Richard J. Foster

Streams of Living Water

Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith

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ideas of this book. In the pressured final months of writing she took
over literally all the responsibilities of home and family. Whenever I
was convinced the project was too daunting, she urged me on.
Whenever I was convinced the writing was so bad that it would be a
mercy to consign it to the fireplace, she said it was good and would
be better. Whenever I got too cocky, thinking I was producing a mag-
num opus, she found the words to bring me back to reality. (Actually,
words often were unnecessary; a quizzical look or a slight lift of the
eyebrows was sufficient.) She is the most precious person in my
life—I thank her.

I am keenly aware that words are, at best, “frozen thought” and
cannot adequately express the life of the streams of devotion
described in this book. Only Jesus, the living Word of God, tran-
scends this limitation. I can only pray that he will take these words
and use them to breathe life into your soul.

/Richard J. Foster
Ash Wednesday 1998

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Foreword

“I hate organized religion. I’ve moved way beyond it.”
“I despise the institutional church. I don’t need institutions
to depend upon.”

“I don’t believe in communities of worship. I am strong enough to
be on my own.”

“I don’t like religion at all. Hypocrites and selfish people invent it
to serve their own purposes.”

“However, I’m very spiritual.”

You will hear such language over coffee in the browsing rooms of
the giant bookstores. It is commonly voiced when celebrities chatter
about themselves on late night television. College students will flock
to religious studies courses but avoid chapel before they go off vari-
ously on their own to find the meaning of life or to commune with
the spirit in the woods or get connected with the energy in the uni-
verse or be touched by angels.

Helping you become very spiritual—no italics, please, for the
word “very” this time—is a goal Richard Foster has set for himself in
Streams of Living Water. But every page shows that he means some-
ting different than do authors of the best-sellers found on bookstore
shelves marked “Spiritual-Occult-Metaphysical-Holistic-Wholistic-
Alternative-Ancient-New Age.” Too many pages show that he and
those authors only coincidentally use the same words—Spirit, spiri-
tual, and spirituality—as they attempt to convey very different things.

Think of the self-acquired, self-advertised spirituality as a kind of
vapor: thin, particled, almost invisible, shapeless, hard to grasp. Who-
ever boasts the possession of it can escape criticism or judgment. You
cannot make congregations out of the clientele that buy into it; they
despise concrete community. Think of the kind of spirituality Foster is encouraging as thick, rooted, concrete, always seeking shape, graspable by anyone who would appraise it and reject or improve it.

What are the differences between the two sorts? Many, of course, but at the core is the fact that the first kind is unmoored and the second is moored. The unmoored makes up reality as it goes along; it flits and is fleeting, leaving one at sea. The moored sort, on the other hand, has a harbor and an anchor, a home port from which one heads forth into the storms or to outlast the calms and to which one returns for replenishment.

Moored spirituality is responsible to textual traditions and the communities that attempt to live by them. Those who relate to it may come from any number of religious traditions. They spend their lives studying the Qur’an or the Upanishads or living in connection with communities that derive from Torah. In the present case, the texts and the communities are Christian, rooted in the Bible and, especially, in Jesus Christ. Foster is not ungenerous to others, but this is the place he knows and advocates, having no choice in the matter because he has been called there.

Richard Foster does not talk about moorings and place. His metaphor is “stream,” with Jesus Christ as the source. Some French writers have coined a wonderful word for what this is about: ressourcement. That means resuming to the source, the headwaters, dipping deeply, and coming forth refreshed. To do this in the present case Foster asks us in each chapter to visit a number of classic Christian people who can serve as paradigms and then to visit some people in the Scriptures. And in each chapter there is also someone from our time, to assure that we understand that the source still pours forth streams in which we can bathe or from which we can drink.

Foster cannot not be the teacher. I note how often he needs “first,” “second,” and “third” sequences (and many longer than that) in order to help us find our ways into the disciplines of faith and to find ways to make them memorable. While those numbers are cold and abstract, warmth and clarity come when he talks about people in the tradition, the stream.

And how varied are these people. I think that some of the unmoored spiritual people—it’s time to pay them a compliment now—who are often more adventurous and imaginative than many stolid Christians, reject the faith because it is bland and boring. Its saints and heroes seem outclassed in a head-to-head encounter with the guru of the week, the shaman of the season, the channeler of the half-decade.

Bland? Boring? Right off Foster says or shows “Not so” as he takes us out to the desert with crazy Antonius and shows that that monk was not all crazy. Foster is ecumenical; his streams flow together. Here is William Seymour, a black Pentecostal founder, who gets rejected even by white Pentecostal pioneers. Here is Phoebe Palmer, not a “mainstream” character in the kind of church history I started out to teach four decades ago. Yet here she is, up there with high-class literary figures, martyrs, and founders.

