

SOCIETY OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST

Cowley

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Praying with the Fourth Gospel

In the **Monastic Wisdom for Everyday Living** insert, Br. Keith Nelson reveals through his own experience how **reading and praying with John's Gospel** can allow each of us to see the ordinary, challenging, and even painful events of our lives as signs imbued with meaning.

Professor in New Testament at Virginia Theological Seminary, John Yieh gives a close look at the **Johannine vision of Christian community** as an embodiment of God's love in Christ.

Br. Jim Woodrum offers **practical suggestions** for how we can meet Jesus in prayer throughout our day, every day.

Tambria E. Lee, Chaplain at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, introduces various ways we might **pray with John's Gospel**.

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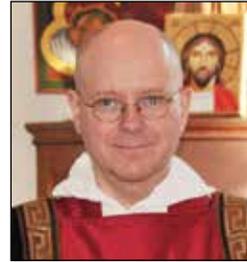
To follow the latest news from the Brothers, visit www.SSJE.org.

We would welcome hearing what you think of this issue of Cowley magazine. Visit www.SSJE.org/cowleymagazine to share comments, ask questions, or see Cowley in color!



Cover photo:

On June 17, 2017, the community celebrated Br. Jim Woodrum's Profession in Life Vows. He is pictured here with Brs. Luke Ditewig and Keith Nelson.



Letter from the Superior

James Koester, SSJE

Dear Members of the Fellowship of Saint John and other Friends,

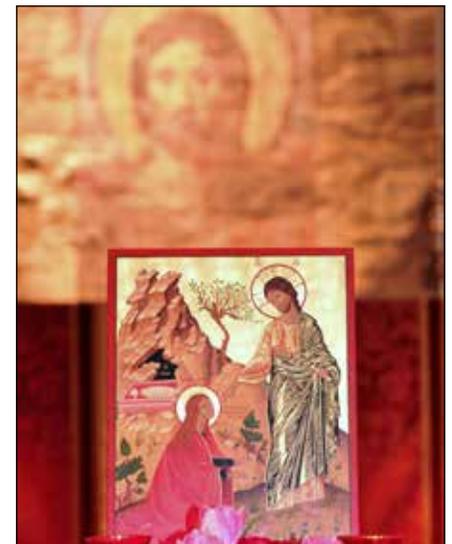
We live in a world full of voices calling us to follow in any number of directions. Often the voices compete with one another. The temptation is to follow the loudest voice, which is often the angriest, or the one which subtly feeds on our fears, our anxieties, our weaknesses. Like the voice of the serpent in the Garden *who was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made* (Gen 3:1), these voices call to us and fill our heads with lies. It's often hard to know which voice to follow, and so we feel fractured.

To hear the voice of Jesus is to hear the voice of love calling to the very depths of our hearts, *for God is love* (1 Jn 4:8). And the voice of love speaks, not to our fears, but to our hopes; not to our anger, but to our dreams. Love is the voice of hope and of possibility. Love not only shouts from the mountain tops (Is 40:9), it also hangs on the cross, and whispers our names at dawn.

We hear this voice of love speaking so clearly in the writings of the Evangelist John. The Gospel and Epistles of John tell the story of a God who is love and who *so loved the world* that he sent his only Son, *so that we may not perish, but may have eternal life* (Jn 3:16). This Son, Jesus, *became flesh and lived among us* (Jn 1:14) in order to reveal this God of love to us (Jn 1:18), to lay down his life for us in love (Jn 10:11), and to gather us into a community of love (1 Jn 4:9-11) called to share God's love with the whole world (1 Jn 3:16-18). John's Gospel presents God not as distant

or disapproving, but as intimate and close, longing for relationship with us – a Good Shepherd who calls us each by name (Jn 10:3).

As members of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, we Brothers feel a special affinity for the writings of John. His vision of a community of love, drawn together by a shared love for Jesus, is at the root of our life, even as his words are woven into the Rule that shapes our community. Above all, we believe that John's writings have the power to transform lives by inviting us into deep intimacy with Jesus. We Brothers have known this in our own experience. For this reason, we have decided to make our 2018 Lent program about *Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of John*.





Ironwork on the Monastery Chapel gates honors the Evangelist John, traditionally depicted as an eagle holding the gospel in its talons.

In this six-week series of videos, Brothers will speak about a daily verse from John, inviting you to deeply reflect and pray with these words – and we’ve designed a beautiful prayer journal to accompany the videos. We look forward to sharing this offering with you all.

The articles in this issue of *Cowley* anticipate this theme, offering perspectives on how we can meet Jesus in the riches of the Fourth Gospel. Br. Keith Nelson’s insert article at the center of this issue describes his own personal experiences of encountering Jesus – and himself – in signs like those that pervade Jesus’ ministry throughout John. New Testament scholar, John Yieh, shares the wealth of his knowledge on the Johannine understanding of community and what it means for those of us looking to form communities of faith today. Chaplain Tambria Lee invites us to try praying with John’s Gospel. And Br. Jim Woodrum suggests some practical ways you might shape your day in order to meet Jesus as you awaken and again as you return to sleep.

