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When Less is More: Cultivating a Community in Relationship with God

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ABSTRACT

What does it look like to cultivate a community in right relationship with God? In taking the focus off individual members and placing it on the community itself, we recognize that the whole of a university is greater than the sum of its parts, and that individual parts are repeatedly and continually shaped and defined by the whole. Being in right relationship with God begins with acknowledging our longings to be loved, to be known, and to belong in ways encouraging us to put ourselves intentionally and consistently in God's gaze of love. Coming before God empty-handed and agenda-less, rather than starting another discipleship program or Bible Study, helps us lean into God's love already at work—common grace. Gratitude flows from opening our eyes to the wonder of God's sustaining love active around us. As we gaze at God, who is gazing at us, we are transformed—saved from envy, pettiness, selfishness, and sense of entitlement. Transformation begins with grace, where the response is a gratitude that moves back to God and is expressed in love of neighbor—love of all created things, both seen and unseen, held together by Christ. This movement of God in our college communities is cultivated by a shared identity as a Christian community, by seeing and knowing each other, being seen and known, using chapel as a Holy Place, and turning our love outward.

Why, one might rightly wonder, is a sociologist writing about cultivating a community's ability to be in right relationship with God? Would not one prefer for a theologian to undertake that assignment? Yet this is the task and contribution I have been given for this theme issue of the *CHE* journal, even as some theology colleagues have been asked to write other articles more aligned with my expertise in social systems and ecology. I thought about asking these colleagues for a trade—perhaps swapping topics for some homemade dilly beans and gooseberry jam from my small-scale farm—but then abandoned the idea as I found myself increasingly engaged in the topic that I have been assigned. As a sociologist, former college professor, and current seminary student, I find the question of a community being in a right relationship with God intriguing, engaging, and about as important a question as any.

Like many professors, administrators, and staff in U. S. Christian colleges and universities, for 25 years I have joined colleagues on Christian campuses in being passionate

about forming students spiritually and intellectually, helping them discern vocational and missional callings. Our calling is, in part, to collaborate with others in our communities—faculty, staff, administrators, and students—to live out the good news of Jesus in transformative ways as we engage our sometimes challenging and messy lives and world. We aspire to live *through* our faith—with our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish.

Beginnings, like inaugurations and new semesters, provide an opportunity for introspective evaluation of who we are, remembering who we want to be individually and collectively. How do we, as communities, cultivate the abilities of our members to be in right relationship with God? My humble effort is to offer some observations regarding what I am learning and have learned about that challenging task.

Let me preface this article by saying that I cannot write about the intersection of our culture with sexuality, raising daughters, the search for contentment, or how we walk gently—or not—on the Earth without appealing to our relational nature, most noted in our longings—recognized or not—for God. Our desire to be known, to be loved, and to belong can be fulfilled to some measure in our relationships with others and with creation; however, such desires cannot be fully realized apart from God, and will not be realized fully this side of heaven. Lest you think that sounds theoretical and abstract (actually, it is theoretical and abstract), I will attempt greater specificity about what being in right relationship with God might look like.

During this current season as a seminary student, one of my assignments was to spend 20 minutes a day, six days a week in centering prayer. This type of prayer, as taught by Catholic monk Thomas Keating and Cynthia Bourgeault (2004), reflects a resting in God's gaze of love, allowing the Spirit to fill and move as God wills.

Centering prayer assumes a posture of humility—a willingness to say that one has talked enough, and to sit in God's presence with no expectation of feeling uplifted, receiving good, or even of hearing God speak. Centering prayer requires releasing, letting thoughts go as they inevitably come, and sitting intentionally and attentively without commentary or request. I am humbled by how difficult I find this simple task. Yet, I lean into it discerning the wisdom of antiquity that suggests this practice makes one more pliable in the hands of God. Initially the task was made easier by knowing that fellow classmates struggled alongside me. On a number of occasions, I sat with them for 10 minute stretches in collective silence—powerful holy minutes.