Asking us to learn from such an assortment of characters who might often have wondered how Foster gets to see their streams of influence flowing together takes some nerve on his part. No one is likely to find all the paradigms congenial. But it is likely that readers will end up learning more from the surprising and abrasive misfits than from the congenial people who fit so smoothly into our preconceived ways.

Foster belongs to a small but I think and hope a growing company—I see Kathleen Norris and Nancy Mairs in it and before them, Henri Nouwen and more—a company of those ask us to be more patient than the readers of the “spirituality” books at the megastores are. He wants us not just to pick and choose but to be judged by what we read, always with the possibility in mind that we will change and be changed. When some of those who have rejected Christian community start turning away from the “spiritual” people because now they have come to look bland and boring, when they start looking for streams of living water, I think they will find Foster and, behind his stories and lessons, their source both congenial and durable. Having a mooring at that source does not mean getting to stay at home while the winds would blow into the sails. It means
FOREWORD

Knowing where the lighthouses and beacons are, where the harbor is into which to return for momentary retreat before the next sailing forth into the turmoil of the world.

Knowing such a mooring and finding the streams are acts that, according to his book title, we should "celebrate." Whoever reads these pages and walks in their way is likely to do precisely that. I invite you to accept the mentoring of a reliable, seasoned guide in Richard Foster and, several paradigms back behind him and his other subjects, the figure of Jesus Christ.

Martin Marty

Introduction

Today a mighty river of the Spirit is bursting forth from the hearts of women and men, boys and girls. It is a deep river of divine intimacy, a powerful river of holy living, a dancing river of jubilation in the Spirit, and a broad river of unconditional love for all peoples. As Jesus says, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38).

The astonishing new reality in this mighty flow of the Spirit is how sovereignly God is bringing together streams of life that have been isolated from one another for a very long time. This isolation is completely understandable from a historical perspective. Over the centuries some precious teaching or vital experience is neglected until, at the appropriate moment, a person or movement arises to correct the omission. Numbers of people come under the renewed teaching, but soon vested interests and a host of other factors come into play, producing resistance to the renewal, and the new movement is denounced. In time it forms its own structures and community life, often in isolation from other Christian communities.

This phenomenon has been repeated many times through the centuries. The result is that various streams of life—good streams, important streams—have been cut off from the rest of the Christian community, depriving us all of a balanced vision of life and faith.

But today our sovereign God is drawing many streams together that heretofore have been separated from one another. It is a little like the Mississippi River, which gains strength and volume as the Ohio and the Missouri and many other rivers flow into it. So in our day God is bringing together a mighty "Mississippi of the Spirit."
In this book I have tried to name these great Traditions—streams of spiritual life if you will—and to note significant figures in each. The naming is not perfect, I know, but I hope it will give you the major thrust of these Traditions: The Contemplative Tradition, or the prayer-filled life; The Holiness Tradition, or the virtuous life; The Charismatic Tradition, or the Spirit-empowered life; The Social Justice Tradition, or the compassionate life; The Evangelical Tradition, or the Word-centered life; The Incarnational Tradition, or the sacramental life.

In reality these different Traditions describe various dimensions of the spiritual life. We find their emphasis throughout the teaching of Scripture—from the Pentateuch to the prophets, from the wisdom literature to the Gospels, from the Epistles to the Apocalypse. And many are the lives that illustrate these themes: Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, Ruth, David, Hannah, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary, Peter, Elizabeth, Paul, Tabitha, Lydia, John . . . the list could go on and on.

But no one models these dimensions of the spiritual life more fully than Jesus Christ. If we want to see this river of life in its most complete form, it is to Jesus that we must turn.
Chapter 1

Imitatio:
The Divine Paradigm

Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith

—Hebrews 12:2

We must imitate Christ's life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do, then, to reflect on the life of Jesus Christ.

—Thomas à Kempis
As Jesus walked this earth, living and working among all kinds and classes of people, he gave us the divine paradigm for conjugating all the verbs of our living. Too often in our concern to make doctrinal points we rush to expound upon Jesus’ death, and in so doing we neglect Jesus’ life. This is a great loss. Attention to Jesus in his living gives us important clues for our living.

Jesus lived in this broken, painful world, learning obedience through the things that he suffered, tempted in all the ways we are, and yet remaining without sin (Heb. 4:15). We are, to be sure, reconciled to God by Jesus’ death, but even more, we are “saved” by his life (Rom. 5:10)—saved in the sense of entering into his eternal kind of life, not just in some distant heaven but right now in the midst of our broken and sorrowful world. When we carefully consider how Jesus lived while among us in the flesh, we learn how we are to live—truly live—empowered by him who is with us always even to the end of the age. We then begin an intentional imitatio Christi, imitation of Christ, not in some shabby or literal fashion but by catching the spirit and power in which he lived and by learning to walk “in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21).