It can be hard to hear above the din

and noise of the world, whose voices call us – especially these days – to be afraid, to be angry, to be jealous, to be selfish. But our job as followers of Jesus is to learn to hear his voice. We hope that you will join us in listening for the voice of love in the words of the Evangelist John, calling us, challenging us, prodding us to greater and more unselfish love.

We will only know the voice of love if we know the One who is love, so really listen. Listen attentively, listen devoutly, listen obediently, listen gratefully, listen eagerly, and you will hear the Good Shepherd calling you by name, for to those who truly listen, God has promised to speak.

The Good Shepherd is speaking to you in love right now. Can you hear?

Faithfully,

James Koester, SSJE
Superior

Letter from the FSJ



Karen Bird
Pictured in the Judean desert

When I first heard about the FSJ pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I felt compelled to go. But as soon as I had paid my deposit, I started having buyer’s remorse. *Really, me go on a pilgrimage?* I worried that I wasn’t religious enough. I can’t quote the Bible and I am far more likely, on a Sunday morning, to feel like I need extra sleep than to attend church. My relationship with Jesus was like one that you might have with a distant, older relative – someone whom you admire deeply, and even emulate, but who is a little intimidating and most appreciated at a distance. Secretly, I had always thought of myself as a rather poor Christian, trying to keep Christ at a distance. But there was this small, nagging sense that I was being beckoned to go.

At one of our first meetings as a group, I had a profound realization of the struggle I was being called on this pilgrimage to address. Br. Curtis asked us to share with the group our answers to a couple of questions: what did we hope to leave behind, and what did we hope to take home with us? *Oh no*, my heart started pounding wildly, *I can’t express my deepest hopes to these people I don’t know! Why did I come on this trip?* As I listened to others, I deepened my breathing and prayed for God to give me the words I needed. Before I knew it, I was telling the

group about my 21-year-old daughter, S., who has severe learning disabilities and mental illness, and who was living with me at the time. I said that I hoped to leave behind my denial about her.

Richard Rohr writes in *Everything Belongs* that “Jesus has given us the ideal eyes by which to see the real nature of reality.” He goes on to say that our job is to see clearly who we are and then to act on it. I had come to Jerusalem blind to my enabling and toxic relationship with my daughter. My blinders allowed me to get through my days at home, but left me exasperated, exhausted and resentful. On the pilgrimage, my eyes started to open to my role in our relationship.

As the initial days of the pilgrimage went by and we learned about first-century and modern-day Jerusalem, we prayed at many familiar and unfamiliar Biblical sites. We prayed the evening service of Compline under the stars, we prayed on the hillside, we prayed in churches, sang in churches, and prayed at the Western Wall. We prayed as a fellowship, and each day brought new gifts of being in a fellowship.

Daily, Jesus started to feed me, literally with good food, and spiritually through the grace of my fellow pilgrims. Over meal after meal (we certainly ate well!) and on bus rides, I encountered love and compassion both for me and for my daughter. Each time I got on the bus to go to the next place, I would sit with someone and see Christ in that person. We shared stories about our lives in ways you only do when you are completely safe. We moved beyond the where-do-you-live and how-many-children-do-you-have discussions to the deeply personal, the places of pain in our lives. Jesus was working in our hearts to move us towards loving compassion with one another. I shared and listened in a way that fed me,

healed me, and opened my eyes. And there was more: there was the challenge of having my blinders torn off. There was the painful realization that I needed to make some major changes. But somehow my distress was bearable. Jesus held me when I cried.

One morning towards the end of the pilgrimage, I went to church very early before anyone else arrived. I began to meditate and pray, and then I opened my eyes. I was looking right into the face of an icon of Jesus. When I closed my eyes again, I remembered an image that I have had for the last fifteen years, of Christ carrying me when I would stumble carrying the cross of motherhood. I heard the small voice say, *why do you not trust that Christ will carry S. the same way He*

has carried you? Tears of gratitude flowed down my cheeks. In my fearfulness, I had been holding for dear life onto a broken relationship. That day in the chapel was the first step in letting go and in so doing, gaining my life back.

I brought back many gifts from my mountain-top experience in the Holy Land. I brought back new friendships, a spiritual director, and the strength to change. It has been a very difficult year since I returned, but my daughter has moved into an apartment and she is more resilient than I could ever have imagined. She certainly struggles, but it is easier somehow. Perhaps I am no longer carrying her alone, but with Jesus. Thanks be to God! 🙏

Companions on the Journey

The Fellowship of Saint John

"I wonder if there might be readers of Cowley who have delayed or denied themselves the chance to become members of the Fellowship out of a sense that they were not somehow, or in some way "enough" just at this moment: not committed enough, not prepared enough, and so on. If so, I would encourage you: Consider whether becoming a member of the Fellowship might be, not a marker of your arrival at some destination, but a way of joining companions on the journey."

