

LE4: Integrative Paper with Spiritual Plan

These past 13 weeks have been a journey of discovery for how I have cultivated, as well as neglected, my own spiritual formation. Even the word “spiritual formation” is a concept I had heard about during my time at Fuller Theological Seminary, but I never really understood or thought about what that looked like in my life. That changed in week 8 when Dr. Wanda Walborn gave a sermon about *Cultivating a Listening Ear*.

In that sermon she made a distinction between “discipleship” and “spiritual formation”. Dr. Walborn describes discipleship as an intentional process, roughly 2 years, where a mature Christian introduces a new believer in Christ to the fundamentals of the faith (e.g., here is the bible, this is how you tithe, this is the four-fold gospel, etc.). Once that process is complete the new disciple should fully understand what it means to be a Christian and they will have a spiritual foundation to continue to live their lives for Christ. The key phrase that caused a paradigm shift in my understanding of discipleship was “once the process is complete”. Make disciples/discipling is something that has been pounded into my head as something of the utmost importance, but to hear that there is point when discipling ends was foreign and fresh that I had to think about what I just heard. As Dr. Walborn continued she had this to say about spiritual formation,

... Spiritual formation actually is something ongoing the rest of your life. You are responsible for your own spiritual growth, not your pastoral team. You are. And as adults you need to take responsibility and learn to come to God by yourself and for yourself. See that’s the thing when we tell students, they come in, they’ve been in church their whole life and they just kind of go through the motions and we say ‘Well, you know what? Now your faith is your own. How are you going to grow with the Lord?’

This sermon I had playing in the background while I was cleaning my room stopped me in my tracks.

Dr. Walborn articulated a concept I had struggled to understand. Discipleship is not spiritual formation. We do not continue “discipling” as it pertains to spiritual growth. We are discipling when we are teaching new believers, but at some point, a believer must become spiritually mature to separate themselves from their teacher. Thinking more about what I heard, Philippians 2:12 (NRSV) immediately popped into my mind “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” Here we see the concept of spiritual formation worded as “work out your own salvation”. It finally clicked! I am a disciple of Jesus Christ and I lack nothing in growing with God other than my own spiritual neglect. This freed me as a believer, as a leader of others, and has helped me redefine how I will approach helping others in my church grow in Christ as I grow along with them.

Now equipped with a definition of spiritual formation that resonated with me, I began to see areas in my life where I was experiencing spiritual atrophy, specifically as it pertained to my perceived call to chaplaincy and pastoral ministry. I have mentioned in my first silent retreat report that I felt apathetic towards loving others. As I read chapter 9 from *Water from a Deep Well* it became apparent that this apathy stems from my own devotional attitude towards the word of God. In chapter 9, Gerald Sittser describes how the reformers cherished and revered the word of God. On page 227 we are given a glimpse of this esteem, “The Reformers labored to preach well because they had a high view of the Word of God, whether incarnate, written, preached or made visible in the sacraments.” Sittser goes on to say “How should we respond to this Word? First, we should make it our own, for it is in the written Word that we come to know the incarnate Word and God’s saving work.” (pp. 237).

I know Jesus and I know he has saved me and sanctified me as His own, yet I ashamedly admit I have taken this unmerited relationship for granted. When I read God's Word, I often do not get excited or moved. It is not because I do not believe, but because I have allowed other things in my life to feed my soul instead of the Word. I have not fasted and been so hungry for God's Word that everything else becomes secondary; rather I have placed God secondary.

To an extent I am being hyperbolic, but there is enough truth in my self-assessment that I recognize I have put so much stock in things and experiences that are not God that it is easy to see why I would be so apathetic towards other people. If I am not excited about what Jesus has done for me, how am I going to be excited about serving and loving others for Christ? Without truly making the gospel my own, that is Jesus incarnate is my sustenance, there is no way I am going to share His good news with others or care if they know Him or not.

Sittser goes on to give practical ways I can cherish the Word the way the reformers did. For one "... for the sake of our own spiritual health, we must learn this story well by reading it time and again, not only to master the basic facts but also to understand it devotionally." (pp. 228) This story *needs* to be constantly read and indwelt *devotionally*. Reading the Word for knowledge does nothing in the long run. Paul would equate that with a resounding gong that makes nothing but noise. No, reading the Word devotionally is how love for Jesus and love for others is cultivated. Secondly, Sittser recommends something that was also refreshing for me to consider "... we must learn to *listen* to the Word, for 'faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the Word of Christ' (Rom 10:17)." (pp. 228) Again, it is so easy to just read the word to gain facts and knowledge, but God wants us to listen to Him. These are such basic principles, yet like a man who looks in the mirror and forgets his reflection I recognize that I often forget that God wants me to listen and obey. This principle is echoed by Dr. Walborn

when she says, “Let the text master us as we surrender.” Read the text, listen to the text, and let it be the master.