In this sense we can truly speak of the primacy of the Gospels, for in them we see Jesus living and moving among human beings, displaying perfect unity with the will of the Father. And we are taught to do the same, taking on the nature of Christlikeness—sharing Jesus’ vision, love, hope, feelings, and habits.

One of the best things we can do for one another, then, is to encourage regular immersion in the Gospel narratives, helping each other understand Jesus’ perceptions into life and his counsels for growth and then making constant application to our daily experience. The dimensions of this task are infinite, of course. However, for the sake of our concern here we want to consider how Jesus in his living provides us a clear paradigm for our living, especially as Jesus’ living relates to the several streams of devotion that frame the structure of this book.
PRAYER AND INTIMACY

Let's consider the Contemplative Stream, the prayer-filled life. Nothing is more striking in Jesus' life than his intimacy with the Father. "The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise" (John 5:19). "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge" (John 5:30). "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14:10).

Like a recurring pattern in a quilt, so prayer threads its way through Jesus' life. As Jesus was baptized by John, he was "praying" (Luke 3:21). In preparation for the choosing of the Twelve he went up the mountain alone and "spent the night in prayer" (Luke 6:12). After an exhausting evening of healing "many who were sick" and casting out "many demons," Jesus got up early in the morning "while it was still very dark... and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed" (Mark 1:35). Jesus was "praying alone" when he was prompted to ask his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" (Luke 9:18-20). When Jesus took Peter, James, and John "up on the mountain to pray," it led to the great transfiguration experience, and Luke notes that the appearance of Jesus' face was changed "while he was praying" (Luke 9:28-29). After the disciples had failed to heal a sick child, Jesus took care of the matter for them, explaining their failure in these words: "This kind can come out only through prayer" (Mark 9:29). Jesus' fiercest anger came when he saw how people had turned the temple, which he said was to be a house of prayer, into a den of robbers (Matt. 21:13). It was after Jesus finished "praying in a certain place" that the disciples asked him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1).

And teach them he did. Not only the now famous Lord's Prayer, which is found here, but teaching layered upon teaching. Jesus taught them to come to God in the most intimate of ways, saying, "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:36). He gave parables about the "need to pray always and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1). He taught his disciples to pray "in secret," to "pray for those who persecute you," when praying to "forgive, if you have anything against anyone," to "believe that what you say will come to pass," to petition "the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest," and much more (Matt. 6:6, 5:44; Mark 11:25, 23; Matt. 9:38).

And the teachings are matched by continual practice, not only of prayer itself but of intense times of solitude. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days (Matt. 4:1). He "withdrew... to a deserted place by himself" after learning of the beheading of his dear friend and cousin, John the Baptist (Matt. 14:13). Following the incredible experience of feeding the five thousand, Jesus immediately "went up the mountain by himself to pray" (Matt. 14:23). When the disciples were exhausted from the demands of ministry, Jesus told them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). After Jesus' healing of a leper Luke seems to be describing more of a habitual practice than a single incident when he notes that Jesus "would withdraw to deserted places and pray" (Luke 5:16).

Without question, the most intense and intimate of recorded prayers is Jesus' high priestly prayer in the Upper Room, where he poured out his heart to the Father on behalf of his disciples and "also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word" (John 17:20). And of course any discussion of Jesus' prayer life and intimacy with the Father must culminate in the holy work of Gethsemane, where Jesus' sweat became like great drops of blood and his anguished words, "Let this cup pass," reached completion with, "Not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Jesus, who retreated often into the rugged wilderness, who lived and worked praying, who heard and did only what the Father said and did, shows forth the Contemplative Tradition in its fullness and utter beauty.

If you are anything like me, even this cursory look at Jesus' love and intimacy with the Father stirs within you longings for a deeper, richer, fuller experience of the divine milieu. No doubt you too ache for a steadfast faith, a boundless hope, an undying love. Jesus points the way.
PURITY OF HEART

Consider with me the Holiness Stream, the virtuous life. It is simply a marvel to watch Jesus move among children and women and men—always timely, always appropriate, always capable. How did this come to be?

We cannot understand the holiness and ingrained virtue in Jesus without carefully examining those forty days of temptation in the wilderness. In that single event we see a lifetime of practiced virtue coming to the fore. Throughout those forty days Jesus fasted from food so that he could all the more fully enter the divine feast. Then, when his spiritual resources were at their maximum, God allowed the Evil One to come to him with three great temptations—temptations that Jesus undoubtedly had dealt with more than once in the carpentry shop and that he would face again throughout his ministry as a rabbi. Yet these were not just personal temptations; they were temptations for Jesus to access for his own use the three most prominent social institutions of the day—economic, religious, political.