– Br. Jonathan Maury, Director, FSJ

To learn more or apply to become a member of the FSJ, visit www.SSJE.org/fsj



What a joy this year to welcome seven new members to the FSJ on the Feast of Saint John. Please join with us in praying for (left to right): Amanda Bourne, Michael Davis, Richard Kelly, Nicolas Boisson, Lisa Gamble, Paul Evans, and Barbara Fisher."



No Longer Servants, But Friends

A Reflection on John 15:12-17

John Yieh
Virginia Theological Seminary

What makes a community "Christian"? Believing and following Jesus as Christ are of course the basic requisites. But how should a Christian community distinguish itself from other social groups in its pattern of belief and pattern of life? By reminding the church in Corinth that they "are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Cor 1:2), Paul evidently regarded a Christian community as one whose members are transformed by Christ and uphold the standard of "holiness" (*hagiotēs*), living a new way of life pleasing and honoring God. Concluding his Gospel with the great commission: "to make disciples of all nations, baptizing . . . and teaching . . ." (Matt 28:19-20), Matthew was saying to the church in Antioch that a Christian community should focus its mission on "disciple-training" (*mathēteia*) so that its members may be committed to the Triune God and fully equipped to share Jesus' commandments with the whole world. What about John the Evangelist? Since the major witness in the Fourth Gospel was nicknamed the "Beloved Disciple" (13:23; 21:7) and Jesus said that his disciples would be properly recognized by their mutual love (13:25), John the Evangelist obviously expected his readers in Ephesus to form a community that would embody God's love in Christ

(*agapē*) so genuinely that they might testify to the eternal life already granted to them by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. All such visions of community are gems of insights for our life together as a Christian community today.

A close look at John 15 reveals three facets of the Johannine vision of Christian community as an embodiment of God's love in Christ.

I. Circle of Friends

One extraordinary term that Jesus deliberately used to call his disciples in John 15 is "friend" (*philos*). To the confused disciples at the last supper Jesus said: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you *friends*, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (15:15). In this statement Jesus made it clear that friend has a higher status than servant (*doulos*) in terms of relationship. He also explained why he elevated their status: they understood what Jesus was doing and they had learned divine revelation from him. Friends are people of kindred spirit who share their minds and hearts with each other. Jesus had told them what he was about to do – to die on the cross for all – and had taught them how much God loved the world. By raising their bar to

a true knowledge of his Incarnation and Passion, he now called them his friends. What a grace and what a privilege!

In Jewish tradition, Noah, Abraham, and Moses have been called “friends of God” because they trusted God and obeyed God’s commandment. In response to God’s call, Noah built an ark on Mt. Ararat, Abraham left his hometown Ur, and Moses returned to Egypt to confront Pharaoh (Gen 8:4; 12:1; Exod 3:10). Divine calling and human obedience made them friends of God. Among Greek and Roman philosophers, friendship was considered a special relationship existing only among people with equal status, kindred spirit, and reciprocal affection.¹ In light of these cultural norms, by calling his disciples friends, the Johannine Jesus wanted his followers to form a circle of friends in which everyone trusts and obeys God, understands and honors each other, and shares sincere love with Jesus and one another.

2. Beloved and Loving

It should be pointed out that this friendship was given to the disciples as a gift, because Jesus first offered himself as their best friend, ready to die for them: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13). Indeed, he had chosen them, not they him (15:16). Thus, Christian community as a circle of friends is bonded together by Jesus’ self-sacrificing love. Like the Beloved Disciple, all followers are beloved of Jesus. It is particularly remarkable, when we think about

¹ Abraham J. Malherbe, “Paul’s Self-Sufficiency (Philippians 4:11),” *Light from the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity: Collected Essays 1959-2012* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 325-338, see 327. See also John T. Fitzgerald, ed. *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech: Study of Friendship in the New Testament World* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

the timing of this declaration. It was in the last supper before his arrest, and Jesus already knew Judas was about to betray him, Peter to deny him, and the others to desert him. Notwithstanding, Jesus called them his friends.

It is indeed by grace for us to become a friend of Jesus, but it takes genuine commitment to remain his friend as Jesus sternly said: “You are my friends if you do what I command you” (15:14). The privilege comes with a condition. The truth is Jesus reserved the right to be the master in the circle of his friends as he said: “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am” (13:13). His claim to leadership was legitimate and worthy not only because he was the Son of God, but also because he was a respectable teacher practicing what he preached by offering himself up on the cross as the Lamb of God (1:29) and the grain of wheat (12:24) so that his friends may receive eternal life through faith in him (20:31).

What is Jesus’ commandment? In 13:34-35, he had already made it clear: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” This commandment is so important that he repeated it (in 15:12) right before he called his disciples his friends. It is a tall order, however, because the standard of the friendly love is Jesus’ own love for them, even unto death on the cross. In his study of the so-called “Book of Discourse” in the Gospel of John, Francis Moloney has aptly argued that before Jesus gave this order for the disciples to imitate his love, he first exemplified it by humbly washing their feet and freely offering bread even to Judas the traitor. After repeating this order in 15:12 Jesus prayed for his disciples to be one with him, with God, and with one another, in anticipating

their suffering and grief in Ch. 17.² A Christian community, whose members strive to be worthy friends of Jesus, should show relationships marked by Christ-like love, tangibly expressed in actions of humility, service, generosity, unity, endurance, and hope.

