

earthly wealth away. Jesus calls him to "confess" and reorder his priorities (Mark 10:21).

I love the fact that the Lord's Prayer comes to us through a disciple's desire to connect with God like Jesus did. "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). Jesus gave the disciple a spiritual practice to *learn* and *do*. He offered him a prayer to *say*. There was no seminar on prayer. No steps and techniques for talking to God. Through praying this prayer the disciples had access to the same relationship with the heavenly Father that Jesus did.

START

CENTURIES OF CONNECTION BETWEEN DISCIPLINE AND DESIRE

From its beginning the church linked the desire for more of God to intentional practices, relationships and experiences that gave people space in their lives to "keep company" with Jesus. These intentional practices, relationships and experiences we know as *spiritual disciplines*. The basic rhythm of disciplines (or rule) for the first believers is found in Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching [a practice] and to the fellowship [relationships], to the breaking of bread [an experience] and to prayer [another practice]."

The desire to know and love God fueled these disciplines. But as the early church community ran into new situations of want, conflict, temptation and persecution, they wanted and needed help to persevere in keeping company with Jesus. The book of Acts recounts a variety of ways the first-century believers made space for God as they faced difficulties:

- Acts 3—the discipline of compassion
- Acts 4—the disciplines of witness, intercession and detachment

- Acts 7—the discipline of service
- Acts 3:1; 10:9—the discipline of fixed-hour prayer
- Acts 14:23—the discipline of fasting
- Acts 15—the discipline of discernment

It can be freeing as well as overwhelming to realize how many disciplines thread their way through the church era. As the gospel spread throughout the Roman world, the church continued to respond to people's desires to keep company with Jesus. The *Didache*, an early Christian text, gave instruction to believers on how to grow in love of God and neighbor. It addressed disciplines like stewardship, chastity, fasting, prayer, humility and the Lord's Supper. In the fourth and fifth centuries, as the church was relieved of its persecution, the desert fathers found that the politicized and nominal nature of Christianity sabotaged their first love. Longing to recover the passionate flame of love for God that characterized the early church, they moved into the desert where they could more intentionally partner with Jesus for transformation. Their longing to be conformed to the image of Christ gave rise to spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, contemplation, spiritual direction and detachment. The desert fathers' passion to love and keep company with Jesus reverberated through the secular life of Rome. Believers who shared a desire to go deep with God established communities characterized by spiritual rhythms that made space in their lives for God. These monastic communities forged their lives around disciplines of fixed-hour prayer, memorization, devotional reading, service, chastity, simplicity, hospitality, meditation and service. During this period of church growth, public worship also developed into fixed liturgies that guarded the church from heresy. These liturgies and their

derivatives are still in use in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions today.

In the sixteenth century the coinciding advent of the printing press, world-class sailing ships and the Reformation fanned the flames of change. The Bible was translated from Latin into native tongues and made available to ordinary people. God's written Word could literally go to the world's end. Ministries focusing on mission outreach and service were launched by both Catholics and Protestants. Bible study, witness, stewardship, discernment and intercessory prayer became the property of common people, not just the educated elite.

The modern era ushered industrialization, individualism, psychology, ecology and global awareness into the mainstream of Western life. People began to keep company with Jesus through journaling, self-care, care of the earth, conversational prayer, accountability partners, small groups, mentoring and inner-healing prayer.

The technological age, with its peculiar temptations and desires, is opening paths into disciplines like slowing, centering prayer and unplugging. Furthermore, classical disciplines like solitude, silence, rest; spiritual direction and retreat are resurging as people desperately seek a quiet, still center in the midst of the whirlwind.

Throughout the centuries the disciplines of prayer, confession, worship, stewardship, fellowship, service, attending to Scripture and the Lord's Supper have remained constant channels and disciplines of grace. These time-resilient disciplines give the church in every age and culture ways to keep company with Jesus. In Christ's presence, temptations, weaknesses, sin, and life's desires and desperations are addressed. It is not spiritual disciplines per se that transform us into the likeness of Christ. Without the work

of God's Spirit within, practices guarantee nothing. Paul says, "Such regulations [disciplines] indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (Colossians 2:23). Disciplines done for the wrong reasons actually sabotage transformation and numb us toward God and the truth. When we use spiritual practices to gain secondary things like spiritual cachet, success, approval and respect, we rob the discipline of its God-given grace. Jesus said of the most spiritually disciplined people of his day:

These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught
by men. (Matthew 15:8-9)

Spiritual practices don't give us "spiritual brownie points" or help us "work the system" for a passing grade from God. They simply put us in a place where we can begin to notice God and respond to his word to us.

Spiritual disciplines give the Holy Spirit space to brood over our souls. Just as the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep at the dawn of creation, so he hovers over us today, birthing the ever-fresh Christ-life within. The Christ-in-me identity is not bound to a generic one-size-fits-all program for union with God. The Holy Spirit knows the spiritual practices, relationships and experiences that best suit our unique communion with God. He knows how to help us move into the "unforced rhythms of grace" that Jesus offers to teach us. **END**

Spiritual transformation, "recovering your life," comes from partnering with the Trinity for change. That doesn't mean we give the Holy Spirit an agenda or a demand.