The economic temptation was for Jesus to turn stones into bread (Matt. 4:1-4). This was more than a taunt to ease private hunger pangs; it was a temptation to become a glorious miracle baker and provide “wonder bread” for the masses. But Jesus knew how short-lived all such solutions are and rejected the live-by-bread-alone option: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).

The religious temptation was for Jesus to leap from the pinnacle of the temple and, by having angels catch him in mid-flight, receive God’s stamp of approval on his ministry. Divine certification inside the sacred boundaries of temple territory would surely have guaranteed the fervent support of the priestly hierarchy. But Jesus saw the temptation for what it was, and he directly confronted institutionalized religion—not only here in the wilderness but throughout his ministry, wherever and whenever it became idolatrous or oppressed the faithful. He knew that in his person, “something greater than the temple is here” (Matt. 12:6).

The political temptation was the promise of “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” in exchange for Jesus’ own soul (Matt. 4:8-10). This mountain temptation represented the possibility of worldwide political power—not only coercive force, but also the glory and acclaim of sitting on the world’s highest pinnacle of influence and status. It was a temptation that fit perfectly the messianic hopes of the day for a Savior who would cast off the oppressive Roman occupation. But Jesus knew that domination and force were not God’s ways. He rejected coercive structures because he intended to demonstrate a new kind of power, a new way of ruling. Suffering, dying—these were Jesus’ messianic forms of power.

In those forty days in the wilderness Jesus rejected the popular Jewish hope for a Messiah who would feed the poor, bask in miraculous, heavenly approval, and shake off oppressive nations. He undercut the leverage of the three great social institutions of his day (and of ours)—exploitative economics, manipulative religion, and coercive politics. What we see in those forty crucial days is someone who understood with clarity the way of God and who had the internal resources to live in that way, instinctively and without reservation. Jesus’ actions were a living embodiment of the Holiness Stream.

But action, by itself, is not enough. It needs to be accompanied by adequate teaching on the virtuous life to lead ordinary people into genuine progress in holiness. Jesus clearly understood this—hence his abundant instructions on life as it is meant to be lived.

The heart of this teaching is the Sermon on the Mount, and the heart of the Sermon on the Mount is the law of love—the “royal law,” as James calls it. Nothing more fully or more beautifully describes the life of holiness. Love is so compact a word that it needs unpacking, of course, and this is what Jesus does in his famous sermon. The life of virtue reflected in that teaching is governed by the maturity of love rather than the immaturity of binding legalism. It is a teaching that takes us beyond the “righteousness . . . of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matt. 5:20).

Now, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees consisted primarily in externals that often involved manipulative control of other
people. Instead of this sort of righteousness, Jesus points to an inner life with God that transforms the heart and builds deeply ingrained habits of virtue. If we develop those habits, we will have the interior spiritual and moral resources with which to respond righteously when we are faced with temptations of any and every sort, as Jesus was in the wilderness.

If you seek holiness of life, I encourage you to make a good friend of the Sermon on the Mount. It is an expanded commentary on the royal law of love. And Jesus’ life is an expanded commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. I find it endlessly moving to watch how Jesus walked among people, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, bringing good news to the oppressed. Always appropriate. Always able. Always giving the touch that was needed. Always speaking the word that was needed. It is a wonder and a marvel.

We see Jesus consistently doing what needs to be done when it needs to be done. We see in him such deeply ingrained “holy habits” that he is always “responsive,” always able to respond appropriately. This is purity of heart. This is the virtuous life. To see the vision of the Holiness Tradition in all its robust dynamic, we need look no further.

This brief look at the holiness of Jesus calls out to us. It calls us to a more consistent life, a more obedient life, a more fruitful life. Jesus, who lived fully every teaching of the Sermon on the Mount long before he taught it, shows us the way.

**Life in the Spirit**

Let’s ponder together the Charismatic Stream, the Spirit-empowered life. Nothing is more satisfying to observe than how Jesus lived and moved in the power of the Spirit. As Jesus arose out of the baptismal waters, “the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:22). Directly on the heels of this dramatic event, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness” (Luke 4:1). Then, after the temptation encounters, Jesus returned to Galilee “filled with the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14). Such is the refrain that echoes down through his entire ministry: “full of the Holy Spirit . . . led by the Spirit . . . “filled with the power of the Spirit.”

