

## St. Benedict

### [Luke 14:27–33](#)

Today we are celebrating our patron saint, St. Benedict. Just as a quick reminder, Benedict was born towards the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the son of a wealthy Italian family. He was sent to Rome to study, but found life in the city to be self-indulgent and immoral, so he retreated to the countryside and on the advice of a monk became a hermit, and lived in a cave for three years. At that point a local abbot died and the monks asked Benedict to take his place. He did so reluctantly but the experiment was a failure – the monks disliked him so much that they tried to poison him. However, this did not put him off the cloistered life as he went on to found twelve monasteries, but it may have spurred him to write his famous Rule, or Way of Life for the monastery. By the 9<sup>th</sup> century this had become the basic guide for western monastics and so Benedict has been called the father of western monasticism.

When we celebrated St Francis two weeks ago, I asked what St Francis would say if he were here today in a world facing climate catastrophe. Today I want to consider which of St Benedict's values he would be emphasizing in this situation.

Abbot Klassen of St John's University in Minnesota, a Roman Catholic Benedictine school, suggests three values from the Rule: humility, stability and frugality.

Benedict devoted a large part of his Rule to humility. Humility is a value which is important both in our spiritual lives and in our daily lives with one another. At its most basic, humility says that the entire world does not revolve around me. But neither am I a miserable worm with no right to be alive. Humility is the ultimate balancing act because it involves having a clear-sighted sense of who we are, our gifts and talents AND our limitations.

The limitations bit is not easy for us. We all have an inner megalomaniac which we developed when we were about two. That little tyrant can leap out and trip us up at the most unexpected times if we have not taken the time and done the inner work to harness his energy. The reality is, however much we may not want to believe it, is that we have limitations as individuals and we have limitations as a species. That's what the ancient story of the tower of Babel is about. However high a tower we build, however advanced our technology we are not God. Remember that passage we heard a month or two ago when God answers Job, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand." (Job 38:4) Despite the inner two-year-old, we are not all powerful, all knowing and omnipresent – the world does not rotate around us and we need God's help. In fact we need God's life because it is the breath of God that gives us being.

So humility is remembering and acknowledging our limitations and our need for God's grace. But it is more than that. Humility is summed up in the traditional Indian greeting, Namaste. Namaste can be roughly translated as "the god in me greets the god in you." Yes God is within us and we are part of God, but so is the person in the pew next to us, so is the person in the supermarket checkout line, so is the person panhandling on the corner. Fundamentally, we are no greater than one another. Gifts and abilities are not distributed evenly and neither is opportunity but the essential worth of each human

being is exactly the same in God's eyes. In fact, the Biblical narrative strongly suggests that God may prefer those who are less able in the eyes of this world. In our baptismal vows we all said that we would seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. This is encapsulated in Namaste – the Christ in me greets the Christ in you." Humility toward one another is living out that Namaste.

And that extends not just to other humans but to the environment in which we live. We sometimes behave as though the environment is something different from us, but we are an integral part of the environment in which we live, and like most creatures, we alter that environment by being there. Humans are the creatures who have most impact on their environment; beavers make dams and alter waterways, goats and sheep eat grass and shrubs and can denude an area quickly; but humans can alter pretty much everything and make the place uninhabitable for other species. And we have done that without realizing it. Humility means acknowledging that. Humility means seeing what we have done, individually and collectively and looking for ways to redress the balance.

By imagining that the planet was here for our use and had unlimited supplies of everything we not only needed but wanted, we have over-used her resources. Humility asks us to re-member that we are only part of an eco-sphere which is in delicate balance and to find ways to respect that balance and redress our excesses so that others, other people and other beings may live too. And this is in our own self-interest. We need other creatures. We depend upon bees and other pollinators, we depend upon the bacteria that live in our gut and the microbes that work in our soil. We humans are only beginning to understand how dependent we are on other creatures even as they are dying out.

The second quality that Abbot Klassen identifies is stability. Stability is the value of growing where you're planted. Benedict was concerned that monks should make a commitment to one monastery and stay there. Because it is only as you stay in a community that your corners get rubbed off in interactions with others. If you keep moving then you never have to confront your own shadow in your community relationships. As Benedict said about such people, "Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites."

And as you stay in the one place, you get to know it, you get to know it deeply. I have lived here in Los Osos for over 25 years. I know the place, I know the land, I know some of its creatures and some of its people. There's an American Indian saying, "Live so that the land will mourn when you die." The value of stability is that we come to know aspects of our eco-sphere intimately. You notice when the wind has turned and become a warm off-shore wind, you recognize when the seagulls come inland that there is rough water out in the ocean.

The Benedictine Rule says that all monks should work as well as pray and study. Work was manual labor either in the kitchen and care of the buildings or on the land. This broke down a social division that had arisen between those who worked the land and those that didn't. Most of us today do not work the land. But all of us have access to some small piece of soil, even if it is only a shared garden area. All of us can pay attention to the little piece of land, the little piece of soil that we have been given. As a congregation we have been given stewardship of this almost-five-acre parcel. Stability suggests that we stay here and learn about it and develop it in balance with the other beings who share this environment.

We need not leave it just up to the ground squirrels because they are no longer in balance – it is part of our calling to care for this land, to plant and to nurture new life.

When we practice stability then we can fall in love with the land on which we live and it inspires us to work for preservation and to work for greater balance. How tragic it will be when the sea rises and the estuary is filled with salt water and the great nursery of the wetlands is lost under the incoming tide. Our love for the estuary can be a motivator for us to work to reduce the carbon and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere so that the seas will rise less than we fear and some of the life we love here may be preserved.

The final quality is that of frugality. Benedict was clear that needs differ from person to person and some people will need more than others. He said that each one should be given what they need. But that's it. Frugality means knowing what is enough. In a way this is an extension of humility, because it is about seeing ourselves clearly.

There is enough but we have been encouraged to get more. In 1955, an American retailing analyst named Victor Lebow proclaimed, "Our enormously productive economy ...demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate."<sup>1</sup> We have responded well to that imperative. But it has been at the expense of the planet and at the expense of other creatures and at the expense of future generations.

We might think of frugality as an ethic of restraint – of holding back. So that we buy and keep what we need and we give away what we no longer need. The Abundance Shop is a wonderful way that we not only provide low cost clothing and household goods for those who need them but we enable neighbors to share with neighbors. An ethic of restraint asks us to consider the use we make of everything from food to energy to clothing. This is also connected to humility. Knowing what we need and what we can do without, what is necessary and what is excess.

I am always brought up short by the last sentence of the Gospel reading for today. "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." I think there may be a difference between give away all your possessions and give up all your possessions. When we give them up, we remember that all we have is given to us by God and that hoarding things we don't use or don't need is unnecessary and contrary to God's intention. Besides which, taking care of stuff takes time and energy we could be using to build the reign of God.

An ethic of restraint will go a long way to avoid the waste of food and the unnecessary use of vehicles. An ethic of restraint will lead us toward carpooling and help us to think about living simply and not using more than our share of the earth's resources.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.csbsju.edu/sju-sustainability/about-us/benedictine-stewardship/values/klassen>

So these three Benedictine values, humility, stability and frugality offer us a guide for living in a time of climate crisis. But underlying all of them is the love of God. Benedict intended his rule to create a “school for the Lord’s service.” That is what it is all about. Underneath everything we are held by the grace and love of God. And the way we show our love is to practice stewardship through humility, stability and an ethic of restraint.