3. To Bear Fruit

To be a friend of Jesus is also a calling with a purpose, as Jesus said: “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (15:16). What does the metaphor of bearing fruit mean for the Johannine community? In the preceding passage (15:1-11), Jesus took a familiar metaphor of the grapevine for Israel (Ps 80:8-16; Isa 5:1-7; Jer 2:21; Ezek 15:1-6) and allegorized it to urge his disciples to dwell in him so that they may bear fruit. Jesus said he was the true vine, God the vinegrower, and they the branches (15:1, 5). The branches are expected to bear fruit, but they can do so only if they abide in the vine, that is, if they are closely connected with the vine so that they may constantly receive from it nutrition and water to grow strong. Interestingly, every branch that bears fruit, the vinegrower will prune or cleanse so that it may bear even more fruit (15:2), but those that are not connected with the vine will wither and be thrown into the fire to be burned (15:6).

For Paul, to bear fruit means to bear the fruit of the Spirit in “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23), in other words, to exhibit a Christ-like character in one’s life. For John, to bear fruit may be summarized in the idea of *solī Deo gloria*, for Jesus said:

² Francis J. Moloney, “Love in Action, Discourse, and Prayer: John 13:1-38; 15:12-17; 17:1-26,” *Love in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical, Theological, and Literary Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 99-134.

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and be my disciples” (15:8). To bear fruit is tantamount to being Jesus’ disciples, and to be Jesus’ disciples is to love one another as he has loved them (13:35). As such, bearing fruit is a social enactment of mutual love that imitates Christ and glorifies God!

As we reflect on Jesus’ earnest words in calling his disciples friends, we may find the best poetic summary of this gift of loving friendship in Samuel Crossman’s hauntingly beautiful words in the famous hymn: “My Song Is Love Unknown” (1664):

*My song is love unknown, my savior’s
love to me,
love to the loveless shown that they
might lovely be.
O who am I that for my sake my Lord
should take frail flesh, and die?*

*He came from heaven’s throne salvation
to bestow;
the world that was his own would not
its Savior know.
But O my Friend, my Friend indeed,
who at my need his life did spend!* 🕯





Meeting Jesus, Every Day

Jim Woodrum, SSJE

Imagine it was with a youthful twinkle in his eye that our Society's founder, Father Benson, once wrote: "If we are to have Jesus our friend, we must know him to be continually near. The companionship of Jesus! It is strange how many there are who look forward to being with him in another world, but never think of living fellowship with him here."¹

I was eleven years old when I made my way to the front of my childhood church to proclaim what I already knew in my heart: that Jesus and I had had a personal relationship since before I could remember. In the evangelical tradition in which I was raised, the pastor would always give an "altar call" before the final hymn: he would invite anyone who wanted a personal relationship with Jesus Christ to come forward and stand with him as a public profession of that desire, which was the next step in the journey of faith. After I took that step myself, I always looked forward to that moment in the service, to see who else might come to be friends with Jesus the way I was.

Yet as I grew into an adult understanding of Jesus during my own journey into adulthood, the constant

companion I had known as a child became a distant acquaintance that I would see once every great while (and when I did, I wasn't quite sure what to say). Perhaps you can relate. Maybe you've been trying to reclaim a relationship with Jesus. Or maybe, in light of current events, you're presently searching for a ray of hope, confused and disoriented at what is going on in this world, wondering 'where in the world is Jesus in all of this?'

In my own journey, I met Jesus again in the same place that I had first professed to follow him: at the altar. Late in my high school years, I had the opportunity to visit an Episcopal Church one Christmas Eve and was most struck by all the activity surrounding the altar during the second half of the service. Something mysterious was occurring, and while I couldn't put my finger on it at the time, it was palpable. I eventually joined the Episcopal Church and came to know and understand what was happening at the altar. It was a sacrament: an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Through this sacrament, my personal relationship with Jesus was renewed. What's more, I realized in this new 'altar call' that Jesus had always been with me on my journey, I just hadn't recognized him. Every time we gather around an altar to break bread and share wine, we get a glimpse of Jesus, who is our constant companion.

¹ Richard Meux Benson, *Instructions on the Religious Life*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1935).

As a monk now, I get the chance to meet Jesus at the altar every day during the Eucharist. Yet even as a monk, I also need to attune my eyes to see him in my everyday life. How can we become aware of Jesus, who is also called Emmanuel – "God with us" – when we're *away* from the altar? I want to suggest a transformative practice which comes from the monastic tradition: reserving two brief periods of prayer to act as 'bookends' to your day.