It is a wonder to watch Jesus moving among people, exercising spiritual charisms with ease and aplomb. The charism of wisdom was absolutely legendary in Jesus. People listening to his teachings were utterly dumbfounded, “for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). In fact astonishment was the standard response to his teachings. The reason for this response is that when Jesus taught he did far more than what we think of as teaching. He spoke life into each heart and soul. Wisdom as a charism of the Holy Spirit is far more than knowledge or information, more even than truth; it is truth applied to the heart and the mind in such a living way that the person is transformed.

The charism of discernment is another of the gifts Jesus used frequently. Any number of times he refused to entrust himself to particular people because, as John puts it, “he himself knew what was in everyone” (John 2:25). Do you recall that when the paralytic came to Jesus for healing, Jesus first forgave his sins? This threw the scribes into a tailspin, “questioning in their hearts” about Jesus’ authority to do something only God could do. Their hearts, however, were an open book to Jesus: “At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves” (Mark 2:1–8). This is the charism of discernment at work, and evidence of a Spirit-empowered life.

We must not leave out the charism of miracles. Consider the miraculous catch of fish and the equally miraculous multiplying of fishes and loaves. Consider also the turning of water into wine to bless a wedding couple and the curing of the fig tree to teach a lesson in

“A charism” is a divinely inspired spiritual gift that God bestows upon individuals for the good of the community of faith and the advancement of the kingdom of God upon the earth.
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

The Servant of the Lord is despised and rejected; a man of sorrows, and familiar to suffering, and one who bears our infirmities and carries our sicknesses.

Let us look at Jesus and the suffering that Jesus endured, the compassion, justice and suffering.

Jesus, the Servant of the Lord, shows us the way of peace and power. Jesus shows us the way of living water. He is the Living Water.

This is the time to go out and into the highways and hedges, to those who have not heard the Good News of the Gospel. Let us bring the good news to all nations. Let us be the hands and feet of Jesus.

John 7:37-39. The Father has given Me power over all nations.

One of the benefits of being a Christian is that we have the Holy Spirit with us always. When we are in trouble, the Holy Spirit is with us to guide us and protect us.

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He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18–19).

These words, which Jesus took from Isaiah, are rooted in the
prophetic vision of the Hebrew Year of Jubilee. In his message and
person Jesus was, in effect, announcing a perpetual Jubilee in the
Spirit. The social ramifications of this were profound indeed: the
land was to be healed, debts were to be forgiven, those in bondage
were to be set free, capital was to be redistributed. With these words
Jesus delivered a war cry for social revolution. No wonder his friends
and neighbors—who understood perfectly well what he was saying—
were “filled with rage” and tried to “hurl him off the cliff” (Luke
4:28–30).

Jesus’ shorthand for this perpetual Jubilee life is the cryptic mes-
 sage, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2, RSV).
And Jesus fully intends that this “kingdom of heaven” will constantly
confront and pull down the kingdoms of this world. His is an alterna-
tive social vision—a vision of an all-inclusive people, gathered in the
power of God, filled with the love of God, and empowered to do the
works of God. It is a vision of Jubilee sharing, Jubilee caring, and
Jubilee compassion for all who are crushed and broken by social and
economic structures.

Jesus underscores the incompatibility of his Jubilee life with the
institutional structures of this world when he says, “No one puts new
wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins
and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine
must be put into fresh wineskins” (Luke 5:37–38). Jubilee life
demands Jubilee structures.

In the Beatitudes we see the Jubilee inversion in which Jesus takes
all those kinds and classes of people that in the natural order of
things are thought to be unblessed and unblessable and shows that in
the forgiving, receiving, accepting life of God’s kingdom they too are
blessed. He tells us to “bless those who curse you,” “love your ene-
mies,” “lend expecting nothing in return,” “do not judge,” “do not
condemn,” “forgive,” “give” (Luke 6:27–38). What kind of a vision is
this? What kind of a life? An impossible ideal, a utopian dream?

Perhaps. And yet this is exactly how Jesus himself lived. Notice his
compassion in cleansing the leper and healing the paralytic, people
who were outcasts of his day (Luke 5:12–26). Look at that relentless
tenderness in healing a centurion’s slave and in raising a widow’s only
son from the dead. Note too the response of the people—“A great
prophet has risen among us!”—which aligns Jesus’ deeds here with
the ancient prophetic tradition of social righteousness (Luke 7:1–17).

When John the Baptizer sends two of his followers to find out
from Jesus whether he embodies the messianic expectation, Jesus
responds, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind
receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf
hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.
And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Luke 7:22–23).

Yes, says Jesus, the messianic kingdom of perpetual Jubilee is indeed
coming, but in a way that no one would have guessed. People, espe-
cially the Zealots, had been looking for military conquest. But Jesus
flatly rejects the Zealot option and shows instead another kingdom
and another power—the kingdom of love and the power of the divine
community.