So one answer to the question of how we might cultivate community members to have a right relationship with God, which may initially sound trite, is not to do very much at all, *except to acknowledge our longing to be loved, to be known, and to belong in ways encouraging us to put ourselves intentionally and consistently in God's gaze of love.*

Suggesting that we not follow such practices very often recognizes that it is easier on a college campus to start a new program or initiative than it is to sit still and to wait before God. So, perhaps being in right relationship with God is about doing less rather than more. Perhaps it is about coming before God empty-handed and agenda-less, rather than starting another discipleship program, Bible Study, social justice initiative, or prayer group.

As an intellectual Christian, you may be disappointed at this point. As academics, we often expect reflections of this sort to hold more loft and complexity. The humility of

simplicity does not come easily. As a starting point, set aside concerns you may have about the suggestion that we add “wasting” time to some list for the moment, so as to consider something equally disruptive. Given the individualistic, Western ways of our culture and faith, perhaps our communities would benefit from a focus on *collectively* being in right relationship with God rather than as individuals. If—I do not assume any of you has been convinced—we accept the suggestion that spiritual benefit might come from doing “less” on college campuses generally designed to affirm “more,” might undertaking such a task as a community affirm and validate this choice? What if, rather than considering how our Christian colleges and universities might cultivate members to be in right relationship with God, we begin asking: *What does it look like to cultivate a community in right relationship with God?* When we remove the focus from individual members of a community and place it on the community itself, we are recognizing that the whole of a university is greater than the sum of its parts, and that the individual parts are repeatedly and continually shaped and defined by the whole.

I grew up as an evangelical Protestant, understanding that the primary way to be in right relationship with God was through personal salvation. In high school, I came to understand that recognizing my need for saving, and not only from damnation, was only the starting point of being right with God. Like most people, I needed saving from the tendency to live a life focused on my needs, my wants, and my aspirations. I needed to learn what it meant to love God and neighbor. I, like all Christians, was on a journey in which I might be transformed ever more into the likeness of Jesus.

A good number of years later, I began to question our 21st-century Western emphasis on individuals. How might such an emphasis undermine the collective dimensions of being in right relationship with God? A collective dimension, it seemed, was one in which we gathered ourselves in places where we as faith communities might be transformed—where the Church universal might fulfill the great commandment to love God and neighbor (Luke 10:27).

Historians, theologians, and historical sociologists might all suggest a way to explore the question of being in right relationship with God is to revisit how the early church understood their task. To become like Jesus, the author and perfecter of their faith (Hebrews 12:2), early Christians operated in community. Although early Church history is not often explored in our churches, we have these believers to thank for how we think about and “do” Christian community. For example, they gathered together for worship regularly. They comforted and drew strength from each other, which was especially critical and transformative amidst the significant persecution faced by Christians during the first 250 years of the church, and again later, particularly for the Anabaptists, during the years following the Reformation.

Together our foremothers and forefathers remembered God’s transcendent and transforming love through regularly giving and taking the Eucharist; expressing their love of God by loving their neighbors; and offering hospitality to foreigners, along with food, shelter, and clothing to widows and orphans. They took food to and visited those in prison, and tended to those who were sick. They sent out missionaries. As *communities*, they sought to be in right relationship with God.

Colleges and universities are not churches; that discussion has been had in various quarters of Christian academia. However, our Christian institutions of higher learning

are part of the Church, having unique opportunities to function as communities of faith within the larger niche of academic institutions.

Consequently, one observation is that it might be helpful to think about being a *community* in right relationship with God, rather than being a community that cultivates individuals in right relationship with God. A related question to consider is why it seems particularly difficult for academics and Westerners—individually and collectively—to value the simple practice of coming with intention before God’s profligate, wildly extravagant love that created us to desire to belong, to be known, to love, and to be loved.

Perhaps the challenge circles back to the suggestion that we need to consider doing less rather than more. The concrete “doing of community life” is easier than the abstract notion of exposing ourselves to God’s gaze of love. The concrete doing of anything is easier than doing seemingly nothing. We value productivity, measurable outcomes, and upward trajectories—common traits within our cultural DNA that are reinforced by promotions, acclaim, and the satisfaction of significance.