From the same book *Water from a Deep Well* the first chapter on the witness of the martyrs also resonated with me. Within my own church context, we are going through a season of disruption that has only been accelerated and exacerbated by the ramifications of COVID-19. We have never truly had to struggle for Christ as we have with COVID-19 and our attitude of “going through the motions” at church became glaringly clear once we were forced to shut our doors. We discovered the resilience of some of the people in our congregation was weak and our leadership had not grounded us in the suffering of Christ. Off the bat on page 28 Sittser makes the bold statement that reminded me of our church’s

We will never understand Christian spirituality-what it is and what makes it unique-unless we grasp the significance of martyrdom. The early Christians died because they confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. His lordship challenged all other ultimate claims on their lives-wealth, status, power and Rome itself. They believed that Jesus tolerates no rivals. When forced to choose, they chose to follow Jesus, no matter what the price. The early martyrs paid an extreme price, their very lives. But the value of their example is not in the martyrdom itself, however noble and courageous, but in their commitment to Christ’s lordship. That we might not have to die for Christ is irreverent. How we *live* for Christ is the real issue.

Our pastor and staff had to navigate tough decisions about whether to defy local ordinances and remain open or to adapt. There was strong pushback from every direction. On personal levels people were dealing with loss of jobs/income, social justice positions, and indeed persecution from those outside the church who thought our desire to meet again was inconsiderate and selfish. Couple all of this with our senior pastor and his family, the worship team, and several families in the church contracting COVID-19 and suffering from it, it is safe to say that this was a genuine crisis that tested our faith for unity and healing. I for one leaned into the idea of partaking in suffering with Christ to advance His kingdom, knowing that other followers around the country and the world were suffering with me. Suffering is the common

denominator of our faith and we need to embrace this reality to strengthen our witness and the body of Christ.

The only other book that really drew me into sincere reflection of my spiritual formation was *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzero. There were a lot of wonderful takeaways from this powerful book that it is difficult to summarize what I found most helpful, but if there is a common theme it is recognizing God's power in my weakness. A quote that popped out at me on page 117 is "We cannot do or be anything we want. God has placed enormous limits around even the most gifted of us." I am a naturally driven and self-starting person with a disposition to "dream big". I want to do it all and make things happen, often by myself. This quote, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, revealed to me how I neglect the discipline of the sabbath. My pride tricks me into believing that I can do all things through my own volition, to include doing things for God (wrong attitude). Scazzero makes it clear that "On Sabbath I *embrace my limits*. God is God. He is indispensable. I am his creature. The world continues working fine when I stop." (pp. 154) Talk about a one-two punch to drive a theme home. A final quote from Scazzero found on page 177 spoke directly to my guarded heart, "You can't have the true peace of Christ's kingdom with lies and pretense. They must be exposed to the light and replaced with the truth." Lord Jesus, if I take only one thing away from this class may it be this truth. My I surrender all lies, all pride, all pretense, and hinderances to you.

Beyond the readings, I enjoyed the small group discussions. I appreciated the vulnerability of these men of God. When we shared our personal thoughts and experiences, we found ourselves on common ground in our need for deeper growth in Jesus. In our dialogue we fostered a bond of trust and encouragement which I think is impressive considering this all took place in a distance learning platform.

As I map out my spiritual plan for growth, I acknowledge that my first semester at ATS, and specifically this class, felt overwhelming at times. While I know I have been brought to ATS by God's will and I expected to be challenged I truly underestimated how ill-prepared my heart and mind was. I struggled to maintain balance being a husband and father of twins, working in the Navy Reserves, and staying on top of my studies. Often, I focused my energy on getting a good grade instead of being transformed. There were just so many disciplines and resources that I had a difficult time benefiting from them. To me this revealed that one of the disciplines I need to practice now is the discipline of simplicity. What can I remove from my life and replace with God? For one, I have decided to take the summer semester off so I can recenter myself of "first things". I really wanted to do summer classes so I can get ahead at ATS, but I have come to realize that not only will this negatively affect my life, but it also defeats the purpose of spiritual formation. This is not a race; it is a walk with God.

The other two disciplines I think go together with simplicity are prayer and fasting. I have mentioned in my discussion group that my prayer life has been weak, and I can see the reason is putting other things before God. I will be more intentional about prayer by practicing simplicity and within the discipline of simplicity I will fast to create a spiritual hunger. These three disciplines are things I believe will help me become more dependent and in love with God.

I am going to take the entirety of the summer (3 months) to practice these disciplines. I think focusing on one discipline per month will be beneficial for me as these are areas are weak. I also think it is important to try and involve my wife and kids in some capacity. This semester I have treated seminary as something I do by myself, when the reality is my family is very much affected by me studying and being consumed by God. I want my family to remain supportive of me and not resent how much time I spend away studying.