

St. Benedict's Day

[Luke 14:27-33](#)

I have heard tell of a spiritual master who cultivates bonsai trees. He has many pots of miniature trees and he tends each one carefully, adjusting its branches, pruning a little here and holding up a bit there. And every one of his bonsai trees represents one of his disciples, and as he is forming the tree so he is forming the disciple.

St. Benedict was big on formation – the process whereby we move from the sinful state which is normal for humans – to the sanctified state which we long for, where we are one with God. And it is to this end that he wrote his Rule – a way of life for monks of the sixth century.

Benedict drew upon the ascetic traditions of both Eastern and Western Christianity, and made something new. His rule became the basis for a great expansion of monasticism two hundred years later.

Much of the rule is taken up with the practical aspects of monastic life; liturgical questions such as the order in which psalms are to be chanted and in which seasons Alleluia is to be chanted (that is where we get the tradition of not saying Alleluia during Lent); practical matters such as how much food and drink each monk is to get; and issues of community and authority. Chapter 68 is entitled, “When a brother is asked to do the impossible.”

Within these practical considerations of community life there are many pearls of wisdom which continue to inform not only monastic life but also the life of contemporary Christians. But the intention of his work was he says “to open a school for God’s service.” In other words, to create a structure within which people were encouraged and taught to serve God.

Isn't that what we are doing here as well? There are many different motivations that get us in the door and that keep us coming back. But the purpose of a church is to be a faith community where people come to

love and serve God in common prayer and common life. Our mission is also to be a school for God's service – to form each other into disciples of Jesus.

And how are we to do that? The spiritual life is a constant balancing act. We have the Great Commandment to love God with everything that we have, and our neighbor as ourselves; we also know that the walk with God is an interior adventure yet we are also called to share that adventure in faith community. We know that the way we live needs to reflect our inner walk with Spirit and our inner hope in God's grace, yet we are healed not by what we do but by that very grace. So we are always holding inner and outer in tension. It is tempting for us to over-balance in one direction or the other.

In the history of the church there have been many times when a re-balancing has occurred. The development of Benedictine monasticism with its focus on staying in one place, blossoming where you are planted and living a life of holy balance, was the result of one of those times of rebalancing. Once Christianity became the official religion, people who were drawn to a more rigorous and demanding lifestyle headed into the desert where they lived solitary, ascetic lives. They took very seriously that last line in today's gospel reading, "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Benedict was one of these solitary monks who reacted against the laxness of the church and became an ascetic. He had little desire to live with others and when he first agreed to become an abbot was so overbearing and strict that his monks tried to poison him! But over time as monks banded together in groups, Benedict started many small monasteries of a dozen men living together under one abbot. At a time of tremendous political, social and environmental upheaval this form of monasticism provided a way to live one's faith; and the service of the monasteries to their local community helped to stabilize a world which had just started experiencing pandemics and where the collapse of the

Roman Empire had left small territories and small tribal groups fighting one another. An environmental disaster with years of extremely cold weather possibly started by a volcanic eruption led to massive starvation in the Western hemisphere.

In many ways it was a time not unlike our own. As was the time of the Protestant reformation. In both cases, God used the social and political upheaval to bring a new form of Christianity, a new spirituality into being.

I think she is doing the same today. And we are part of that.

Benedict did not know that he was starting a great movement and would eventually be known as the father of western monasticism; he was responding to the needs of the moment, to the men who were coming to him asking for him to be their abbot. And he didn't get it right immediately.

We do not know what great work God is engaged on in our midst. We do not know how the Holy Spirit is using and is going to use St Benedict's to meet the spiritual and material needs of Los Osos and beyond. We can look back and see that many seeds have grown and flourished, like the idea of a thrift shop to help provide inexpensive clothes and household items to those in need. That was thirty years ago and now the Abundance Shop is an important ministry and part of who we are and an institution in Los Osos. Other seeds have proved not to meet the needs or have been short-lived.

In the gospel reading, Jesus is discouraging those who think following him is going to be exciting and fun and who have no desire to go deeper. He tells them to think about what it will actually cost. It always amuses me that this is the reading for our patronal feast, given the difficulty we had knowing how much this building would cost and frequently having to stop and wait until we had the money to take the next step. But perhaps that is how the spiritual life goes – we go along for a while and

then there is a challenge to move to a new level. Something happens that makes it feel as though we are on hold, or have even wandered away from the path. But looking back we can see that God was working even in those times.

As I go on sabbatical in a few weeks, it may feel like one of those times. It may feel as though y'all can take a break and stay home. Perhaps it will seem to be a fallow time with less going on than usual. But God is not going on sabbatical. God is still working in our midst.

When the normal rhythm changes, that is a time for the Spirit to reveal the new work that she is doing. When things are off balance it provides an opportunity for new thinking for new possibilities to emerge. This school for God's service has been built on solid foundations by all those who have gone before. We need not fear that change will lead to us toppling over, rather it is an exciting opportunity for new formation.

I look forward to seeing what God will do in the next few months and how we will be formed into the church we are becoming.