation that would embrace risk and honor the experiences of each person in the room. I also hoped that a reflection on meaning might connect to the probing work of the Holy Spirit, assisting those gathered to wonder about how the presence of Christ might be at work in the life of this community. When, for instance, someone might report a frustrating experience, we found that by asking how that experience was *meaningful*, the memory of the experience could be reframed. The question about *meaning* had the potential to cultivate a greater self-awareness as well as the perception of the Spirit of Christ at work within. By entering prayerfully into this shared space, we sought to experience something of what St. Paul prayed for the Church in Ephesus:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power (Ephesians 1:17-19).

We sought to have the “eyes of our hearts enlightened” by the Holy Spirit as we took the risk of such a mindful leadership.

As Tilden Edwards contends, “Contemplative awareness needs to begin on the personal level.”⁵⁵ Through the sharing of such prayer-grounded conversations, new insights can be gained in the life of the entire community. Edwards’ reflection is apt:

Spiritual awakening is never for us alone. The Spirit shows itself to be a very public as well as personal face of God. What happens to us, like an energized wave drawn to the shore, is meant to refresh and reshape the shore as needed. We bring what’s been given to us into the situations of our lives—in this case, the congregation—and what’s been given to us interacts with what’s been given to others. That interaction, pervaded by the Spirit’s presence, leavens decisions in meetings, the expression of our liturgies and homilies, education, mission projects, and the rest of the life of the church.⁵⁶

Thus the entire community can share in such an awakening through prayer and attentive listening. In such an exercise, our perception of God’s presence can widen and lead us into an even greater awareness of our identity as the Body of Christ. Of course, mindfulness, in and of itself, is not the goal or aim within Christian practice. We do not seek awareness just to be aware; rather, for Christians, we pray that we may be illumined by the Holy Spirit so that we may live more deeply in tune with God’s living presence in the world.

The theological images of *conversion* and *illumination* might be the most appropriate descriptors of the Christian mindfulness which we are suggesting. In these moments of greater awareness and insight, we are offered clarity in the midst of the pressures and complexities of our lives.

⁵⁵ Tilden Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 73.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

As described above, in the experience of grief, mistrust, fear, and anxiety at Grace Church, we have been offered the possibility to embody a shared leadership that fosters healing, trust, hope, and imagination. Throughout these three years, the work we have done together as a community has not been empowered by our own effort; rather, we have been invited to share in the life of the Spirit of Christ who continually urges us toward greater wholeness. We have prayed, as Tilden Edwards recommends, that the Spirit may release us from “dependence on our small self-identity, our conditioned sense of the centrality of our ego-identity and security” so that we may better realize how “our deep identity in the image of God participates in divine strength, love, and wisdom.”⁵⁷

Robert Hughes speaks to this movement from self-focus to a more Spirit-focused awareness in *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life*. At one point he describes the common experience of being stuck in a cycle of disillusionment and resentment, born of a sense of entitlement combined with unrealistic expectations of life, others, and even oneself. His picture of the inner state of one riddled with disillusionment is apt:

Finally, when I grow weary of [resentment], I end up in resignation, seeming to accept life in a kind of bitter and cynical skepticism I call realistic but which has as its essence a giant middle finger raised into the heart of the cosmos. Unless something makes me

⁵⁷ Ibid., 116.

notice, I shall go bumping down these stairs every time on a kind of automatic pilot.⁵⁸

Such a sense of being on autopilot is pervasive in our world today, a state which Walter Bruggemann often described as “psychic numbness.”⁵⁹

Hughes describes the conversion that is needed in such a state of existence. He recognizes that the dynamic of conversion has two components: what he calls “conversion from” and “conversion to.” This “whole package of conversion” is *metanoia*, or repentance. It is summed up in the double movement of change found in the preaching of both John the Baptist and Jesus: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). In conversion, as Hughes explains, we *turn away* from the illusion or distraction when we *turn toward* the fulfillment or promise. As he says, “we are able to see what we turn from in its true colors, and really for the first time, only because another possibility has appeared that gives us something to turn *toward*.”⁶⁰ This experience, as Hughes describes it, is one of judgment; however, it is a judgment that is life-giving rather than terrifying or damning. His vivid image of waking up presents the role of judgment within conversion as an invitation to develop greater awareness

⁵⁸ Robert David Hughes, *Beloved Dust: Tides of the Spirit in the Christian Life* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 92.

⁵⁹ Walter Brueggemann was my Old Testament professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. He used this term to describe the condition of the society against which the prophetic tradition spoke. For any change in the socio-religious establishment to occur, such a state of psychic numbness must first be identified and then overcome.

⁶⁰Hughes., 77.

and thus live more deliberately: “Judgment is not so much designed to get us to be good from fear of punishment as it is a wake-up call. “Wake up! Smell the coffee! Get a life.”⁶¹

Later in *Beloved Dust*, Hughes draws on the poetry of George Herbert to elucidate such a wake-up call. “The Dawning,” an Easter poem, urges the sorrowful, slumbering soul to arise with Christ:

Awake, sad heart, whom sorrow ever drowns;
Take up thine eyes, which feed on earth;
Unfold thy forehead gathered into frowns:
Thy Savior comes, and with him mirth:
Awake, awake.⁶²

One is again reminded of the stories of Jacob, Elijah, and Saul. These three pivotal figures in the Judeo-Christian tradition struggled and resisted in different ways, asserting themselves and their own plans rather than God’s. In all three accounts, God took the initiative and reoriented the way they understood their lives, their purpose, their potential. The greater awareness they received—the insight they experienced—was a gift of the Spirit that reconfigured their existence. Hughes would argue that each of them experienced a profound conversion.

Conversion is experienced within the particular, unique circumstances of a person or a community’s life. There is not one form or pattern of conversion that a community can package and market; indeed, conversion is not a facile technique that can be taught to

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 255.

someone else. As Hughes states, “What is important is not so much the medium by which the call is conveyed as the recognition that the Holy Spirit is operating in all of the various media.”⁶³ The Holy Spirit empowers the conversion experience which makes possible the insight of grace. Again, Hughes’ words are helpful:

Conversion, then, is a response to prevenient grace. It requires noticing, healthy shame, hope, healing, empowerment, and falling in love. All are gifts; all are early experiences of being beloved even as sinful dust, as beings with a tragic and flawed existence but called forward into self-transcendence by some sense of an abiding true essence as gift.⁶⁴

The resistances we experience within ourselves and within a community are very real; therefore, much of parish ministry focuses on ways to become more aware of these resistances as well as the Spirit’s invitations.

Recently I asked my current Senior Warden, Jason Voyles, to describe his experience at Grace Church, paying close attention to areas where he has encountered the transition, or turning, from resistance to greater insight. His articulate reflection is emblematic of this movement within the entire Grace community:

I remember sitting down at a table for the first “listening session” Stuart hosted on a Wednesday evening shortly after officially beginning his tenure as Rector of Grace Church. The church was still in its “honeymoon” phase with our new rector, but, given the experience many in

⁶³ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 75.

the parish had gone through, many were apprehensive about when this phase would end and things would “return to normal.” Interestingly, I think that most of the people attending expected to have Stuart stand up and tell them his plans for the parish: what direction we should head, how we should get there, and what role each of us would play. Stuart turned this completely on its head. He invited everyone to share their dreams and use their imaginations to discern what Grace Church could be. His invitation was not to continue doing things because “we’ve always done it that way,” but, instead, to be contemplative about our life as a parish and what this life could be for everyone.

This imagining mindset has been a shift, and it has sometimes been somewhat difficult. At first I saw resistance in areas where parishioners felt like they had carved out their niche and were content. “Why were we trying to come in and change everything?” they wondered. To many, things were working fine and there was no need to try to “redefine” what the parish was. It was a balancing act to try to reassure parishioners that the church was still their church home. Many parishioners feared being cast aside as they saw a new wave of volunteers that would come in and supplant them. This has created some friction between the old guard and the new recruits and I’m sure has led to our clergy having many long conversations with parishioners, but this has ended up being a positive development in the long run. It has allowed many in the parish to have

long-overdue discussions, and it has allowed some healing and catharsis for many in the parish.

Once the idea of mindfulness began to take root, it was amazing to see the transformation in the parish. One could almost feel the energy in the air. It was an immense positive force emanating from the parish. People were invited to dream and to imagine and you could see it in their eyes when discussing the church's future. The hope and sense of childlike wonder was palpable. It seemed that for the first time in a long time parishioners really felt like they had a voice in (and stake in) the future of the parish. They felt that their input was desired and meaningful. And, to be quite honest, it has been very much so. The idea of being mindful about the church and its future has tapped into resources within parishioners that I had no idea existed.

As the parish has become more accustomed to contemplating our shared life together, the circle of our parish has been drawn wider. Again, what I think of as the typical church paradigm has been turned on its head. Rather than invite people to attend service on Sunday and then hope that they decide to get involved in the broader life of the church, this shared mindfulness has allowed people to imagine their space within the life of the church and truly find their home in the parish. This has resulted in a marked increase in attendance on Sunday and revitalization of the church's ministries. As people have become more mindful about their place in the church and the future of the church, they have become more

invested in the life of the parish. I now see people are genuinely excited about the prospect of attending church, rather than attending out of some sense of obligation.

This isn't to say that Grace Church won't have its share of challenges in the future. However, in practicing mindfulness, I feel that the parish as a whole is training to be able to handle any trials and tribulations that may arise. Rather than having an attitude of gloom and inevitability of some negative occurrence, I see the parish meeting its challenges with enthusiasm and daring to do the hard work of being mindful about where the church's future lies.

