



# Holy Ground

A Quarterly Reflection on the Contemplative Life

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## Living in the Presence

*I just can't get over it. He calls the Holy One of Israel, "Abba," "Daddy" He calls me Thaddaeus. I can't figure out how he got to be on such terms with the Lord God. He shows God more clearly to me than the scriptures and all the prayers and learned discourses by the rabbis ever could.*

*When he is here, I see holiness. I tell you something different goes on between him and the Lord God. Sometimes I get to thinking that if the light was right, I might get a glimpse of God right beside him. They is that close, that familiar.*

*And folks know it, especially the sick, the desperate ones, the sinners, and the little uns. They is all clamoring to look in his eyes and touch his hands and his clothes. As though just being next to him, some of the Lord God might rub off on them. They is real buddies all right, close.*

*So pretty soon I found myself wanting some of that friendliness with God for myself. It's like a yearning, a hankering for something somehow familiar but you*

*just can't name it. So you walk around listless and empty-like, until you get up next to Jesus and find out that you're full.*

*Betrayal? It will be the dirtiest act a man ever did. But I'm not worried for him. When you're that thick with God, how's a betrayal by one of us gonna hurt you?*

Thaddaeus' soliloquy from the drama, *Is It I Lord?*,  
Loretta F Ross

Thaddaeus is struck by the unique relationship of Jesus with God, his Abba. The disciple recognizes his own desire for such a relationship and discovers within himself an inner satisfaction and wholeness with Jesus.

For nearly 40 years I have listened to people as they, like Thaddaeus, tell me their stories of encounter with and awareness of God. I have found as the poet Rilke writes, "rumors of God wander in our dark blood as if along dark alleys," and that though "there is much clamoring in our blood, we know we are made of yearning." What is most meaningful and transforming for people are not their beliefs or the creeds they

recite, but rather felt experiences or encounters with Holiness. It is through our hunger for connection with love, that God draws us into relationship with the sublime mystery, beauty, and the endless love of I Am.

We cannot conjure up a God experience on our own. More likely we stumble upon it, or witness it as Thaddeus did. We can pay attention to what attracts us, what brings out the best in us, what softens, delights, and fills our hearts with joy. We can create an inner readiness and intentionality to increase our awareness of Christ in our midst and in our world.

Thaddeus says, relationship with God is “something somehow familiar, but you just can’t name it.” God becomes known to us in the coming together of our hearts and the heart of Christ Jesus. God who is love is essentially revealed in relationships between us and everything else God has created, as well as with the Creator.

There is a profound difference between our words, our concepts, and our theologies about God and our experience of God. For some people our language about God and our denominational theological systems and beliefs create barriers to their experience and encounter with the Holy One.

Most churches are faithfully seeking the realm of God. They do great

mission work. They study the Bible. They provide fellowship. They are good people. Many secular organizations engage in mission and social justice work, as well. What makes us different from the local food bank, coffee house study group, or Rotary Club?

I wonder if what matters in churches and faith communities is not so much what we do, as how we do what we do, and the kind of people we are becoming. Are we evolving as communities and individuals in the likeness of Christ? Are our encounters with each other and the world brimming over with tenderness, love, vitality, creativity, justice and generosity? Do we share with each other our experiences of the fullness of God in our lives? Do we radiate contagious friendliness with the Holy One?

For over 25% of the American population the answer is a resounding no. Since the early 1990s increasing numbers of Americans have been identifying as religiously unaffiliated. In 1991 only six percent of Americans identified with no religious affiliation. By the end of the 1990s 14% of the public claimed no religious affiliation. The rate of religious change accelerated further during the late 2000s and early 2010s, reaching 20% by 2012. Today one-quarter of Americans claim no formal religious identity, making this group the single largest “religious

group” in the US. (*Exodus – Why Americans Are Leaving Religion – and Why They Are Unlikely to Come Back*, © Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), 2027 Massachusetts Ave. NW, 3rd Floor, Washington D.C. 20036 [www.prri.org](http://www.prri.org), released on September 22, 2016)

Why are they leaving? Here are the biggest causes of disaffiliation:

The reasons Americans leave their childhood religion are varied, but a lack of belief in the teaching of religion was the most commonly cited reason for disaffiliation. Among the reasons Americans identified as important motivations in leaving their childhood religion are: they stopped believing in the religion’s teachings (60%), their family was never that religious when they were growing up (32%), and their experience of negative religious teachings about or treatment of gay and lesbian people (29%). (*Exodus – Why Americans Are Leaving Religion – and Why They Are Unlikely to Come Back*)

Did you get this? 60% of those who leave do not believe us. They do not believe what we teach. Let that settle in. It is not our hip band, or impressive organs, or stiff liturgies, or flashy programs, or techy screens and digital expertise that sends them away or keeps them, nor is it our coffee bar or lack of coffee bar, our nursery, or bad parking situation. For 60% of those who leave, we simply have no credibility. We are not convincing. Do they see hypocrisy, apathy, or a bland

secularized, plastic coating over our worship, programs, and relationships?

How did this happen? Why don’t people believe us? We live in a rich time of theological and Biblical search, change, expanding understanding, and spiritual growth in many faith arenas. Brian D. McLaren is among the modern prophets and thinkers, who are exploring the shape and evolution of Christianity. He distinguishes between our beliefs, our conceptual formulations, and doctrinal statements and what he calls the essence of our faith, which is something other than a list of opinions and propositions.

*The Great Spiritual Migration – How the World’s Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian*, p 22

The reason we live in a culture increasingly without faith is not because science has somehow disproved the unprovable, but because the white noise of secularism has removed the very stillness in which it might endure or be reborn.

Andrew Sullivan, “I Used to be a Human Being”, New York Magazine

Let’s consider what that essence of faith might be. My sheer drapes tremble as the harsh breath of the furnace rushes from the floor vent. I sigh deeply at the stack of books by my chair. I am weary of too much hot air, and teachy, preachy, spiritual books,

articles, and opinion pieces (my own included!). So many words and earnest expression overwhelm me like a great tower of Babel. I see my desire to stay “up to date,” to know and understand this wild world and its creatures. Like Eve and Adam, I am tempted to reach, “Ah, this will make me wise.” Yet I know that *in God alone my soul finds rest*. (Psalm 62) What heals and deeply satisfies me is not looking over my shoulder at some shiny distraction, but simply being present to my own life with a calm and quiet mind. For it is here in this moment, shimmering with its own sufficiency, alive with fecund possibility, that I encounter and engage with that friendliness and closeness with Christ. No image, song, poetry, art, theological discourse, or doctrine can ever begin to improve on such fullness, goodness, and love offered to us moment by moment, when we are awake and aware of the presence of the Living God.

Brian McLaren concludes that what churches need to do is become “schools or studios of love.” He says that we should be specializing in teaching people how to love. “Who develops, teaches, and refines a transformative curriculum of love? Who trains teachers and leaders who exemplify and teach the love that the world so needs? If our churches don’t do these things, who will?” pp 54-55.

I smiled reading these words. There is already a curriculum for becoming

more loving and compassionate in many schools, which are teaching spiritual formation and spiritual direction across the world. And people are flocking to them. Slowly some of this material is making its way into some churches, but usually not in any comprehensive way. Though, I read this week about a church who hired an executive pastor, whose job description includes: *The architecting of Adult Spiritual Formation processes*. This is The River Church Community in San Jose, if you are interested.

Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, Richard Rohr, and many others are articulating the need for a comprehensive school for the soul and have set out various ways to bring deeper spiritual formation and more rigorous discipleship training to people.

Instead of a system that occupies itself with correct beliefs, McLaren suggests that we passionately commit ourselves to make love our highest aim and turn that commitment into reality through practice in a community of practice. McLaren is right on here. Practice, practice, practice – learning to love and develop the character of Christ takes lots of practice and support.

As a young person I often felt church left out the *how*. The pastor and Sunday School teachers told us what to do, that was pretty clear: love, follow the ten commandments, be humble, pray, serve others, etc. What gnawed at me

was the *how*. I felt envy and anger and there were people I didn't love at all and didn't want to. Sure I wanted to be transformed in Christ. That sounded cool. But nobody told me what that process would look like, how it would feel, and how I could cooperate or resist. I also had no idea how bad transformation could hurt and no reason to hope in the midst of the pain. This 16<sup>th</sup> century poet friar and spiritual director helped me find meaning in my pain and open myself to God's Spirit at work within me.