In the morning, take a few moments and pray *forward* through your day. As editor David Cobb suggests in the newly revised *Saint Augustine's Prayer Book*:

In God's presence, think through the day ahead: the work you will do, the people you will encounter, the dangers or uncertainties you face, the possibilities for joy and acts of kindness, any particular resolutions you need to renew. Consider what might draw you from the love of God and neighbor, the opportunities you will

have to know and serve God and to grow in virtue. Remember those closest to you and all for whom you have agreed to pray, ask God's blessings, guidance, and strength in all that lies before you. Then, gather up these thoughts and reflections with the words of the Lord's Prayer.²

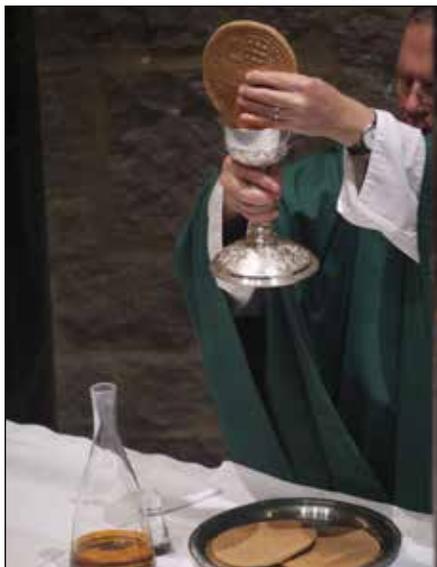
Or you might conclude, as I do, with Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer," which is popular in 12-Step work:

GOD, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as the pathway to peace. Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to

² David Cobb, ed. *Saint Augustine's Prayer Book*. Revised ed. (West Park, NY: Order of the Holy Cross/Forward Movement, 2014).



On June 17, 2017, the community, family, and friends celebrated the joyful event of Br. Jim's Profession in Life Vows.



His Will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen.

If your experience is anything like mine, you'll find that, over time, this way of praying in the morning will help make you aware of Jesus with you throughout your day. Even the empty, in-between times of the day can become full of chances to meet him in the moment. Father George Congreve, SSJE once wrote:

At times, when we have to wait and have nothing to do to occupy ourselves with, -Oh! Then it is not wasted time if we have thought of God in it, if we have looked into the face of Jesus. Then anything that we do at the end of such waiting times we do with a glory and a power to witness to Jesus which is, indeed, a precious result. Everything should become by degrees an act of communion with God.³

A second period of prayer, at the end of the day, can help you to see how many moments throughout your day were, indeed, "an act of communion with God." Before you go to bed, take ten or fifteen minutes to pray *backwards* through your day. You might use the five-step prayer known in Ignatian Spirituality as "The Examen":

- Become aware of God's presence and ask God to bring clarity to the end of your day.
- Review the day with gratitude, both what went well and where you might have come up short. Pay attention to the small things. God is in the details.
- Pay attention to your emotions. Ignatius says that we detect the presence of God in our emotions. What is God saying through these feelings?
- Choose one feature from the day and pray from it. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart - whether intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.
- Look forward to tomorrow. Do all this with a posture of gratitude knowing that all of life is a gift of God, and then close with the Lord's Prayer.⁴

Jesus always waits for us at the altar. And he meets us in the sacrament of our daily lives. He continually accompanies us along our earthly pilgrimage, loving us and upholding us, each step of the way. Look for him beside you. 🙏

⁴ "The Daily Examen," IgnatianSpirituality.com. Loyola Press, 2016. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.

Dip Your Toes In

An Introduction to Praying with John's Gospel

Tambria E. Lee
Chaplain, The University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill



I had no idea what to say to this woman whose life had been changed in a moment in time. It was an accident that happened in the midst of living in this world to the fullest, the consequence of which made death seem preferable. She fell on a bicycle path. Her way back toward some semblance of life was impossible to fathom.

I stood by her hospital bed with family and friends, feeling as powerless spiritually as was she, physically and emotionally. Almost everything was broken and much rendered paralyzed, save the life-altering words from Communion Under Special Circumstances: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven." "Abide in me and I in you." She said they were comforting words because the only thing left she could do was "abide," and the only medicine that could heal her broken limbs and nerves was the body and blood of Jesus.

Providentially, the card I left with her after we had shared communion seemed to illustrate her spiritual landscape. It was a photograph of either sunrise or sunset - impossible to tell which - only that it was at the brink. What was visible was predominant darkness and the sun right above the horizon, lighting that darkness. She was living in the in-between time; the not-knowing time. The words written inside

the card stated simply, "I am the Light of the World. Whoever walks with me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life" (Jn 8:12).

Into this reality - and every other circumstance like it - comes the unique voice of the Gospel According to John. This is a Gospel that speaks with powerful metaphorical phrases such as "I am the Light of the World." A Gospel filled with signs and symbols and wonders. "I am the bread of life. The one who eats this bread shall never be hungry" (6:35). A Gospel filled with opportunities for relationship with the living God who manifests in myriad ways. "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me" (10:11). A Gospel that knows the power of abiding. "I am the vine and you are the branches. Abide in me and I in you" (15:4). A Gospel filled with provocative and impossible hope. "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (11:25).