Voyles' personal testimony supports Hughes' contention that the experience of conversion, entailing as it does both reorientation and risk, opens the possibility of receiving greater insight and clarity. We do not so much *gain* insight and awareness as we *receive* it and participate in it, and this light that we encounter in these moments of mindfulness empower us to delve even more deeply into our practice of prayer.

These graces of illumination inspire and encourage us onward as a community. We realize that our limitations do not have to define us; rather God's love beckons us forward into new territory. We learn to resist yielding to fear and anxiety, as pervasive as they may be. We come to see our true identity in Christ, the One who was transfigured before his disciples as an embodiment of God's grace and who calls us to greater participation in the divine life itself. Jesus' moment of

illumination reveals what we are to become. As Hughes says, “Our own beginning transfiguration in that same light is not a transformation into something else, but the revelation and birthing of our own true selves.”⁶⁵ This true self finds its full expression, of course, in our baptismal identity and the experience of our transfigured and sacramental life in Christ, and it is to this area that I now wish to turn.

⁶⁵ Hughes, 254.

Chapter Four

Transfiguration and Illumination

In the strength of that glimpse, things become possible. We can confront today's business with new thoughts and feelings, reflect on our sufferings and our failures with some degree of hope—not with a nice and easy message of consolation but with the knowledge that there is a depth to the world's reality and out of that comes the light which will somehow connect, around and in Jesus Christ, all the complex, painful, shapeless experience of human beings.⁶⁶

In the previous chapters, I have argued that a particularly Christian understanding of mindfulness practice can be an imaginative invitation for ministry, given the myriad challenges of contemporary parish discussions around leadership development and discipleship. Harkening back to Amos Wilder's challenge to find a "contemporary theopoetic," I have tried to explore the modern phenomena of mindfulness practice in a way that elucidates meaningful opportunities for any who practice the Christian faith. The challenges the Church faces are quite real, and we have ample theological and spiritual resources within the broader Christian tradition that can offer hope amid the pressures and frustrations of our circumstances. One can indeed hear the reassurance of Jesus as he told his disciples when they were wracked with worry and anxiety in their own day: "Do not be afraid, little

⁶⁶ Rowan Williams, "The Transfiguration" in *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Williams B. Eerdmans, 2003), 9-10.

flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

Mindful awareness, as we have shown, is not the ultimate goal or end within Christian practice; rather, we seek a conversion of life that nurtures an imaginative engagement with the more theological and foundational aspects of our identity within Christ. Such a converted awareness enables and empowers the experience of a transfigured existence, a reality in which the dimness of our current vision (1 Corinthians 13:12) beholds the brightness of Christ's love within us and through us. As Rowan Williams observes, with such a "glimpse" of a transfigured existence, "things become possible." We can face the anxieties and stresses of our lives. We can name the resistances within us that inhibit a greater reliance upon God's grace, becoming less captive to our own ego-driven pursuits and an accomplishment-oriented leadership framework. Above all, we can begin to experience the beauty and truth of the hope that is promised in the consummation of all things, these glimpses of the Spirit of Christ that break through into our existence, and that are "still to come as final *pleroma* and commonwealth."⁶⁷

In a moving poem, "In a Troubled Time for the Church," Sebastian Moore paints such a picture of in-breaking hope with images of fire, love,

⁶⁷ Hughes, *Beloved Dust*, 385.

energy, and breath. His words evoke rich images of anticipatory longing, transforming the heart from within:

To feel the warmth of a consuming fire
Softens the heart of me to neighbor love
As the fulfillment of our first desire
Requiring no commandment from above.

The church's present looking desperate
Awakes the heart to feel a future God
And a new sense of what it is to wait
Dissociating this from the soul's plod.

To wait upon a lover who delays
Is the soul's ecstasy, dark sleepless night
As new energy puzzles and prays
With a new certainty of coming light.

I knew this as there breathed across a psalm
A future against which we do not arm.⁶⁸

The vision of this future fills our eyes and draws our hearts, even as we grapple with current frustrations.

One could say that this future orientation indicates a subtle but key distinction between Christian and Buddhist perspectives on mindfulness. As mentioned previously, mindfulness in Buddhist practice is primarily understood as pure, ego-less awareness. As Gunaratana says,

Mindfulness is present-moment awareness. It takes place in the here and now. It is the observance of what is happening right now, in the present. It stays forever in the present, perpetually on the crest of the ongoing wave of passing time.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Sebastian Moore, *The Contagion of Christ: Doing Theology as if it Mattered* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 184.

⁶⁹ Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, 134.

Gunaratana goes on to emphasize how mindfulness practice is a deeply participative endeavor that seeks to surpass one's ego-grasping within the complexity of one's circumstances. He paints a picture as follows:

It is observing all phenomena—physical, mental, or emotional—whatever is presently taking place in the mind. One just sits back and watches the show. Mindfulness is the observance of the basic nature of each passing phenomenon. . . . In mindfulness, one is an unbiased observer whose sole job is to keep track of the constantly passing show of the universe within.⁷⁰

There are some Buddhist scholars and practitioners who hold there is more to mindfulness practice than *merely* pure awareness. Many Buddhists are aware of the critique that such a self-focused, passive mindfulness practice can be, in reality, self-centered. Diana Winston, the Director of Mindfulness Education at UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center and teacher at Spirit Rock Center, acknowledges some of these possibilities with mindfulness practice, but argues that there are great benefits for continued focus and practice within the Buddhist tradition. As she says,

When we talk about the mindfulness movement, we're not just talking about people paying attention. We're talking about the cultivation of many qualities, which we can think of as 'outcome qualities,' such as compassion, patience, and equanimity.⁷¹

It is important to clarify at this point a key argument of this particular paper: while in Buddhist practice mindful awareness is primarily understood as pure, ego-less awareness *of* reality, within the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 135.

⁷¹ Diana Winston, "Forum: What Does Mindfulness Mean for Buddhism?" *Lion's Roar* (May 5, 2015) Accessed August 3, 2015, <http://www.lionsroar.com/forum-what-does-mindfulness-mean-for-buddhism/>

Christian contemplative tradition, the hope and promise of a transfigured identity is marked by a keen watchfulness *for* the fullness of a reconciled and redeemed existence within Jesus Christ. One should note the difference in orientation within Christianity, as well as the way we are called to participate with the Triune God's dynamic work within our lives. Indeed, this has been a constant refrain at Grace Church as we enter more deeply into this Bicentennial Discernment season. On one hand, we ask ourselves how we can be more *aware of* the challenges and promises of our ministry context, while at the same time discern what kind of participation in God's mission we are being *prepared for*. For what embodiment of Christ's love in the world around us is God preparing us? Toward what new possibility of shared ministry are we being equipped, given the pressures and opportunities we face as a community?

Tilden Edwards seeks to illustrate this when he describes the way that our life in Christ broadens our perspective. Using the image of horizons, he states:

As a Christian, I believe that God's reconciling Spirit in Christ is inviting openness to insights and practices today that expand our horizons in such a way that we find our understanding of Christ, God, and spiritual Reality deepened and widened.⁷²

It is the reconciling work of the Spirit of Christ that breathes into our lives and opens our eyes and heart to more of the fullness of what is promised. To be sure, this widening is not a capacity that we have

⁷² Tilden Edwards, *Embracing the Call to Spiritual Depth*, 19.

innately within ourselves. In this regard, Robert Hughes' nuanced description of a transfigured awareness and reality is elucidating. For him, understanding spiritual illumination as "transfiguration" is crucial. As he states,

First, it reminds us that the light of "illumination" is not a "natural" one, neither some natural light of human reason or spirit, nor some inherent light in the created world of nature, but rather the very glory of God illuminating world and self, as they are also illumined from the inside, as it were, by the Holy Spirit indwelling them.⁷³

He goes further to clarify that "transfiguration is not transformation, not a magical change of something into what it previously was not, but rather the illumination by the light of God's glory of what has always been and remains true."⁷⁴ There are, indeed, complex connections here between a Christian understanding of our transfigured identity and a Buddhist understanding of one's Buddha-nature. Christianity's theistic interpretation of reality gives rise to a reliance upon God's grace, while Buddhism's non-theistic interpretation of reality emphasizes one's own practice and cultivation of an insightful awareness. Two millennia of Christian theology and spiritual reflection consistently affirms our transfigured identity to be a gift of the Triune God, a grace that draws us into the fullness of God's purpose for our lives.

The reflections offered by my senior wardens and associate priest articulated just such a sense of God's presence at work in both the

⁷³ Robert D. Hughes, *Beloved Dust*, 257.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.

search process and the ongoing bicentennial conversations at Grace. As Cheryl Kelley stated, “I felt the Holy Spirit nudging us along in the whole process, creating a sense of calm under everybody’s ‘what ifs.’” Cynthia Park testified that “The Mindful Church model is able to highlight genuine transparency as not only essential to the process but also as an affirmation of the work of the Holy Spirit, focusing human energies toward glorifying God.” When Jason Voyles described his current experience as Senior Warden, he noted that we will inevitably face difficult situations in our future. Yet, as he states,

Rather than have an attitude of gloom and inevitability of some negative occurrence, I see the parish meeting its challenges with enthusiasm and daring to do the hard work of being mindful about where the church’s future lies.

Looking back at their separate accounts, it is striking that each of them recognizes both the complexities of the current situation as well as a definite orientation toward future fulfillment. In other words, something is being revealed through increased awareness within our contexts. Even within the more mundane circumstances of vestry meetings and budget preparations, we can catch glimpses of the eschatological reality of Christ shining into our lives.

