

Proper 22 2020
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Exodus 20; Matthew 21:33-46
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Acquire inward peace and a multitude around you will find their salvation.

We are in anxious times. Even before the successive, collective psychic shocks of the past six months, life could be tumultuous. We are also conditioned by our culture to react when things are going wrong – “Don’t just stand there, do something!” Too often, our measure of worth has been about doing instead of being, and especially when stress hits, people who are good and competent and successful are supposed to be out making things better.

At the same time, running around in a frenzy doesn’t always help other people, and rarely helps us. God does not want us on some anxiety-propelled hamster wheel. Nor does God want us drowning in the pain and loss being experienced by so many people around us that are dear to our hearts. God offers us something else, even when the world seems to be crashing in around us, and wave upon wave of tragedy break upon our the shores of our lives.

Acquire inward peace and a multitude around you will find their salvation. Saint Seraphim of Sarov was a Russian monk and saint from the eighteenth century. He was known for spending extended time alone in prayer, yet this quiet increased his capacity to transform lives. He didn’t run out of time to do what was important. Instead, by listening to the psalmist and actually being still and knowing that God is God, he was able to touch more lives. Many came out to him for advice and wisdom, and he was noted for a number of miracles. He truly lived out this quote of his, *Acquire inward peace and a multitude around you will find their salvation.*

I am talking about this today because so often we try things backwards. We act like if we get everyone else to be at peace, then we will find our salvation. I know I sometimes fall into this. If everyone in my family and in the parish is happy, I think that everything will be OK for me. I also know that I rarely am helpful to anyone during those times that I run around like a crazy person trying to fix everything and everyone around me.

Usually these fretful, stressed-out strivings happen when I do not feel at peace with myself. Maybe I feel like I’ve messed up and have to fix something. Maybe I have been judging people and getting mad at them, so I assume they are also mad at me and if I don’t settle them down I’m going to be in trouble later. When, of course, the one I need to settle down is myself. Maybe I am afraid that the pain or sorrow others are feeling will overwhelm me and I have to find a way to prevent it. Maybe it just feels like the world is coming to end, and I am isolated or lonely or afraid, and if I just try a little harder than it will be worthwhile for God to take care of me.

It doesn’t matter that I know all of those messages are lies. I mean, it does matter, but I may not hear it in the moment. When I act out of those anxious places, I’m not bringing things that people need. At best I’m trading my fears and anxieties for theirs, and at worst I am adding layers of drama to already problematic situations.

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The other way to approach things, of course, is to ensure that I do what will bring me peace. We can't give to others what we don't have. If I want to offer people peace or love or joy or kindness or presence or a listening ear, I have to actually have those things myself so I can share them. Instead of reacting to the stresses around me, I can actually decide to use chaos as an opportunity to ground myself more fully in the life of the Holy Spirit. The more we are overwhelmed with stress and fear, or the more we are saddened and brought to our knees by the real pain and loss of those around us, or the more we feel threatened directly and indirectly by changes in the world around us, then the more time we need to make space in our lives for joy and peace and love and gentleness and kindness and patience and goodness and faithfulness and self-control.

So how do we cultivate that inward peace that is so necessary for ourselves and others?

We could follow St. Seraphim literally and do things like eat a diet solely of vegetables we have grown in our garden or spend a thousand nights in a row lying on a rock with our hands in the air praising God, but those are probably not where we need to start. Nor are they probably where we need to finish. Instead we can take time to do those simple things that remind us that we are loved by God, that God is in charge, and that God will take care of us and all his children, no matter how the world around us might look.

Prayer is an important way we reconnect with God, but I don't mean prayer that is an obligation or prayer to check off the boxes of praying. We can just pray in ways that let us share time with God. Maybe that is meditating or journaling or reading inspiring scripture. It might also be singing (even by ourselves with no church choir or organ in the background), or dancing or running or going for a walk, or just being in nature. Some people, including some pastors I know, find fishing to be this kind of powerful prayer time. Much of what we do that revitalizes us is a form of prayer, especially when we intentionally invite God to do it with us. He's there anyway, but it helps us to invite him along.

Gratitude is another way that we can deepen our own peace and love. Sometimes all that is necessary for gratitude is paying attention to what we have. Instead of just consuming things around us, we can be stop and be grateful for them. For the food we eat. For a cup of tea or coffee in the morning and the happy effects of caffeine hitting our bloodstream. For the incredible colors we see, not only in nature as fall approaches, but also in all areas of our lives. So many things have beautiful paint and colors. We have whole industries devoted to making almost everything we see or buy look attractive and beautiful. So much passes by us without a thought, but when we are thankful for it, everything becomes a way to bring us deeper into the peace and love of God.

A third broad category of ways to connect with God is to bless others. We can just offer those around us good things that we have received from God. These might be spiritual or material or almost anything. Note the difference though, between valuing people for who they are and blessing them out of our abundance rather than trying to fix them because we need them to be somebody they are not. We might even make sacrifices because we see a need, certain that God will support us in offering that blessing. Such offerings are Christian love flowing out of an

assurance of God's love for us, and are very different from activities stemming from fear or guilt or shame. I think we all know the difference, and how big a difference that difference can make for us and for others.

These are just ideas, not requirements. We are all made differently and we all experience God and find his peace in our own ways. The important thing is not to follow someone else's script, but to do what we need to do. The world does need us. These are crazy times and some people have to step up and do what needs to be done. Yet the world doesn't need us when we are fearful or stressed or overwhelmed. Everyone has enough of that already. The world needs saints of God, people who know they are beloved children of their heavenly Father. People who have deep wells of love and joy and peace to share. People who shine with the radiance of the light of the world that the darkness cannot overcome. People who transform lives just by being who we are in whatever situation we find ourselves in.

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