The ancient Church fathers called the Gospel of John the most "spiritual" of the Gospels for good reason. I'd like to think it was because the writer was trying to explain the mystery of the person of Jesus.

Compared to its synoptic counterparts, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John is a complicated and reflective, rather than descriptive, book. The writer seeks not just to relay the facts but to explain the

meaning behind them. Scholars think it was composed between 80 and 110 CE, and traditionally it was attributed to John, son of Zebedee, one of the original twelve disciples.

Tradition also suggests that, because he knew of the other three Gospels, John decided to offer a different voice, one of a Jewish Christian who knew Greek well and had a profound and life-altering relationship with the Risen Christ. It appears that the writing took place in the Ephesus area of Turkey famous for Paul's letter to the Ephesians and perhaps one of the few fully intact New Testament cities left that can help fill in the blanks of our biblical imagination. (See www.ephesus.us). There still stands there an active church dedicated to Mary the mother of Jesus and John the beloved, where the prayers of the faithful continue to be stuck in its walls, inside and out.

The great New Testament scholar Raymond Brown divides John's Gospel into four parts. First comes the Prologue (Jn 1:1-18), which Episcopalians hear on the Feast of the Incarnation each year. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (1:1-14). The next section Brown calls the Book of Signs (Jn 1:19-12:50). It shows all the ways in which Jesus reveals himself to the world through signs and wonders. These signs and wonders are told almost exclusively without the use of parables, which characterize the Synoptics. John's stories depicting Jesus' life and ministry also are told over a two-and-a-half to three-year period (as opposed to a one-year period in the Synoptics). In John's Gospel, there are three journeys to Jerusalem as opposed to one penultimate journey culminating in the Passion narrative as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. According to Brown, John's Gospel continues into the Book of Glory (Jn 13:1-20:31), which depicts Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as

manifestations of God's intention and presence. Compared to the Synoptics, John's narrative has some glaring omissions, particularly if the writer had knowledge of any of the other three Gospels, since he fails to mention Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness, the Institution of the Last Supper, the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer, and the Transfiguration. The Gospel concludes, in Brown's characterization, with the Epilogue (Jn 21:1-25), which offers additional resurrection narratives and a conclusion not found elsewhere.

Each Gospel has its own unique voice, and John's is particularly compelling through its use of metaphorical language with double meanings: temple and body (2:25), water and spirit (7:37-38), lifted up and exalted (12:32). But perhaps the most compelling invitation of John's Gospel is how it is rooted and grounded, first and foremost, in relationship. The "I AM" statements for which the Gospel is famous harken back to Moses' encounter with God through the burning bush at Sinai when God says "I am who I am" or "Tell the Israelites that I am sent you" (Ex 3:14). These phrases capture the unfolding of mystery intrinsic to every relationship. We try to articulate what it means to express our love by sharing a part of who we are, an aspect of our identity with the other. For instance: I am a priest, a wife, a chaplain, a sister, a daughter, a gardener, a hiker, a friend. And so Jesus says to us: "I am the Resurrection and the Life," "I am the Good Shepherd," "I am the Vinedresser," "I am the Light of the World," "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life," "Before Abraham was I am." All of these articulations of Jesus' identity invite us into relationship with Jesus and the God whose love he reveals.

There are as many ways to strengthen our relationship with the God we

encounter in John's Gospel as there are words within it, images that reflect it, themes that drive it. One of the most compelling ways is to consider how it introduces to us the "beloved disciple." This is he to whom the Gospel refers as "the one whom Jesus loved." This is the disciple who is with Jesus at every significant moment in his life (13:23-26, 19:25-27, 20:1-10, 21:4-7, 21:20-23, 21:24) but who is not, according to most scholars, considered to be one of the twelve. A deeper understanding of the beloved disciple opens the door for an expanding of our own relationship with the Word made flesh, dwelling among us.

I've experienced this expanding relationship in my life, and John's Gospel has been central to its growth and transformation. I grew up in the deep South, where every roadside held a sign for John Deere tractors and a church sign proclaiming John 3:16. Yet in my adult years, I've found the Gospel an inspiration for prayer more varied than that I encountered as a girl. Opening myself to new ways of praying with John's Gospel has been an opportunity to look at how my image of God had changed as my geography shifted and my education grew. My willingness to step outside the boundaries of more conservative religion has freed God to be different as well. Since then, I've used John's Gospel for *lectio divina*, as words found only in John's text became talismans for my prayer. I've explored the Gospel through its themes of Jesus as friend, as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the Good Shepherd, the True Vine, the Bread from Heaven, Living Water, and so many other rich images. I've culled the Scripture for answers to contemporary social issues such as racism or poverty. All were means of God's grace in that moment in time and with this most challenging of Gospels. I suspect if you are willing to dip your toes into this baptismal pool,

you will find your life of faith strengthened and your loyalty confirmed – no matter what is before you.