The Transfiguration story in the Gospel of Matthew reveals this dynamic of a graced awareness unfolding within Peter, James, and John. Jesus takes them “up a high mountain,”

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became a dazzling white. . . . While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and

from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” (Matthew 17:1-8).

The three disciples realize the profundity of the situation, and they try to grasp and contain it as best they can. Yet, they are overcome—overshadowed—by a fullness they cannot imagine.

Rowan Williams describes how, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, it is common to find the disciples shielding their eyes in iconographic interpretations of this encounter. Their awareness has been heightened, and it is painful. They are beholding what they cannot fully behold. The disciples are faced with the light of Jesus. Williams explains:

As the Eastern Christian tradition has regularly said, the light that flows from Jesus here is not a ‘created’ light—it isn’t a phenomenon of this world, but a direct encounter with the action of God which alters the whole face of creation precisely because it isn’t just another thing in creation. And Peter, James, and John are not ready to see things with and in the light of God, any more than we are.⁷⁵

It is both a disorienting and reorienting heightening of awareness, one that leads us to be “spiritually flung backwards, baffled in finding adequate words for this, even fearful at the prospect of discipleship it puts before us.”⁷⁶

As upsetting as such a moment of transfigured awareness might be, it is also an occasion for enormous hope. Again, Williams’ words are deeply probing:

⁷⁵ Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light*, 13. See also Solrunn Nes, *The Uncreated Light: An Iconographical Study of the Transfiguration in the Eastern Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007). Nes reflects on the artistic and imaginative aspects of pivotal iconography within the broader tradition, drawing on rich theological reflections to aid in the development of a practice of prayer.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

But we are given a glimpse of what God can do in this rare moment of direct vision, when the ‘door of perception’ is opened by and in Jesus, and the end of the world is fleetingly there before us. And finally, we can let ourselves contemplate the fact that the divine freedom shown us in this vision tells us both that there is not escape from the world in which we have been put as creatures *and* that there is nowhere from which God can be finally exiled.⁷⁷

Such is the nature of awareness seen through the lens of the transfigurative reality of Jesus Christ. It is a posture and practice of illumined alertness and wakefulness—watchfulness—that finds its roots deep within the monastic and contemplative tradition of the Christian faith.

Further on in Matthew’s Gospel account, the story which inspires Sebastian Moore’s poetic interpretation of hope in the midst of a “troubled time for the church,” we find the evocative account of the ten bridesmaids with lamps and oil, a key text for this recurring meditation on wakefulness and alertness. In this account, we find ten bridesmaids waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. All have lamps, yet five are described as foolish and five as wise. The five wise bridesmaids have prepared adequately, in a posture of alertness, while the five foolish bridesmaids never prepared for the advent of the bridegroom. When, after hours of waiting, the foolish ones ask for oil to help them fully see and participate in the bridegroom’s arrival, they have to leave to go buy oil for themselves, missing the encounter completely. At their return, the door is already closed, and they are left outside the feast. As they cry out

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

to be included in the celebration, Jesus pronounces a summons to a life marked by watchfulness: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25:1-13).

This pivotal theme of watchfulness—and the arrival of the bridegroom at earth’s darkest hour of midnight—is also a pronounced motif in the last weeks of the Pentecost season and throughout the season of Advent. Beginning with the celebration of All Saints’ Day on November 1, the liturgical year takes a decidedly eschatological turn with apocalyptic and visionary readings about the end of time. Advent vigilance takes on an apocalyptic orientation and contemplative yearning, coming as it does on the heels of the Last Sunday after Pentecost when we mark Christ the King and the consummation of history. In contrast to popular understandings of Advent, at work in both secular and religious circles, as simply a time of preparation for Christmas, the lectionary only turns to pre-Nativity readings on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Thus the Advent season as a whole, and especially the lectionary texts of its first three weeks, call us to an intense vigilance in our practice of faith.

Such a posture and practice of watchfulness lies at the heart of the Christian tradition, and is pronounced in patristic texts still highly revered within the broader Orthodox Christian tradition. Within these early texts, one repeatedly encounters the theological concept of *nepsis*, or watchfulness, taken from the Greek root *nepho*, meaning to keep alert,

to stay awake, to remain diligent. George Morelli, a priest within the Antiochian Orthodox Church, articulates *nepsis* in the following terms:

These early Christian spiritual teachers taught their disciples to develop *nepsis*, that is, to be wakeful and attentive. . . to that which was inside and around them. Thus, we also need to practice being completely “present” to our own thoughts and surroundings.⁷⁸

As Morelli states, the key component within this practice of prayer or orientation is a “vigilance of the mind and heart.” It requires us to become much more aware of our own emotional state and tendency to react in judgment and anger. Elder Ephraim of Philotheou, a contemporary Orthodox theologian currently living at St. Anthony’s Greek Orthodox Monastery in Arizona, elucidates this call to watchfulness in a sermon:

Abba Paphnoutios, a great father, was going along one day on his way and there he saw two men committing some sin. The thought of his passion said: “Look what great evil they are doing!” The eye saw them and immediately the thought flared up, trying thereby to attack the purity of the Saint’s soul by judging the brother or also by his being tempted. Having watchfulness, however, he was being vigilant, immediately his mind was enlightened and he said to his thought, “They are sinning today, I will sin tomorrow. They will repent, but I know myself to be a hard man, unrepentant, egotistical, and thus, I won’t repent. I will be punished since I am worse than these two. And what do I have to do about these careless sinners, since I am a much greater sinner and more passionate?” And speaking in this manner and putting a lock on the provocation of sin, he was saved and didn’t judge the brothers who were sinning.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ George Morelli, “Mindfulness as Known by the Church Fathers.” <http://www.antiochian.org/mindfulness-known-church-fathers>. Accessed October 11, 2016. This article was published through the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese.

⁷⁹ Ephraim of Philotheou, “Watchfulness, Prayer, and Confession.” Translated by Seraphim Bell. <http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/elderephraimhomily1.aspx>. Accessed October 11, 2016.

Abba Paphnoutios gained a wisdom through his watchfulness, by becoming-aware of the temptations at work in the situation rather than by reacting mindlessly to the pressures he faced.

The knowledge or insight Paphnoutios gained is distinctly different from the kind of knowledge we usually gain within our particular circumstances. The knowledge gained by such a *nepsis*-oriented awareness is what the patristic writers deem noetic knowledge. As Morelli explains,

St. Paul's injunction in his letter to the Romans (12:2), ". . . be transformed by the renewing of your mind. . .," would be understood by an English reader to refer to the rational mind (reason). On the other hand, the Church Fathers would understand that St. Paul is referring to knowledge from the depth of one's heart, which they would call the *nous* or *noetic* mind.⁸⁰

Such a *noetic* transformation springs from openness to the movements of the Holy Spirit in the course of everyday life. Through such a prayerful posture, we can move beyond our own ego-driven agendas to gain a wider perspective on whatever circumstances we face. To be sure, for the patristic writers, such a state of awareness was not attained by an innate human faculty operating on its own. As we have already noted, the Christian understanding of illumination differs from Buddhist concepts of mindfulness, even though Buddhist orientations can still yield helpful insights. As Morelli states, "The mindful, noetic, mind of a person is enlightened by an illumination from God, through the Holy Spirit, in the depth of the heart and mind, which allows perception of spiritual

⁸⁰ Morelli, "Mindfulness."

experience.”⁸¹ Put another way, when our prayer is coupled with a steady practice of *nepsis*, we are led into spaces of transfigured awareness. It is indeed the essence of a transfigured awareness that gives life to one’s practice of prayer.

An evocative prayer composed by Archbishop William Temple, now included in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, seems to ask for just such a comprehensive noetic awareness, embracing heart, mind, imagination, and will.⁸² Temple’s prayer, moreover, ends with an orientation towards, and availability for, future mission:

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to thee, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be holy thine, utterly dedicated unto thee; and then use us, we pray thee, as thou wilt, and always to thy glory and the welfare of thy people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen (BCP, 832-833).

The ancient practice of *nepsis* would surely create conditions in which God’s action in drawing in our hearts and granting illumination might fruitfully occur. Further, once our minds are guided, our imaginations filled, and our wills are controlled, we then offer ourselves to be used according to the mission of the Triune God who is seeking wholeness for the entire world. One can also see resonances with *nepsis* in the Collect for Purity and the way the cleansing of our heart enables us to magnify God:

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (1980; rpt. HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 568.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP, 355).