Notice how Zacchaeus embraces this Jubilee life, accepting its
call to generosity (Luke 19:1–10). Notice too the Jubilee attitude of
the widow who puts her two copper coins in the offering, giving “out

Look at the Jubilee events in the Upper Room: they are rich in
social righteousness. Jesus begins by showing the Jubilee inversion of
greatness with a towel and a basin. Next he helps his disciples see
that the primary social structure God uses to change the power struc-
tures of this world is the divine community. Finally, he offers up the
uniting Jubilee prayer for the divine community: “that they may all
be one” (John 17:21).
We dare not omit the struggle in the Garden. It too helps us understand social justice. Remember, Jesus could have called down ten thousand angels to obliterate the political structures of his day. The Zealots were hoping he would. But in the Garden Jesus gives his final rejection of the Zealot option and turns his face toward the cross. And in the cross we see the Jubilee way, the way of conquest by suffering.

The Jubilee vision of Jesus culminates in the Apocalypse, the last book of our Bible, where justice and righteousness prevail, where the divine community lives in a new heaven and a new earth, and where God “will wipe every tear from their eyes” and “mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev. 21:4). This is Jesus’ social vision of perpetual Jubilee. It embodies all we mean and desire when we speak of the Social Justice Tradition.

Jesus’ living out of justice and shalom challenges our vested interests. It rebukes our rugged individualism and selfish hoarding. And it invites us to be the kind of people in whom justice and compassion flow freely. Jesus, who lived in the virtue and power of that Jubilee life that pulls down the kingdoms of this world, points the way.

**Proclaiming the Evangel**

Let's consider the Evangelical Stream, the Word-centered life. Jesus, the Christ, came proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God and was in his very person the embodiment of the good news of the kingdom of God. Jesus was, and is, the living Word of God enfolded among us, standing in his person as the very good news he proclaimed.

And what is this good news? It is, very simply, that people—all people—can enter into a living and abundant life with God in his kingdom of love now, and that this reality will continue on, and indeed intensify, after death. How is this possible? It is not that God’s kingdom of love did not exist before Jesus, or that it had been postponed somehow. No. But before the incarnation its availability had, in the nature of things, been restricted and mediated through a special people and a special religious class. In Jesus’ person all that changed. In Jesus the doors were thrown wide open: “Whosoever will may come.” The kingdom of God’s love has been made available to all. Whenever, wherever, whoever. In Jesus’ person.

Jesus himself was absolutely clear about these matters: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” he declared. “I am the bread of life.” “I am the light of the world.” “Before Abraham was, I am.” “I am the good shepherd.” “I am the gate for the sheep.” “I am the resurrection and the life.” “I am the true vine” (John 14:6, 6:35, 8:12, 8:58, 10:11, 10:7, 11:25, 15:1). The good news is that in Jesus himself the way has been opened for you and for me to come freely into God’s great kingdom of love.

But how? Very simply. By grace through faith we receive God’s love for us and enroll as Jesus’ disciples, or students, or apprentices. That means we follow him in all things, learning from him, receiving his strength, and living as he would live if he were in our place. By grace through faith.

Now, Jesus went about proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and its availability to all. He also demonstrated the reality of its presence. This dual action of proclamation and demonstration is found throughout the Gospels. “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23). There it is: the proclamation of the presence of the kingdom and the demonstration of its life, in this case by the ministry of healing. He gave the same commission to the Twelve: “He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal,” which is exactly what they did. “They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere” (Luke 9:1–6). Again, proclamation and demonstration. He gave exactly the same mission to the larger group of seventy: “Cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Luke 10:9). Proclamation and demonstration. In this dual action we catch a glimpse of how the Evangelical Tradition is integrated with the Charismatic Tradition. (Of course, in Jesus all the Traditions function as one.)
It is a wonder to watch how people responded to Jesus’ wonderful good news about God’s kingdom of love and its accessibility. They came pouring in. In Matthew’s Gospel we read that “from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force” (11:12). As we compare this with its parallel text in Luke, we see that Matthew is using the language of “violence” to describe the rush of people pressing into God’s kingdom of love. Jesus had brought people such good, great news that they were all but knocking down the doors to get in! They had found the treasure in the field and were willing to sell everything they had to get it. They had seen the pearl of great price and nothing would stop them from having it. They were “violent” men and women — violent in the sense that they would not allow anything to keep them from coming into this abundant life in God’s kingdom of love.

Zacchaeus came rushing in, as we noted above. When the word of the gospel penetrated his heart, it opened up a great river of generosity that compelled him to give away half of his goods to the poor and to repay four times over anyone he had defrauded. Jesus commented on his action, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:1–9).