Maybe doing less starts with leaning into God’s love already at work in what we call common grace. God’s love tumbles, rumbles, and flows throughout creation. We see it in the shifting of the seasons. Sun filtering through leaves that expose their true colors in fall before letting go to ride the breeze to the ground, becoming rich, loamy soil that will nurture life by feeding critters, dormant roots, and seeds that then awaken predictably every spring, reaching for the sun. A simple and life-giving common grace.

God poured forth love and created a universe that is sustained by God’s active presence within it. Life is sustained by a wildly extravagant and gracious God:

He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, *and in him all things hold together*. (Col. 1:12-17, RSV)

We see the gaze of God’s love expressed in people coming together to restore order and normalcy in the aftermath of a relentless hurricane season and in people gathering around the nation to grieve random killings of other people—strangers, yet kin. Common grace inspires and empowers the good that emerges as a community collectively as in battles hunger, sex trafficking; and racial, economic, and environmental injustices. This grace does not remove the tragic consequences of living in a fallen world, but it continually comes to visit us in our struggle and grief. Can we quiet our rumpled and too-busy spirits to let awareness of such love—of Christ holding all things together, reconciling all things to himself—seep into our consciousness, settle deep into our collective bones, and emerge in an outpouring of gratitude for the gift of life and all that entails?

Aristotle did not consider gratitude a virtue because it primarily involves receiving whereas the *virtuous* person is a giver. Virtue means that we act as “great-souled” people who give courageously to the needs of the world. But Aristotle wrote before the time of Jesus, before the grace of God revealed in Jesus turned everything upside down. To the Christian, virtue—and being in right relationship with God—begins with the Great Receiving, opening our eyes to the wonder all around us, and to God’s gaze of love. Gratitude flows from such a Receiving.

As gratitude settles into our souls, as we spend time gazing at God who is gazing at us, God (not us) does the transformative work of making us more like Jesus, aligning us in right relationship to God. Emmanuel—God with us—offers saving grace from our sins, and also our insecurities, fear, anger, and despair. As we gaze at God, who is gazing at us, we are transformed—saved from our envy, pettiness, selfishness, and sense of entitlement. This experience might be more like virtue from the inside out. Such virtue begins with grace, where the only possible response is a gratitude that moves back to God and is expressed in love of neighbor—love of all those created things, both seen and unseen, held together by Christ.

If we return to the purpose of transformation, this process gets flipped on its head. We do not *strive* to get in a right relationship with God so that we can be better people or become a better college community, or do some good in the world. Rather, as we sit with God, placing ourselves in the gaze of God and letting Holy Spirit commune with our spirit, our hearts become grateful. We are transformed, and we come to see and love the world, the whole Cosmos, as God does.

However, we mystery-solving Westerners want flow charts and diagrams, and step-by-step instructions; we want models and best practices. In a conversation about our childhood faith, Keith, my brother-in-law, asked how I came to understand the goal of the Christian life. My explanation was long and convoluted, and may have involved flow charts and diagrams. When I had finished, I asked how that fit with his understanding. Very gently (he is a gentle soul) he replied, “Well, mine is more simple than that. I’ve just always thought I should be like Jesus.” Bonhoeffer (2005) said the same from a prison cell in Germany shortly before his execution in 1945: “To be conformed to the one who has become human—that is what being really human means” (p. 92).

God’s plan from the beginning was to unravel some of the mystery of being in a right relationship with God even if doing so created another mystery altogether. God’s plan from the beginning was to send Logos—the Word who was with God in the beginning—that we might see God and know God.

John 1 starts off similarly to Colossians 1, affirming the Word being with God in the beginning, and all things being created by Christ.

John 1:14 and 16 states:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father ... and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

We know the heart and character of God through Jesus. As we are transformed into the likeness of Jesus—God incarnate—we become more fully human.