I have been in a thousand hospital rooms since that day long ago at Yale New Haven Hospital, when communion was shared between strangers who knew not whether they were facing never-ending night or the dawn of a new day. Whatever the case may be, it was John's Gospel that bridged the divide between hell and heaven and cemented the relationship with the God who saw each and every person in that room that day – and every room since – as beloved. 🙏





I Become Peace

A conversation about vocation with Br. Nicholas Bartoli

Where did your monastic vocation begin?

My vocation didn't start with a particular interest in monasticism, because when I was young I didn't know what a monk was, or that monasticism was even a thing. But I do remember, as a little boy, being intensely spiritual and interested in God. A seed of sorts was planted really, really early in me. I felt a sense that walking in the light of God's presence was my calling, that it was my vocation first and foremost, regardless of whether I became a plumber, or a computer programmer, or whatever.

When I was about six or seven, I remember my mom asking me, "Are you looking forward to getting married one day?" And I said, "I don't think I want to love just one person; I want to love everybody." I have no idea where that came from, but I remember the conversation. Amazingly, it has carried forward to today.

Now the sad part of the story – I suppose there's always a sad part to any true story – is that my temperament, my personality, the gift from God of my being open to God's presence, also left me open to some bad teasing and bullying. In fact, it was so horrific that I

was traumatized from an early age. As a result, I basically shut down, my heart closed down completely, in an effort to protect myself.

That severe contraction and closing off of my heart ruined the beautiful relationship I had with myself, with God, and with the world. I also divorced myself from anything that even hinted at spirituality or religion. I was a self-proclaimed atheist.

I feel like that seed – the desire for God which God planted in me – never left. But because the sense of God's presence had retreated, it wasn't available to me any longer. Eventually I went into a really severe depression, which lasted for most of my life – from about second or third grade until 2010. As I understand it in retrospect, I think that my depression was less of a disease in itself and more of a symptom: a symptom of my denial of self, denial of God, denial of who I was meant to be.

So what changed to crack your heart back open?

It's actually a very long story. Here's the short version.

The first movement toward any kind

of resolution – which I only recognized in retrospect – came when I discovered dance in 1997. At the time, I was living in Washington, D.C., I had an internship with the Environmental Protection Agency, and I basically couldn't function. I was walking around in a fog. I was just so horribly depressed that I was numb. And yet, somehow – and I think this was maybe God putting his finger lightly, gently, somewhere – this idea came to me out of nowhere, "Hey, maybe I should try something physical, an exercise class or something." The thought was like a foreign object that had entered my brain.

Then I was walking along near where I lived and saw a poster in a window: "Dance workout." Where the energy for this came from, given where I was at, I have no idea, but I dragged myself to the class one day. And it was amazing. The people were lovely and welcoming. So I went back. I wound up totally, totally falling in love with modern dance, and in the process, discovering a way of re-inhabiting my body and learning to express myself in movement. And it was a renaissance. My brain started working a little differently, my body started responding differently. I credit the discovery of modern dance as being the initial crack.

There was a lot more to come. Dance led me to yoga, which led to yoga philosophy, which brought me back around to things spiritual and religious. From yoga I got into Buddhism, and I ended up actively practicing Buddhism for quite a while. So I had a good Yoga practice, a dedicated Buddhist practice, I was meditating and learning things from that, and I started to see a therapist. Eventually, I ended up leaving my job and moving to Boulder, Colorado, where I started the Somatic Counseling Psychology program at Naropa University. Soon after I started that program, I also

started another independent program on the side, called Hakomi, which is a very particular form of psychotherapy and therapeutic approach based on mindfulness and the body.

It was in 2010, during a four-day Hakomi intensive training on "the inner child," that I had a spiritual experience which has radically shaped me and my entire life since then. I can't go into it in detail here, but during one of the exercises, on June 25, 2010, I experienced a profound reintegration of all those parts of myself and my heart that had been closed off and contracted so many years back when I was a small boy. The experience broke me open. I might even describe it as a kind of mystical experience. And the next two weeks after that event were very strange; I don't know how else to explain it, except to say that I was living in this kind of thinly-veiled reality, having a lot of mystical experiences. It was very, very powerful, and beautiful, and wonderful, and also terrifying. I was crying almost every day for huge chunks of the day – out of delight, out of gratitude.

To share one instance: I go to the gym and I'm on the treadmill, running. And then all of a sudden, I look out from the treadmill and everybody in the gym, every single person – the old lady in the corner, the bodybuilder guy, everyone in between, *everybody* – they are glowing like a sun. Just glowing. I can't even say it without crying. Each person was infinitely beautiful, just glowing with this *light*. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. And somehow just by witnessing it, I felt like I was burning up. Now, mind you, the subject of God had not yet come up in my brain. But I said my first spontaneous prayer on the treadmill that day. I said, "God, I can't take it. It's very beautiful but I can't take it. I'm human." And as soon as I said that, it started to fade. Mind you, I'm this atheist, Buddhist guy.



Br. Nicholas with Jason Hays, who played a critical role in helping Nicholas to discern his vocation.