Mary Magdalene came rushing in. When Jesus freed her of seven demons, her life was forever changed and gratitude flowed out of every pore in her body. At great personal risk she gathered with the little band at the foot of the cross, watching and waiting and praying. Then, after the burial stone was put in place, enrobing Jesus, she stayed there with “the other Mary,” sorrowing. But that sorrow turned to joy when, on the third day, Easter morning, Mary was the first witness to the resurrection, and the first to be addressed by the risen Christ, who called her by name, “Mary!” (John 20:16).

Nicodemus came rushing in. True, at first he came under cover of darkness, but even this act threatened his position and standing among the leaders. And later, when the religious authorities were about to seize Jesus, Nicodemus posed just the right question to stop them in their tracks: “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” — that phrase “does it?” making it clear to all that by now Nicodemus “was one of them” (John 7:45–52). Then, following the crucifixion, Nicodemus provided the spices for Jesus’ burial. Now frankly, Nicodemus had nothing to gain by this act and much to lose. But the touch of Jesus upon his life had been so transforming that he risked all in this simple act of courtesy.

Oh, there were so many others. The woman at the well in Samaria came rushing in. Little children came rushing in. The Syrophoenician woman came rushing in. The thief on the cross came rushing in. The poor came rushing in. Such was the response of so many.

But not everyone. The rich young ruler held back. He had great wealth, and (more important) his great wealth had him. Jesus saw into his heart and called him to total divestiture so that discipleship might be possible. But the young ruler could not bring himself to carry out this radical act and went away sad.

The leader of one of the synagogues held back. When Jesus went to the synagogue to teach one sabbath, a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years was among the crowd. Jesus, overcome with compassion for her, called her over to him and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment” (Luke 13:12). And as he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight. Well, you can imagine the utter joy in this woman. You would think, when she began praising God, that everyone else would praise God with her. But not this leader of the synagogue. No, he became “indignant,” says Scripture (Luke 13:14). And why? Here was a woman who had just been freed from an eighteen-year affliction. Why was this leader unable to join in her joy? Well, because Jesus had done this good work on the sabbath. The rigid religious observances of this leader kept him from entering into God’s great kingdom of love.

Judas held back. He had charge of the money for the apostolic band, and that money had eaten a hole in his heart. In addition, he was a Zealot, and he had hoped to force Jesus’ hand to join the Zealot cause. If Jesus were to be confronted by violent force, surely
he would respond with supernatural violent force, or so Judas thought. So he betrayed his Master.

Yes, some turned back. Jesus welcomed them to the great banquet of God’s love, and they declined the offer. Their excuses for refusing the invitation of love were lame indeed—new land, new oxen, new bride. So Jesus turned from them and went out into the streets and lanes, the highways and byways, and welcomed in the outcasts—“the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame”—and they simply flooded in (Luke 14:15-24).

This, then, is the evangel message of Jesus. And he calls all who follow him to share his invitation with others. “Go,” he says, “and make disciples of all nations.” Notice that he calls us not to make converts but to make disciples. And part of the task of making disciples is “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:18-20). This is our call and our commission. And it is the great heritage of the Evangelical Tradition.

I am sure that you, like me, desire to bring the good news of God’s kingdom of love to your neighbors and friends and welcome them to enter in. If so, then we are to follow Jesus. He shows us the way.

THE SACRAMENT OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

Let’s think together about the Incarnational Stream, the sacramental life. Incarnation is right at the heart of the Jesus story, of course. The wonder and the glory and the majesty of Christmas is that at one pinpoint in history the great God of the universe stooped to take on human form. God came to us as a baby in swaddling clothes in a manger in an obscure village in a backwater of civilization. Incarnation!

One of the earliest attempts to express the enormity of this divine invasion declares to us that Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6-8)

Nothing can ever approach this perfect and unrepeatable reality of incarnation. Jesus, the Christ, is incarnation itself. We bow under the mystery of it.

But as wonderful as the doctrine of divine incarnation is, it cannot provide us with a paradigm for our living. It is an unrepeatable reality in holy history. Therefore, Jesus in his divinity cannot give us the paradigm we need. Jesus in his humanity can, however.

It is easy for us to overlook this human paradigm because the substance of it is centered in Jesus’ hidden years. We are given very little information about those growing-up years, but what we are given is highly suggestive. Not suggestive in the fanciful “sandbox miracles” kind of way that some have used to fill in those hidden years. No, suggestive in a much more ordinary way. But precisely because it is ordinary, it is all the more helpful to us. Following the birth events we are told quite straightforwardly that “the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40). A parallel statement is given later, following Jesus’ interaction with the leading teachers in the temple when he was twelve: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52). Most instructive of all is the simple comment of Luke after Joseph and Mary had found Jesus in the temple: “Then [Jesus] went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them” (Luke 2:51).