When we explore the ancient texts of the Christian tradition, we find this eschatologically-oriented, attentive posture emphasized by the elders. St. Hesychios of Sinai, now thought to have lived somewhat later than St. John Climacus (6th or 7th century), wrote a remarkable treatise “On Watchfulness and Holiness.” Commenting on the struggle of the spiritual life, he maintains the necessity of constant reliance upon Christ. As he states,

It is impossible to find the Red Sea among the stars or to walk this earth without breathing air; so too is it impossible to cleanse our heart from impassioned thoughts and to expel its spiritual enemies without the frequent invocation of Jesus Christ.⁸³

For Hesychios, purity of heart is the goal of *nepsis*, this state of watchfulness or awareness. In prayer, we come to understand our frailty and our constant struggle with preoccupation and distraction. Our minds focus on the mundane and sinful distractions that surround us in daily life. Without this practice, we persist in a state of spiritual blindness. As he writes:

Just as a blind man from birth does not see the sun’s light, so one who fails to pursue watchfulness does not see the rich radiance of divine grace. He cannot free himself from evil thoughts, words,

⁸³ Hesychios the Priest, “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” in *The Philokalia: The Complete Texts*, Vol. 1, translated and edited by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), 166.

and actions, and because of these thoughts and actions he will not be able freely to pass the lords of hell when he dies.⁸⁴

Yet, we are not without hope, Hesychios says, because the practice of mindfulness is a chosen means by which God comes to our help. “Watchfulness is a spiritual method which. . . completely frees us with God’s help from impassioned thoughts, impassioned words, and evil actions.”⁸⁵ For Hesychios, the practice of *nepsis* undergirds the cultivation of all other virtues: “It is the heart’s stillness and, when free from mental images, it is the guarding of the intellect.”⁸⁶ We are to ground ourselves firmly in Jesus Christ and in the Spirit who gives us life and hope, a grounding that in turn enlivens us and orients us toward the fullness of God rather than the staleness of our more mundane existence. Here Hesychios’s writings are illuminating:

Just as salt seasons our bread and other food and keeps certain meats from spoiling for quite a time, so the spiritual sweetness and marvelous working which result from the guarding of the intellect effect something similar. For in a divine manner they season and sweeten both the inner and the outer self, driving away the stench of evil thoughts and keeping us continually in communion with good thoughts.⁸⁷

Nikophoros the Monk, or the Hesychast, who lived in the second half of the thirteenth century, also offers evocative reflections on this essential practice of *nepsis*. He, too, realizes the constant struggle we face in our spiritual practice, the way we too often focus on our own ego-

⁸⁴ Ibid., 163.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 162.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 162-163.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 177.

driven preoccupations and succumb to distractions. Yet for Nikophorus as well, hope is ever-present through a practice of watchfulness. For instance, in his treatise “On Watchfulness” he declares:

For the miracle occurs in tearing ourselves away from the distraction and vain concerns of the world and in this way relentlessly seizing hold of the kingdom of heaven within us.⁸⁸

In a beautiful passage of his work, he shows us that the key to developing such a practice rests in a simple yet close attention to our breath. It is a remarkable visualization exercise:

You know that what we breathe is air. When we exhale it, it is for the heart’s sake, for the heart is the source of life and warmth for the body. The heart draws towards itself the air inhaled when breathing, so that by discharging some of the heat when the air is exhaled it may maintain an even temperature. The cause of this process or, rather, its agent, are the lungs. The Creator has made these capable of expanding and contracting, like bellows, so that they can easily draw in and expel their contents. Thus, by taking in coolness and expelling heat through breathing, the heart performs unobstructed the function for which it was created, that of maintaining life.

Seat yourself, then, concentrate on your intellect, and lead it into the respiratory passage through which your breath passes into your heart. Put pressure on your intellect and compel it to descend with your inhaled breath into your heart. Once it has entered there, what follows will be neither dismal nor glum. Just as a man, after being far away from home, on his return is overjoyed at being with his wife and children again, so the intellect, once it is united with the soul, is filled with indescribable delight.⁸⁹

It is essential to remind ourselves that this transfigured awareness, this *nepsis*, of which the patristic writers speak, is not an awareness that is imposed upon the world. It is not an alteration of the

⁸⁸ Nikophoros, “On Watchfulness,” *Philokalia*, Vol. 4, 194.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

world around us into something different; rather, it is the removal of distractions to behold reality as it truly is. It is we who have become blind to the presence of Christ in the world around us. It is this blindness which leads us to rely upon our own ambition and perceived capabilities. Reliance upon ourselves causes stress and anxiety when we face resistances that we mistakenly assume can only be overcome through our own strength. For the ancients, *nepsis*, or transfigured awareness, enables a clearer understanding of the nature of things, freeing us from crippling illusions. As Hesychios teaches, *nepsis* consists of “scrutinizing every mental image,” “freeing the heart from all thoughts,” “continually and humbly calling upon the Lord Jesus Christ for help,” “having the thought of one’s death in one’s mind,” and “fixing one’s gaze on heaven.”⁹⁰

According to St. Gregory Palamas, the heart of the Transfiguration of Christ consists in realizing the true nature of reality. As Robert Hughes has reminded us, transfiguration is not transformation into something radically different; rather, it is the realization of things as they truly are. When St. Gregory discusses the Transfiguration, he explains how it overcomes our blindness:

Thus Christ was transfigured, not by the addition of something He was not, nor by a transformation into something He was not, but by the manifestation to His disciples of what He really was. He opened their eyes so that instead of being blind they could see.

⁹⁰ Hesychios, “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” 164-165.

While He himself remained the same, they could now see Him as other than He had appeared to them formerly.⁹¹

The mystery of the Transfiguration of Christ points to its possibility within our own lives. As we grow through grace in participation in the life of Christ, we are given glimpses of hope that draw us into the fullness of God's promise for the entire world. As the Collect for the Feast of the Transfiguration in The Book of Common Prayer puts it, we pray for a deliverance from turmoil that leads, finally, to vision:

O God, who on the holy mount revealed to chosen witnesses your well-beloved Son, wonderfully transfigured, in raiment white and glistening: Mercifully grant that we, being delivered from the disquietude of this world, may by faith behold the King in his beauty; who with you, O Father, and you, O Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (BCP, 243).

When we catch a glimpse of this transfigured reality, this existence grounded in the presence of Christ rather than our own little egos, our understanding of prayer itself is altered. For there is a temptation in personal prayer to excessive subjectivity, focusing on our desires and preoccupations narrowly conceived. Yet, when we lean more into a posture of prayer that is grounded in the *nepsis*-centered, transfigured reality we have described, our orientation shifts. Robert Hughes clarifies the complex interplay between a transparency in prayer that discloses our ordinary human desires and a still deeper desire to align ourselves with God's mission:

It is not a matter of giving God instructions on how to accomplish our agenda but rather a sharing of our desires and concerns as a

⁹¹ Gregory of Palamas, "The Declaration of the Holy Mountain," *The Philokalia*, Vol. 4, 422.

means of identifying ourselves with God's agenda, including, I have come to believe, God's own sorrow for the things that do not work out as originally hoped, even as we take new hope and confidence that somehow, "All shall be well."⁹²

As Hughes notes, "there is often a shift in prayer in this current of transfiguration."⁹³ Rather than remaining focused on our own set of requirements, we come to see the deeper connection between God and all of reality. Our perception widens as we come to understand what it means to be part of Christ's Body today as well as what it means for God's reconciling work in Christ to be present throughout the entire world. As Hughes describes, when we begin to live more and more in an awareness grounded in the transfiguration,

We largely enjoy our life together with God by seeing God's glory illuminating our own being and everything around us, including our neighbor, our work, our worship, and our intimate relationships. Prayer is the enjoyment of this transfiguring light and becomes a means of grace in support of that ongoing transfiguration.⁹⁴

The way we understand and yearn for hope takes on new light in the light of Christ. We realize that prayer is not effective because of our efforts or any special skills we imagine we have. Further, prayer does not begin with us but with the Holy Spirit who is already at work in the world, drawing all of existence into the hope of reconciliation and redemption. As Hughes points out,

Personal prayer is an attentive joining in the prayer the indwelling Spirit is already praying within us, even, or especially when we do

⁹² Robert Hughes, *Beloved Dust*, 338.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

not know how to pray (Rom 8:25-27). Our most personal prayer turns out to be a participation in God's own inner Trinitarian conversation.⁹⁵

More and more we are drawn into a dynamic relationship with the Triune God in our practice of prayer. In a *neptic* orientation, our attentions shifts "from what is illuminated to the light itself, first contemplating it in its enlightening of others and ourselves but ultimately desiring to know the light in person."⁹⁶ In this way, our experience of transfiguration leads to a deepening union with God, to a yearning for a fuller union with the Source of our existence. This "culmination of the spiritual life," as Hughes puts it, "takes on an increasingly erotic dimension, going beyond dalliance to serious courtship."⁹⁷

It is to this dimension that we now turn: reflection on the practice and understanding of prayer that can cultivate union with God within an ordinary or typical parish community which is seeking to reorient the way it understands leadership and ministry. How do we see our desires changing within Grace Church? How do we see our relationships with one another growing through the practice of transfigured awareness? How can we identify the community's yearning for an even deeper grounding in God's presence, given the pressures we face in our day-to-day ministry?

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 339.

Chapter Five

Prayer and Desire

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:3-4).

As my third year at Grace Church was drawing to an end, the vestry met to discuss the Bicentennial Vision Campaign we had begun. Together, we looked at the trends in our budget, membership, and attendance. These three areas have offered the key bellwether numbers for determining health within parish communities for years. We laid the spreadsheets and narratives in front of us and explored the increases in key components of the parish's life. We saw that in 2016 alone we had welcomed over thirty new families. We noted increases in participation, with several new people now sharing in leadership within various parish ministries. We looked back over the past three years and noted a nearly 30% increase in our overall budget—a figure that had enabled the parish to expand our community partnerships and ministries of compassion throughout the city, county, state, and beyond, as well as complete major renovation projects that had been deferred for years. We noted how we had all experienced the dynamism of growth and vitality that the reorganization had encouraged through the five key cluster components

of Administration, Compassion, Formation, Participation, and Creative Expression. Further, we discussed how we all felt very positively about the planned 6.5% increase in pledges for the 2017 budget, further increasing both our financial stability and capacity to nurture key ministries within the parish and wider community. All in all, it was a very exciting conversation, and then we took a further step into a much riskier space.