Daniel Brunner, one of my seminary professors,¹ explained it this way. Some of us are old enough to remember tracing letters in first grade as we learned to make the letters of the alphabet. So Jesus is the tracing guide of the Divine.

As we trace Jesus, follow Jesus, we are transformed. We might ask, what kind of person was Jesus? If we really believe that Jesus was fully human (as well as fully divine), we might also ask, *how* did Jesus become the kind of person He was? It was, most certainly in part, by placing himself often in the loving gaze of God. As we come

¹Brunner teaches at Portland Seminary, affiliated with George Fox University.

to see and love the world as Jesus did, we become like Jesus, serving as conduits of God's love and grace.

I find it challenging, and I doubt I'm alone here, not to turn a spiritual formation conversation on college campuses into an outcomes-based narrative. There might be some disappointment if this essay did not acknowledge that thought. Even as people who live in the world of ideas, it is hard to sit with abstract talk without grounding it in outcomes or action, regardless of how lovely it sounds.

So, out of compassion for those wanting to bring clarity to this mystery—and wanting to be sure I attempt due diligence in the task set for me—what follows is a summary report, of sorts, that includes five observations drawn from Christian campuses across the country. These examples represent the fruit of the Spirit, surely nurtured and coming forth from communities cultivating a right relationship with God.

Shared identity as a Christian community. Many Christian colleges and universities have created this sense of identity very well as a result of the intentional strategies of their members. When I have been on such campuses and talked with students or alumni, their shared sense of oneness is clearly a source of nurture and hope. I have experienced such community in the friendly warmth when walking across campus, the engagement of people before chapel, conversations between classes, and the buzz in the cafeteria.

Seeing and knowing. Although this goal is shared by many colleges and universities, it is difficult to achieve. Yet I have walked with presidents, deans, faculty, and chaplains who greet not only faculty and students by name, but also maintenance workers and kitchen staff. As one who struggles to remember names, this personalized attentiveness humbles me. I entered a department once where donuts had been left for janitors cleaning their building—something I learned was done regularly. Some campuses have cultivated the value of *seeing* all people, regardless of position and status in the community.

Being seen and known. I have witnessed the inverse of seeing and knowing among faculty and administrators who invite students to know them, both in and out of classrooms and offices. They go beyond a prayer or devotion and bring something of their spiritual journey into the classroom. Twenty-eight years ago, psychologist Sorenson (1994) studied how students best learn integration; his contributions are perhaps most remembered for the saying, “Integration is caught, not taught” (p. 182). Sorensen found that students were most impacted by professors who were transparent about their own spiritual journey with their students. This action also occurs on college campuses that regularly have faculty speak in chapel, facilitating professors bringing their whole selves into their community, rather than just expertise in their field.

Chapel as a Holy Place. Certainly chapel is the place where communities gather with intention and attention before God. Some chapels use sacred space to acknowledge bonds to each other, recognizing that obligations and life-giving privileges come from being in community together. I have been inspired at the myriad ways I have seen chapel used to come before God as a community—seeking the heart of God, seeking to be communities in right relationship with God.

Love turned outward. We have all seen college communities turn God's love outward toward their neighbors and the world. One institution with an active pottery-making community pooled its talents and raised money for people displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. One group made bowls while another organized a simple soup supper.

People came, chose a bowl they could take home, filled it with soup, gathered around tables, and sent money and prayers to aid the relief work in New Orleans. This story is only one of many about paying attention and then responding in love as a community.

Not surprisingly, this (non-definitive) list is quite relational. A community in right relationship with God is a community in relationship with each other. Such a community draws people toward the Light, toward Jesus, and into the loving gaze of God.

When a community lives with Jesus at the center—living generously, kindly, and honorably—the community flourishes. The flourishing cannot always be measured with numbers or dollars or program expansion. Instead, flourishing is measured by its inexplicably warm welcome, emerging from a community that recognizes it belongs to and is loved by God. The gratitude that flows from such a place is winsome and inviting. May this increasingly be true of our college and university communities.

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