A whole world is carried in that unadorned observation that Jesus was “obedient to them.” Jesus grew up under the tutelage of his parents, Joseph and Mary. And while Joseph is not heard from again, we can be confident that Jesus learned the carpentry trade from him and
worked in that trade until he began his public rabbinic ministry at roughly the age of thirty.

We would do well to ponder those years Jesus spent as a carpenter, working in what we today would call a blue-collar job. Where do you imagine Jesus learned to walk in perfect harmony with his heavenly Father? Where do you suppose he learned to “give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you” (Matt. 5:42)? Where do you imagine he came to experience such a life of single-minded devotion to God that he knew that “no one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24)? Where, I ask you, did he learn such a deep, intimate life of prayer that he could confidently teach us, “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matt. 7:7)? Where do you think he learned to live out the words, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12)? Where did he learn all these things and so much more? I will tell you where. He learned them in his carpentry work and at home with his parents and his brothers and sisters. Jesus did not all of a sudden one day start spouting nice sayings about God. No, when he began his public ministry, he was speaking out of a life that had been tested and tried. He had proven the teachings to be true over and over again as he sawed wood and assembled chairs and built cabinets.

It is critical that we understand the significance of this. Today we tend to confine Jesus and his work to stained glass and high altars and silent retreats, or perhaps to intercessory prayer work and revival meetings. And clearly there was a specifically religious or liturgical dimension to Jesus’ incarnational living. He went to synagogue “as was his custom” (Luke 4:16). As a faithful Jew he recited the Shema twice a day: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD one” (Deut. 6:4, NIV). In addition, he observed the three hours of prayer that were part and parcel of Jewish practice: morning, afternoon, and evening.

But as good and essential as these things were (and are), we must recognize that the majority of Jesus’ life—and of ours—is found in our families and homes, in our work and play, among our neighbors and in our everyday surroundings. This tangible world is the place we most fully express the meaning of incarnational living. This is where we experience the outflow of love, joy, peace, and all the fruit of the Spirit. Here and nowhere else. It was true for Jesus; it is true for us. This is the Incarnational Tradition.

This way of sacramental living calls out to us. It calls us to make all our waking and sleeping, all our working and playing, all our living and loving flow out from the divine wellspring. It can; Jesus points the way.

**IMITATIO**

When Jesus walked across the pages of human history, people—astonished by what he did and what he said—exclaimed, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” (John 7:46). And it is appropriate to add, “Never has anyone lived like this!” Jesus captivates our imaginations and wins our hearts because he was, and is, the very Son of God with the power and the life to transform and empower our lives.

During his years in the flesh Jesus called out his disciples, saying, “Follow me.” That call had specific and immediate content, and it had specific and immediate results: those disciples left their nets and other business activities and literally followed Jesus. They traveled with him. They listened to what he taught. They watched what he did. And they tried to do things the way Jesus himself did them. They were his students, his apprentices in the life of the Spirit.

Jesus, alive and among his people today, calls to us exactly as he did those disciples so long ago, saying, “Follow me.” Now, we do not follow Jesus in precisely the same way those early disciples did. We cannot walk the dusty roads of Galilee with him. No, we follow him in the Spirit, but the basic principle and pattern is the same. This is why the study of the Gospel records is such a help to us. In their pages we see how Jesus lived and what he did while he was enfleshed as we are. We see, for example, that he trained himself in prayer, soli-
tude, worship, and like disciplines. And we are to imitate him in this, as in all central aspects of his living.

But it is right here that we face a problem—for some an insurmountable problem. How can we imitate Jesus’ pattern for living when we do not live in first-century, rural Palestine? We repair automobiles or work at computer terminals or teach school or raise children, and we have responsibilities and demands that simply were unheard of two thousand years ago. How can we imitate the life of Christ in our day and age?

It is precisely at this point that I have encouraging news. We are not the only ones from a different culture and age who have wanted to imitate the life of Christ. Others—myriads and myriads of them—have sought to imitate the way of Christ and to translate that way into their own settings and surroundings. We are helped immensely by looking at their efforts and learning their stories. Furthermore, it is a genuine act of humility to realize that we can learn from others who have gone before us. To be sure, they made mistakes, but even so they have much to teach us. In the midst of all their stumbling and fumbling they sought to imitate the way of Christ and to grow in Christlikeness. Their stories have been—and remain—a rich source of joy, inspiration, and instruction. It is to some of those stories that we now turn.