My associate Cynthia and I asked if we could have a conversation with the vestry regarding our own spiritual health. We spoke about how we yearned for a more prayerful conversation around numbers and spiritual health, budgets, and faithfulness. I took the risk of holding up the budget report—as positive as it was—and confessed how I longed for a culture where these numbers did not feel like my annual evaluation. We acknowledged the stress of wanting so badly to see increases in attendance, total membership, and revenue, because these are the default indicators that we, as the clergy and vestry leadership, are somehow “doing a good job.” Further, we admitted how we realized the entire Grace community had the luxury of having such a conversation since we were not presently riddled with anxiety about whether or not we would survive much longer as a parish.

Together, we all took the risk of leaning into the conversation and articulating our hopes and dreams of what it would look like, as one vestry member put it, not to be ruled by the “tyranny of numbers.” As I

looked around the table, I saw a deep recognition on each face and a shared hope and curiosity about whether such a shift in our communal ethos was even possible. At one point, another vestry member asked the group, “Do we have the power to change the narrative in this way?” In other words, can we set new expectations for our community? Can we hold up new markers for faithfulness, for vitality, for health and wholeness? Are we willing to risk stepping into a new territory of measurement? I was so heartened in the conversation, because I saw my colleagues freshly awakening to the possibility of a new way of living and serving together. I felt empowered as we expressed our desire to live and minister with a heightened awareness of the Spirit’s guidance of our common life as the Body of Christ. We were aware of the pressures we faced, and we longed to explore the possibility further.

What emerged in that conversation was nothing less than a desire for *theosis*. As A.M. Allchin reminds us, “Too often we seem to have spoken about God, theorized about him without being able to bring men and women to any living apprehension of his presence and his power.”⁹⁸ Although the notion of *theosis* is little known within the Anglican tradition, and still less in Protestantism generally, the hope of transforming unity with the Triune God is nonetheless evident in classic Anglican writers and theologians. Theological reflection on *theosis* is of course pronounced within the Orthodox community. Among Patristic

⁹⁸ A. M. Allchin, *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd: 1988), 1.

writers, *theosis* is apprehended as our true and ultimate destiny. All our ascetical work is preparatory for this grace, for it is grace that finally leads us into union with God. As St. Gregory Palamas writes,

For all the virtue we can attain and such imitation of God as lies in our power does no more than fit us for union with the Deity, but it is through grace that this ineffable union is accomplished.⁹⁹

It was remarkable to glimpse this shared desire emerging from a vestry conversation about deepening our Bicentennial Campaign discernment. In my experience, such glimpses within more business-centered meetings are few and far between, and I wondered that night if that absence was due to our negligence in cultivating such a posture of deeper reflection.

It takes enormous risk to engage in such attentive reflection, yet the vista we behold when we pay attention and lean into such transformative encounters holds endless meaning. Our perspective is indeed widened, and we can catch a glimpse of the profound unity connecting all our lives in Christ. What Allchin described in the writings of key figures such as Hooker, Andrewes, Wesley, Pusey, and Keble can be seen in our own moments of comparable insight:

In all we are conscious of a movement of awestruck joy at the presence of God with us and in us, an experience of the dynamic joy of the kingdom which changes all things, overthrowing our customary ways of thinking of the relationships of God with man. From this centre of amazement we gain a new way of looking at things, an alteration of consciousness, a realization that we are able to respond to the world's problems when we see that in the

⁹⁹ Gregory Palamas, "The Declaration of the Holy Mountain in Defence of Those who Devoutly Practise a Life of Stillness," *The Philokalia*, Vol. 4, 421.

power of the gospel the problems themselves are being changed and that we ourselves are in the process of changing.¹⁰⁰

Our shared vision is enhanced as our spiritual myopia is addressed and repaired. Together, we are challenged to trust even more the Spirit's guidance, as we catch a glimpse of what God can make possible.

Eventually, through this grace, we come to see that our yearning for God is fueled, in reality, by God's yearning for us!

It is this dynamic of yearning that is the beating heart of our work within the parish community. All our hope for a more imaginative experience rooted in discernment, for a mindful engagement with our vocation, and for the promised hope of a transfigured awareness within Christ enable us to comprehend more fully our deepest desire: union with God. As Robert Hughes states, "Even if transfiguration is the tide in which most of us will spend most of this life, glory is the current in which we shall live eternally."¹⁰¹

While we were having these conversations in the vestry meeting, the Sunday lectionary presented the story of Zacchaeus. I told my wardens and clergy colleagues that I hoped to weave into the Sunday sermon some of our work as a parish community. This included themes such as watchfulness, hope, and desire that I wanted the community to ponder. What follows is my sermon on Luke 19:1-10:

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰¹ Robert Hughes, *Beloved Dust*, 373.

Today's sermon is about a man named Zacchaeus. We know something about him. He was a "wee little man, and a wee little man was he," as the children's song goes. One thing I have realized about this wonderful children's song is that it teaches a deep spiritual truth about watchfulness.

"He was trying to see who Jesus was."

When I first started to prepare for this sermon, I couldn't get past this sentence: "He was trying to see who Jesus was." Here is Zacchaeus, looking for Jesus, watching for Jesus, being attentive for Jesus, having this desire within him to see the Lord, to behold Him. It's a beautiful image.

Zacchaeus does see Jesus—yet more importantly, Jesus sees him! He peers from the tree, straining to catch a glimpse of the Lord, and Jesus invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house at that very moment. "Zacchaeus, you come down, for I'm going to your house today."

Notice what happened: Zacchaeus' own watchfulness, his own attentiveness to the Lord's presence enabled him to see that Jesus saw him. There is, of course, insight for us to consider here: At those moments in our lives when we feel the "point" of our prayer is to behold God, to focus on God, to gaze on God—at those moments of insight when we are in such a posture of prayer—we realize, or come to perceive, that the "point" all along is that God has been beholding us. God has been gazing on us all along, and we forget that. We lose sight of that.

Here we thought that our practice of prayer was about gazing on God, when perhaps it is about coming to understand that God is gazing at us. God is inviting us to rest in that gaze, and we are drawn into a deeper communion with Christ.

This is why the story of Zacchaeus is such a beautiful and powerful story to reflect on, because it is “so us.” Here maybe we thought our practice of prayer was all about our effort or technique, or accomplishing some distinct practice or type of prayer, or maybe trying so hard to be perfect in prayer, when, in reality, it was about yielding and allowing ourselves to accept that we are being held this entire time by a God who loves us and wants us to know how much we are all loved.

Notice what else happens in this text: As Zacchaeus yearns to see the Lord, and realizes that he, in reality, is seen by the Lord, he is invited into a deeper communion. Yet, the reaction from those witnessing this encounter is troubling: “All who saw it began to grumble.” “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner,” they say to each other. And there is judgment and condemnation. So, in the text, we have this complex dynamic of what is being seen and who is seeing:

Zacchaeus desires to see Jesus and strives to put himself in a position to catch a glimpse of hope, Jesus sees Zacchaeus and invites him into a deeper communion, and the crowd sees and becomes fixated on what they perceive as something inappropriate, outside the norm, unacceptable.

How many times have we felt like Zacchaeus, wanting so badly to catch a glimpse of God, having this desire within us? How many times have we been like Zacchaeus as well, maybe just for brief moments, realizing that we are seen by God? And how many times, honestly, have we been like the crowd: quick to criticize someone who, maybe, has a slightly different way of seeing God, of looking for God? The deep currents of this text invite us into a reflection on what watchfulness looks like, what attentiveness looks like, in our practice of faith.

Over a thousand years ago, tucked in a monastery on the Sinai Peninsula in modern-day Egypt, there lived a man named Hesychios, who is now revered as a saint in the Orthodox Church. Hesychios lived in a monastery with an intriguing name: The Monastery of the Mother of God of the Burning Bush, now St. Catherine's Monastery there at Sinai. Hesychios wrote wonderful reflections on watchfulness, what in Greek in the Christian contemplative tradition is known as nepsis, from the Greek verb nepho meaning, to stay awake or to be sober. His writings focused on what we could call a "deep practice" within the Christian tradition that calls us to pay attention: to our thoughts, to our surroundings, to those yearnings for a deeper experience of God in our lives, to those things that cause us to resist such a deeper experience of God. Hesychios and the early patristics, the early Church fathers and mothers, call us to be vigilant in our practice of prayer, to pay attention, to practice mindfulness and watch.

As he described, “Watchfulness is a spiritual method which, if sedulously practiced over a long period, completely frees us with God’s help from impassioned thoughts, impassioned words, and evil actions. It leads us, in so far as this is possible, to a sure knowledge of the inapprehensible God, and helps us to penetrate the divine and hidden mysteries.”¹⁰² In other words, it matters what we pay attention to. It matters what we give our focus to. As St. Hesychios describes, the goal or point of our spiritual practice is, then, “to fix one’s gaze on heaven and to pay no attention to anything material.”

We hear this put another way in Matthew 6 and Luke 12: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Zacchaeus is a master of watchfulness in this text. He is risking his entire well-being to see Jesus, to really see him, and to be seen by him—even when he is rejected by those who only “see” this person Jesus wasting his time with “a sinner.” His very name points at this dynamic: Zacchaeus, from Zacchai, meaning someone who is defined by his desire to be righteous, to do the right thing.

At the very beginning, I said this sermon was about a man named Zacchaeus. The truth is this sermon is about us. What do you see? What are you looking for? What do we see as a community? What are we looking for, as we step into our 189th year of shared prayer and worship, compassion and community? How are we being watchful in our day and

¹⁰² Hesychios, “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” *The Philokalia*, Vol. 1, 162.

time? It's hard, to be sure, when we are surrounded by a million voices shouting at us and telling us what to pay attention to. Yet, this is our practice, isn't it? To be watchful. To pay attention. To see with the eyes of our hearts rather than with the superficial eyes that only notice the flashy and sparkly things.