Our beliefs are abstracted from stories, narratives, and songs of corporate and individual encounter and engagement with the numinous Holy One. Initially passed through generations in oral histories, later written, pressed between pages, held in form, these provide the cognitive foundations of religious structures, ecclesiology, and doctrine. Before words, before language these beliefs were events, concrete, specific - battles, fear, sweat, tears, death, blood, hearts racing, bone breaking suffering, starry nights, raging seas, floods, smoke, fire, prayer, mud and olive trees - human encounters with God and the Love that will not let us go.

I know communion with God happens often in many churches. I meet people every day who have deep faith and love for God. Our problem may be that we do not talk openly with each other about our personal challenges and

experiences in relationship with Christ. In some cases we haven't learned how to increase our awareness of such experiences or even develop a language with which to describe our experience. We are shy and fear that we will be ridiculed or judged or told we are wrong. We are reluctant to hold each other accountable for a developing faith. And we have a very hard time shutting down our busy minds, calming our stressed out bodies, and managing our near constant anxiety to notice Christ's quiet strength within us and to be aware and attentive to the ever present, Love with Us, Emmanuel.

Contemplation is a kind of continual communion through all things by quite simply doing everything in the presence of the Holy Trinity.

- Elizabeth of the Trinity

Everything we do in worship and in our service to God ought to be consecrated to fostering the encounter or recognition of God personally and corporately. When that does not happen, people feel cheated, betrayed, bored, or frustrated. Perhaps they get caught up in their distractions and just leave. Maybe it becomes too much work to stay. Maybe they experience God more immediately and profoundly somewhere else. Or perhaps, God does not seem to appear to us, because nobody in the place really expects God to.

I attend church and work alongside churches like a hermit at the edge of a village. I have followed a call to abide in God and leave my door open with an extra chair or two ready for anyone who might like to drop by. And lo and behold, the people come, more than I have chairs for sometimes. We are more likely to discover God in those places where the Presence of God is consciously attended to and welcomed.

Of course we need theologies and statements of beliefs, doctrines and all the words and books. To experience God is also to long to share that experience with others. Relationship pours into more and more relationships, where love abounds. We all ought to be little Thaddaeuses telling our story of the compelling draw of God's love in our lives.

The more you are directly experiencing God's presence, the more that what you say and do will be an expression of God's presence. You will speak with an authenticity which communicates the communion you share with Christ to others. And Christ will draw others to him through you.

Every day we may witness some new horror. Some of us have become entrained to trauma, too full of anxiety to think or feel much except worry and fear. When the darkness threatens, I hear: Return! Return! Turn back to the Light.

The qualities of Christ-like love, wisdom, and strength of soul are within us. Our task, our responsibility, and our great privilege is to push away the clutter and debris, which obscure our awareness of how close we already are to Jesus – like “real buddies,” as Thaddaeus tells.

The prophet Isaiah warns, “Therefore, the Lord God, the holy one of Israel, says: In return and rest you will be saved; quietness and trust will be your strength— but you refused.”

*Loretta F. Ross*



*It is well to fly toward the light,  
even when there is some fluttering  
and bruising of wings against  
windowpanes.*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

*The church must step outside of herself. To go where? To the outskirts of existence.*

Pope Francis



*The deepest motive for mission is simply the desire to be with Jesus where he is, on the frontier between the reign of God and the usurped dominion of the devil.*

Lesslie Newbigin



*To pray and open one's awareness to the Presence of God is to stand on that stretch of barren frontier between the reign of God and the dominion of the devil. That frontier is where the church needs to be – but seems to shrink from in both spirit and body.*

Loretta F Ross

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*The river of the water of life...flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb...On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

Revelation 22: 2-3

*I cannot imagine how religious persons can live satisfied without the practice of the presence of God.*

*For my part I keep myself retired with Him in the depth of center of my soul as much as I can; and while I am so with Him I fear nothing; but the least turning from Him is insupportable.*

Brother Lawrence



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