"He was trying to see who Jesus was."

Our conversations were deeply meaningful for us, and we realized the absolute necessity of grounding these conversations in a practice of common prayer. We named out loud that the only way we could truly explore our desire for a sharpened awareness of our unity in Christ was to take crucial steps as leaders of the parish. The first thing we did was to set aside all of 2017 as a Sabbath Year. We committed ourselves to avoid adding any new large-scale initiatives or activities for an entire year. Instead, we pledged to continue our bicentennial conversations, reflecting on what we presently do, why we are doing it, and how we are being invited to let go or change our current ministry opportunities. Several around the table admitted that this pledge would greatly challenge them, since so much of the way we understand "success" and "evaluation" depends on increases in numbers, yet there was absolute consensus that this pledge of a Sabbath period was essential for our health. We asked ourselves if we were willing to let go of our need to accomplish and over-schedule in order to rest, yield, and listen even more deeply.

The next thing we did was anchor ourselves in practices of focused prayer for an entire year. I pledged to be in either my study or the chapel Monday through Thursday at 8:30 to pray Morning Prayer and remember the entire community and their concerns. Several in the group began planning ways they could find dedicated spaces of prayer within their lives, and we agreed to encourage greater participation within the entire community.

We reflected together that our practice of watchfulness can only be supported by a posture of constant prayer. Only by such faithful practice can we hope to become more aware of the circumstances of our lives, resist the pressure to capitulate to a success-oriented program emphasis, and respond to the opportunity for a conversion to another way of living in the Spirit of Christ. Our longing for a life resonant with God's dream is rooted in God's own being. As Allchin writes: "He longs for his people, delights to dwell among them, finds in them his joy."¹⁰³ Together we began to realize that the practice of *nepsis*, of watchfulness that leads to transfigured life in Christ, enables us to lay hold of our deepest desire. Put another way, when my vestry colleague asked if we had the power to change the narrative, this very question was rooted in her desire for a shared ministry springing from an awareness of our union with God in Christ.

¹⁰³ Allchin, *Participation in God*, 65.

From such a place of vulnerability, we were able to ask ourselves a critical question: “What do we desire most?” We looked back over our previous conversations and found a subtle thread connecting much of our common work. Underneath the question in the Listening Circles which asked, “What have been the most meaningful experiences in your life with ___?”, lay a still deeper invitation to reflect on our desires to see our children, youth, and adults come to a greater awareness of Christ’s presence in their lives. Underneath the search committee’s work lay the same deeper about what they and the parish desired, not just with a new rector but for the entire community. Finally, underneath the Bicentennial discernment and vision work, we are seeking to articulate our deeper desires for the future of the parish, this marvelous community who is the Body of Christ in this particular place at this particular time. Desire, we come to see, lies at the heart of all we do: our desire for greater union with God and his purposes for our lives as well as our burgeoning awareness of God’s profound desire for us—to bring our entire lives into the fullness of God’s very being.

According to Allchin, this desire for union with God reorients our entire vision and understanding of reality:

The Christian tradition is thus full of an affirmation of God’s nearness to humankind, and of our unrealized potential for God. The basic affirmations that Jesus is Lord, Jesus is the Christ, are affirmations about the possibilities of man, about the intimacy of relationship between human and divine, no less than about the mystery of God. They speak about a meeting, a union of God with humankind that alters our understanding, our deepest experience

of what it is to be human, which gives us a new vision of the whole creation and alters the substance of our living and dying.¹⁰⁴

Union with God is at the heart of our deepest desire, yet our lives more often than not fall far short of this reality because of human frailty, blindness, and sin. The great English Benedictine monk Sebastian Moore speaks eloquently about this dynamic of desire and those things which work against it:

God is a god of desire, not of power and prestige, and Jesus knew God as the object of all our deepest desires—for joy, for laughter, and the love of friends, for sexual fulfillment. All of his life and teaching can be summarized as encouraging us to allow our innate desire, which is also God's desire for us, to break through our fear and self-loathing. And sin is that fear, fear of desire, fear of life and fear of falling into God.¹⁰⁵

Moore argues that “we are wired for love and we only flourish when we love.”¹⁰⁶ Desire is the fundamental characteristic of our identity as human beings, this yearning within us for complete fulfillment. The tension within our lives comes from straying from our heart's desire and instead settling for the distractions of the surrounding world. This desire pulses between us and God, and we can feel it deep within us. In one of his poems, Rainier Maria Rilke seeks to show this persistent longing for connecting by painting a series of intriguing verbal images:

You, God, who live next door—

If at times, through the long night, I trouble you
With my urgent knocking—
this is why: I hear you breathe so seldom.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰⁵ Sebastian Moore, *The Contagion of Jesus*, 120.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

I know you're all alone in that room.
If you should be thirsty, there's no one
to get you a glass of water.
I wait listening, always. Just give me a sign!
I'm right here.

As it happens, the wall between us
is very thin. Why couldn't a cry
from one of us
break it down? It would crumble
easily,

it would barely make a sound.¹⁰⁷

Rilke helps us imagine ourselves and God separated by only a thin wall, us with our ear pressed tightly against it, straining to hear even the faintest glimpse of a noise that might give us some reason to step out and risk contact. We are left asking ourselves how often we crave an invitation to a more intimate relationship.

Jesus, Moore argues, lived in absolute attunement with this deepest yearning within the human heart. He knew the fullness of human potential as well as the propensity to fall far short of God's dream for us all. Jesus, Moore writes,

dreamed of a society ruled by desire as he knew it, and not by the myriad forces that come to rule the world forgetful of real desire and forever sinking into its counterfeits. What we call sin is the enormous darkness everywhere, the worldwide conspiracy to turn our back on what we most deeply know about ourselves.¹⁰⁸

As much as Jesus recognized our potential, Jesus also knew of the terrible possibility for our missing the mark. He was vividly aware of the

¹⁰⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. Translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 53.

¹⁰⁸ Moore, *The Contagion of Jesus*, 121.

persistent push and pull within humanity, an awareness perhaps nowhere better embodied than at his very crucifixion between two thieves, each embodying this tension themselves in their last moments of life.

The struggle that arises within us when we yearn for God, and yet resist yielding to this hope, is very real. In “Love III” George Herbert describes this tension beautifully:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
 Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear
 I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.¹⁰⁹

Herbert lays bare the disparity between God's own invitation and “quick ey'd” perseverance and our own sense of shame and slackness of soul.

The God imagined here is one that broaches our deepest need before we struggle over the words. When our doubt arises within us, God has

¹⁰⁹ George Herbert, “Love bade me welcome,” *The Country Parson/The Temple*, ed. John N. Wall, Jr. (New York/Mahweh: Paulist Press, 1981), 316.

already reached out to hold us fast in an embrace that assures us of our value. Indeed, the image of God painted here is one that woos us, circling around every excuse we have and cutting off our escape from the union we crave so intently. In such an experience of love, we are welcomed, assured, embraced, and served by God's very self. In the end, how can we resist such an encounter of bliss?

The significance of being served by God's very self is far too often missed within the minutiae of parish ministry, yet the promised hope of our participation in the eschatological banquet imagined by Herbert is the essence of the parish Eucharist. Our experience of the Eucharist is greatly enriched by the practice of watchfulness, as St. Hesychios teaches it. In accord with an-imaginative engagement that nurtures a transfiguration of our awareness, Hesychios envisions the "divine fire, the body of our Lord Jesus Christ," driving away the illusions of our lives. Such illusions capture our attention, drawing our attention away from our true desires and leaving us, ultimately, unfulfilled. Through attention to the promised presence of Christ in the Eucharist, we become attuned to fullness of life in Christ himself.

And if after this, standing at the entrance to our heart, we keep strict watch over the intellect, when we are again permitted to receive those Mysteries the divine body will illumine our intellect still more and make it shine like a star.¹¹⁰

Such a development in ourselves, guided by the Holy Spirit, enables a fuller participation—a significant appreciation—of the

¹¹⁰ Hesychios, "On Watchfulness and Holiness," *Philokalia*, Vol. 1, 179.

Eucharistic heart of our faith. We become aware of distractions, hesitations, and preoccupations that thwart such an experience of sacramental significance—our deeper desire. As Julia Gatta points out, the distraction we experience during our preparation for the Eucharist mirrors the inattention we experience within wider life, noting “the atmosphere in sacristies prior to the eucharist, where too often pandemonium reigns.”¹¹¹ What priest has not experienced the cacophony of voices, urgent demands for appointments, questions about upcoming Sunday classes, and frustrated opinions on recent decisions hurled her way as she drapes the chasuble over herself and prepares to process into the nave? But it does not have to be this way.

Even though we suffer from the onslaught of anxiety within the wider culture, we have the opportunity within our parish communities to reorient ourselves in our liturgy with intentional periods of silence. It is helpful, for instance, to hold significant pauses before praying the collects, before the confession, after the sermon, and after the reception of Holy Communion, which can be experienced as a moment of communal mystical, sacramental union with Christ. A parish that incorporates a few simple, corporately agreed-upon disciplines, such as intentional boundary-keeping in the vesting space itself and maintaining a prayerful silence before the liturgy begins, will find their experience of the liturgy immeasurably deepened. “Pacing the liturgy to the measure

¹¹¹ Julia Gatta, *The Nearness of God: Parish Ministry as Spiritual Practice* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2010), 52.

of the Spirit is fundamental,” Gatta writes.¹¹² The same can be said of our entire framework of administration and ministry: pauses before meetings, silence before vestry decisions, and dedicated times of study and shared prayer can guide the tone of an administrative staff. In this way, our approach to the Eucharistic celebration gives shape to the entire spectrum of the parish’s common life. Gatta’s hopeful image is enticing:

The task here is to embody, through posture and demeanor, such calm and focused attention that we absorb the Word of God ourselves and invite others to do the same. As we listen or pray, we become conscious of Christ’s presence—among us, surrounding us, within us.¹¹³

Such focused attention to Christ’s presence across the various movements of the liturgy teaches a way of praying that congregants can then carry over into personal prayer. For as Evelyn Underhill observes, “The spirit of prayer is far more easily caught than taught.”¹¹⁴

Gatta’s use of the word “absorb” is interesting, because it points to the way our lives instead soak up the flavor of the world around us. Why should we be surprised that many churches rely on corporate leadership models when that is the dominant secular paradigm? Why should we be surprised when parish clergy and vestry members become fixated on numeric indicators to gauge the health and vitality of a spiritual community when such expectations pervade our collective

¹¹² Ibid., 42.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Evelyn Underhill, “The Parish Priest and the Life of Prayer,” reprinted in *The Mount of Purification* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1960), 265-267, cited in *The Nearness of God*, 52.

consciousness? Yet, as a community sacramentally nourished by the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist—as Herbert suggests in his scene of a great banquet—we are constantly invited to reimagine our assumptions about ourselves and our ministries. We can see the desire for such a reimagining in the following collect:

O Almighty God, who pourest out on all who desire it the spirit of grace and supplication: Deliver us, when we draw near to thee, from coldness of heart and wanderings of mind, that with steadfast thoughts and kindled affections we may worship thee in spirit and truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP, 833).

As with the pulsing heart of the Eucharistic imagery within our liturgical life, our Baptismal Covenant recognizes the persistence of this ongoing spiritual struggle as well. While demanding continual resistance to evil, it recognizes in the same breath our propensity to sin and consequent need for frequent repentance when the celebrant asks the baptismal candidate and the entire congregation: “Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” (BCP, 304). It is not a matter of “if” we fall into sin but “when,” nor is it a matter of “if” God’s grace is available but “when” the need arises for our restoration.

Moore poses a question for us in the church and in the world as we reflect on the goodness of Jesus within our lives: “Can we experience our desire to love all people that Jesus brings to flourishing in the *ecclesia* of the called?”¹¹⁵ Can we notice this yearning within us, and then seek to

¹¹⁵ Moore, *The Contagion of Jesus*, 115.

embody it around us and within us, with all whom we meet? Can we nurture this deeper yearning and thus reorient the way we understand discipleship and ministry? It is a question of discernment, watchfulness, and vocation. The resistance we feel, the “growing slack” of Herbert’s image above, is to Moore how we understand sin itself.

With Jesus revealing us to ourselves as seated where he is in the heavenly places, we have a new definition of sin, not as the breaking of a law but as the *frustrating of our real desire* (Moore’s emphasis).¹¹⁶

In an interesting parallel to our prior discussion on *nepsis* or watchfulness within the Patristic tradition, Moore describes an intriguing practice called “focusing” that he uses to engage this tension directly. In situations where we find ourselves aware of a struggle, when we become aware of both a potential for growth as well as any fear, anger, or resistance that is present, we are invited to lean into the experience with our own bodies, our own embodied existence. What is going on inside us? What are we feeling toward the situation, toward others around us? As we become more aware of what we feel in the situation, we remind ourselves of Jesus’ own words. As Moore says, “‘Do not be afraid!’ and ‘Open now to one another!’ are the same command to live in our new condition of human flourishing, for which Christ is the pioneer, as the Letter to the Hebrews says.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

We are invited to be honest with ourselves, trusting that the pain of our own circumstance finds its hope and restoration within the reality of Jesus, who yearns to draw us into the dynamic life of the Triune God. In this space of honest awareness, we see what is possible.

The point of focusing is that this ‘me’ thus attended to, thus listened to, what Tolle calls my ‘pain-body’, is where desire resides and wants to grow into loving. OK, so I go there and let this happen.¹¹⁸

Much honesty and vulnerability is demanded of us to enter into such a space of restoration and union. We need not deny our pain, anger, grief, and frustration—indeed we cannot—in order to yield to God’s invitation to be united through Christ into the fullness intended for us. Such an image of our entire selves being enveloped in the mystery of Christ’s own birth, life, death, and resurrection harken to Paul’s Letter to the Philippians when he imagines the potential of being united with Christ in the Paschal mystery that gives all our faith shape and sustenance:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:10-14).

To return to the beginning of this reflection, we need not deny the frustrations and fears that arise when we face the circumstances and

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

pressures of church attendance and budgetary challenges—nor the loss of any perceived cultural sway. Rather than denying these points of stress, Moore would encourage us to be curious about what lay just on the other side of them: our deeper yearning. Such a space of honesty is the place of the cross and the tomb, the space that gives rise to new life and promise. By engaging our deepest yearning, our desire to become our real and full selves within God, we can place the reality of our lives before the reality of Christ himself. In that moment of realization, when the stone of the tomb rolls away, the hope for a new way of being is realized. As Moore illustrates,

There is an unmistakable shock, of disorientation, of terror; something new and unmanageable is breaking in. And who is this figure that people don't recognize until something happens inside them? Sound familiar? You don't know him till the real you wakes up, and then he vanishes, leaving you with the breaking of bread, the light in the eyes, the heart on fire, the Kingdom, the world the way it is meant to be. And then the shock of the empty tomb reveals its secret. It is the shock of recovering from a sickness as old as the world, the new breaking-in on the oldest thing we know, the place of the dead, emptying the tomb and the mind to receive him, the man of our desire, the true shape of the world.¹¹⁹

Moore says that we should pray that “the real you wakes up.” Then we can step into the new reality promised by and embodied in the Risen Christ.

To some people, the concerns and worries of a particular parish community may seem too trivial to link such a profound process. It may not be readily evident that the conversations, hopes, struggles, and

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

dreams of an ordinary group of church people find their deepest meaning within such an understanding of desire. “Why not?” I would ask. Why do we not see the potential of typical, normal, routine parish ministry as the grounds for such a dynamic of discernment, mindfulness, watchfulness, transfiguration, and union? What is the point of our shared life together if not for “all of us to come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13)—words echoed in our baptismal liturgy (BCP, 302)?

Sadly, church communities often fall victim to the same cycle of program maintenance and anxiety-driven predictability as any secular enterprise. Our days become filled with the common stresses around attendance, budget demands, and building maintenance. In a world where our norm is now articulated as “decline,” this becomes an inevitable focus. Yet the call of Christ persists, the invitation to a fuller participation in the very life of God who seeks our wholeness and vitality. We are given the opportunity to have our eyes opened to see the potential for conversion within the minutiae of mundane ministry. We need not deny the pain and frustration we feel; rather, we can lean into our reality and trust that the Spirit of Christ is already at work, bringing to life that which we thought was hopeless. As Moore shows so beautifully,

The key to Calvary is buried deep inside you, inside me: it is the same key that unlocks prayer, for it is desire. It is in some moment when you knew that nothing would ever satisfy you, and knew, at the same time, “This cannot be all there is!” Indeed we

are far short of the desire that “for the sake of joy which lay ahead of him, endured the cross, disregarding the shame of it”. But that is not the point. In fact the point is that we must be short of this. For this is desire, coming from a self that we hardly know as ours. It is seated in what mystics call *la pointe vierge*, the core of our being, when alone we may restore that image, blackened by the candle smoke of centuries.¹²⁰

This is our hope, the promise we are given by God in Christ, and it is very much an “aggressive” way to share in parish ministry! It is the promise of our sacramental life—drenched in the waters of Baptism and nourished with the bread and wine of the Eucharist—that invigorates us and guides us into the fullness God dreams for us as individuals and as a community of faith.

I can think of no better way to close this paper than by including a remarkable, poetic reflection by Allchin—who references Pusey, who in turn references St. Augustine himself. Allchin seeks to articulate the joy found when people experience fulfillment, sharing in such union with God that they sing forth in exultation. The illustration he gives of harvest time can just as easily be imagined to be within the day-to-day workings of a parish community. Why should the two be any different? Brother Lawrence’s potatoes are now the parish secretary’s weekly newsletter mailings. As Allchin states, “At times this fullness of joy goes beyond all formulations into the silence of contemplation, and into the

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

exultation of praise.”¹²¹ In this space of transfigured awareness and union, Allchin presents an image of sheer joy:

Think of people as they go about some hot and exhausting job—at harvest time say, or in the vineyard. They start celebrating their happiness with the words of familiar songs. But they end up turning away from words and syllables, as if they were filled with so much happiness that they couldn’t put it into words. And off they go into the noise of jubilation. This kind of singing is a sound which means the heart is giving birth to something it cannot speak of. And who better to receive such jubilation than the ineffable God—ineffable, because you cannot talk about him? And if you cannot talk about him, and it is improper just to keep silence, why, what is there left for you to do but jubilate—with your heart rejoicing without words, and the immense breadth of your joy not rationed out in syllables.¹²²

¹²¹ Allchin, 66.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 67.

Epilogue

Risk and Vulnerability

Early in the fourth year of my cure at Grace Church, I shared a lunch conversation with my spiritual director, Barbara, at The Copper Pot, our favorite place in Clarkesville, Georgia. We reflected on the broad outlines of this paper as well as our shared experiences in parish ministry: mine as an Episcopal priest and hers as a long-time church musician. It didn't take long before the topics of vulnerability and risk rose to the forefront of our conversation.

"I remember a lesson my conducting professor taught us," Barbara said. "He said that the deeper potential and expressions of conducting can only be experienced when the conductor is vulnerable."

"Yes!" I told her. "That's exactly right, and that is true with parish ministry as well."

I also shared a sense of foreboding with my upcoming sermon on the Sunday prior to the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States. How could I speak in a way that realized the tension and anxiety felt by so many, acknowledged the diverse political views within my parish, called us to reflect theologically on any political agenda we encounter, sought to reaffirm our Baptismal Covenant to honor and respect all people and creation, while also honestly wrestling with my own fears of overtly offending anyone? The sermon would come a week

before our Annual Meeting when we would approve the 2017 budget, celebrate increasing our budget over 30% in three years, and formally announce that we were finally debt-free after a quarter century of expansions. The last thing I wanted to do was thwart the momentum of our community. As rector, I felt incredibly vulnerable balancing the many aspects of our common life even as I yearned to live into my vocation to proclaim the Gospel within the community entrusted to my care.

After much soul-searching, I offered these words as part of my sermon, reflecting on Jesus' call for Andrew and Peter to "come and see" (John 1:29-42):

Following Jesus as a disciple is not easy. We forget that, I think, because maybe we compartmentalize our practice of faith into one section of our life. Maybe we see our discipleship as only a part of ourselves: I'm a policeman, a teacher, or a lawyer. I'm a republican or democrat. I'm a Christian. Perhaps we even come to believe that none of these "facets" has any direct effect on the others, that being a Christian doesn't have anything to do with being a lawyer.

But what Jesus teaches us is that following him is the ground of our very lives. It will affect all of us, every part of us—or it should. Our political views must be honestly and even painfully evaluated through the lens of the Gospel, not just laid alongside the Gospel as another choice in our lives. At the end of the day, our whole lives are seen through the lens

of the Incarnation and Resurrection, the life, death, resurrection, and ongoing presence of Jesus Christ. Is it inconvenient? Yes. But honest and prayerful theological reflection is no longer a luxury limited to folks in academic gowns, robes, or clerical collars. It's time for all of us to step up as theologians.

In the reception line at the end of the service, I was amazed to see nearly twice as many people as usual waiting to share their appreciation for an opportunity both to acknowledge the reality of our own lives and to lean into the challenge of discipleship. My heart swelled with gratitude for my community. It was clear that there were diverse political views and anxiety within the parish, yet there was also the possibility to ground our political dialogue in a posture of Christian mindfulness—just as we had done in our conversations with budget, program maintenance, pressures, and institutional anxiety.

The interweaving of discernment, transfigured awareness, and desire in parish ministry that we have explored requires a certain degree of vulnerability and risk for spiritual growth to occur within the community. While we may know this intellectually, clergy often grasp tightly onto preconceived notions of what *they* feel is best for the community rather than seek a discerned, communal awareness that is grounded in the Spirit's guidance. They seem captive to their own agenda.

The pattern of a re-imagined Christian mindfulness described in this paper necessitates a posture of both personal vulnerability and prophetic imagination.¹²³ Authentic spiritual leadership is marked by both humility and courage: a humility which recognizes that in our current state we can only see—“through a mirror dimly” (I Cor. 13:12); and courage nonetheless to cry out to prepare the way of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3). We live in a space of “already and not yet.”

Tilden Edwards has for a long while offered the image of the “mind-in-heart”—that reality or potential within ourselves whereby the cognitive faculty descends into our spiritual heart. Edwards’ image of the mind-in-heart finds its roots in Patristic writers. St. Hesychios, for example, dramatically portrays our ongoing struggle with thoughts, for which prayer from the heart is the sole antidote: “Intellect is invisibly locked in battle with intellect, the demonic intellect with our own. So from the depths of our heart we must at each instant call on Christ . . .”¹²⁴ In order to guard against an inflated estimation of the intellect, Hesychios recommends cultivating a quiet mind, watchfulness over the heart, and the Jesus Prayer:

We should strive to preserve the precious gifts which preserve us from all evil These gifts are the guarding of the intellect with the invocation of Jesus Christ, continuous insight into the heart’s depths, stillness of mind unbroken even by thoughts which appear to be good, and the capacity to be emptied of all thought. In this

¹²³ See Walter Brueggemann’s work in Old Testament theology, in particular. His pivotal work with the prophets and their call to speak out against oppression is a vital element of any conversation surrounding vocation and discipleship.

¹²⁴ Hesychios the Priest, “On Watchfulness and Holiness,” *Philokalia Vol. 1*, 171.

way the demons will not steal in undetected; and if we suffer pain through remaining centered in the heart, consolation is at hand.¹²⁵

A *nepsis*-centered, transfigured awareness can more fully lean into God's desire for our lives. This heart-centered, awakened desire is all-permeating; it creates compassion and shapes our discipleship.

Martin Smith has observed that *nepsis* and *diakrisis* are in fact "twin virtues" within the practice of Christianity. The transfigured awareness that comes with the practice of *nepsis* leads to *diakrisis* or discerning judgment. While it is possible to reflect on each aspect singularly, these two are so intrinsically linked within Christian life that they cannot be separated when exploring Christian practice in any depth. One could visualize *nepsis* and *diakrisis* as a prayerful experience of inhalation and exhalation within the Christian contemplative tradition.

As I noted in my earlier critique of some Buddhist approaches to mindfulness practice, it is not enough only to be aware of one's thoughts within a given situation. One's awareness must inform one's ethical stance towards the situation. Interestingly, with this point, Christians can find great insight exploring the work of renowned Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and the development of "Engaged Buddhism" that evolved out of his experience in post-war Vietnam. In those dire circumstances, his Buddhist community realized how their traditional mindfulness teachings—while anchored in basic principles of Vietnamese and Theravada traditions—required a social embodiment. They needed to

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

affirm the welfare of all people by speaking out against injustice and exploitation. Thich Nhat Hanh's willingness to unite the two threads of mindfulness and embodiment—Christians could read here *nepsis* and *diakrisis*—led to his being exiled from his home country for nearly forty years.

Christians can find a plethora of mystics, theologians, pastors, and writers who each offer a reflection on such an integrated understanding of Christian discipleship. Within Anglicanism, of course, there is a pronounced tradition of social embodiment rooted in rigorous theological reflection, especially upon the social implications of the Incarnation. Charles Gore, William Wilberforce, F.D. Maurice, William Temple, Kenneth Leech, and Desmond Tutu are just a few examples of this vibrant tradition, moving seamlessly from theological reflection to ethics and social involvement. As Kenneth Leech says, "Christian prayer is inseparable from resistance and struggle For prayer is directed towards the vision of the Kingdom of God."¹²⁶ One can also draw inspiration from Roman Catholics such as Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, Jean Vanier, and countless others whose witness to peace combined with works of compassion and justice issued from their contemplative grounding—as Edwards would say, their "mind-in-heart" awareness. An integration of *nepsis* and *diakrisis* is also evident in the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights pioneers who called all of society to

¹²⁶ Kenneth Leech, *True Prayer: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (1980; rpt. Harrisburg, New York: Morehouse Publishing, 1995), 68.

reflect more deeply on what it means to be a beloved child of God; furthermore, one can never omit Dietrich Bonhoeffer from any discussion of how we are called to live as disciples while facing the resistance of society.

As Christians, we are always called to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ and find our hope in his life and in the promise given through his resurrection. Our mindfulness within our Christian practice is suffused with the Eucharistic promise that nurtures us in our lives and challenges us to share God's love with all we meet, striving to share in the banquet of the Kingdom of God. As Leech observes, "To know God is to do justice and plead the cause of the oppressed: to know God in Christ is to share in his work of establishing justice in the earth, and to share in his poverty and oppression."¹²⁷ It is a call marked not by spiritual pleasantries but by a stretching and yearning for the Kingdom of God—a yearning that will face resistance from both the greed of the powerful and the oft seen resignation or apathy of the larger population. In the case of both greed and indifference, Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, acknowledges the dangerous rise of an anthropocentric mentality within humanity:

When human beings place themselves at the center, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism which sees

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interests.¹²⁸

The struggle with such anthropocentrism rests at the heart of the human struggle, as religious thinkers throughout time have sought to teach us.

St. Augustine pointedly noted this tendency, what he described as *incurvatus in se*, a turning in upon oneself, noting especially:

Therefore, when the will cleaves to the common and unchangeable good, it attains the great and foremost goods for human beings, even though the will is only an intermediate good. But when the will turns away from the unchangeable and common good toward its own private good, or toward external or inferior things, it sins.¹²⁹

It is vital for the Church to name this sinful reality with which we all struggle even as we yearn for the hopeful reconciliation of the Kingdom of God in our lives. Pope Francis draws on Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew as he clarifies our call as Christians: “[Bartholomew] asks us to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, an asceticism which entails learning to give, and not simply to give up.”

In the end, in all that we do as a community of faith—even with all the anxiety we feel concerning attendance, budget growth, and the survival of our institutions—we must always be mindful of the bedrock spiritual grounding of our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are called to be mindful *of* the circumstances and pressures of our lives, and

¹²⁸ Pope Francis, *On Care for our Common Home: Laudato Si'* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015), 59.

¹²⁹ St. Augustine of Hippo, *On Free Choice of the Will*, translated by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 68.

we are called to be mindful *for* the reconciling in-breaking of Jesus Christ into the life of the whole world. To be sure, only through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit can we dare to embark upon this journey alongside Jesus and learn more fully what it means to be a disciple.

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