So that left me a little, well – as you can imagine – off-balance, wondering what was going on.

Shortly after that, I found a book of poetry from the Sufi mystical tradition. I had encountered this stuff before, but it didn't register. Now I began reading at random one of these poems, and a spark of recognition came into me. I realized, "Okay, either he was crazy in the same way that I'm crazy, or neither one of us is crazy, and *am I falling in love with God?* Is this what's happening?" I started to read more Sufi poetry and other mystical poets, and realized that they were totally describing what was happening to me – everything I was experiencing. And that gave me a lot of comfort because it helped to solidify for me that, yes, apparently this is what God feels like. It brought God into the picture.

I felt like I was rolling down a hill, like I really didn't have control over anything. At some point, I felt pushed – I felt an impulse – toward bringing other people on board to help me out with this. I don't know how else to say it, but I felt myself called to go to a church. It was very powerful and it was that simple: "Find a church." I was really shocked that

God was pushing me in this direction. Honestly, I was pretty resistant, because at the time I thought that all Christians were basically conservative homophobes. I was wishing that it would have been a push to go to a Buddhist temple or an Ashram, or anything else. I might have even considered a synagogue. But the command was strong.

So, because that was the only thing I had to go on, I did some church shopping. I made the rounds of five or six churches, including Quakers, Unitarian Universalists, a Baptist church, the Latter Day Saints. I was just randomly trying places. But nothing seemed to really fit.

Eventually, one Sunday, I happened across a United Church of Christ and went in. The whole experience was just amazing. The sermon and the pastor touched on so many points that reflected this new reality I was experiencing. I was like, "Wow! Really? They talk like that here? In church?" And so I stuck around. After the service, I went and talked to a couple people. The Assistant Pastor, Jason, invited me out to lunch with him and had a wonderfully, grounding, normalizing conversation with me. I was boiling over with all these crazy, mystical

experiences, and a new way dealing with morality, and this light coming from everywhere, and this joy like God was going to consume me at any minute, just bursting with it. And Jason had the perfectly appropriate response to help me: he was totally nonplussed. And he started throwing out these theological phrases: "the Christ within," "mystical experience," "sharing the resurrection," and "born again." All of a sudden, my random experiences felt like they had an anchor in reality and could be a part of my journey.

So Jason did a lot to normalize my experiences. And then finding a home in a church, and committing to it, really helped me grow. Christianity gave me a way to relate to all the stuff that was happening in my heart. It gave me a way to talk about God.

So how did this faith develop into a sense of a monastic vocation?

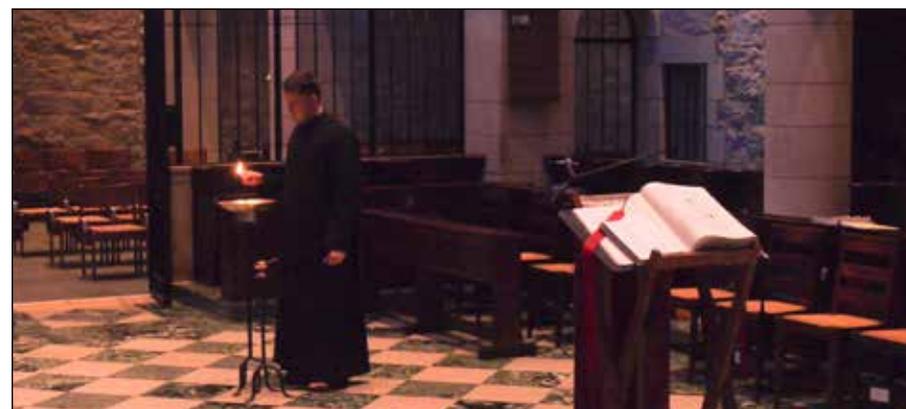
Ever since my June 25th experience, I only knew what God wanted for me – and it was very clear and felt like a tall order, all at the same time: it was clear that God just wanted me to be present in the world, in a particular way, for God, and out of love, sharing that love with everyone. That was my mission. As I grew in faith, God kept tapping me

on the shoulder to point me toward ways I could realize that vocation. For instance, I felt called to more and more radical simplicity. I felt drawn toward celibacy. It was like God had flipped a switch in me. I remember sitting at my computer, literally about to go on match.com, and thinking, "What am I doing?" Whenever I had thought about celibacy before, it had worried me to feel like I was giving something up. Suddenly it occurred to me that celibacy is actually about *choosing* something: choosing to take all my sexual, emotional, intellectual energy, and direct it in one direction, toward God.

As I was figuring this all out, Jason and my spiritual director, David Frenette, both suggested that I needed the support of a community. At that time, I was so ignorant about monasticism, I didn't realize that they meant a monastic community. And then Jason was more explicit. He said, "You need to try a monastic vocation."

After that, things snowballed really quickly. Jason suggested SSJE to me because he had once expressed interest in a vocation with SSJE, so he knew the community quite well. Once Jason actually verbalized it and started talking about SSJE, the idea felt like it had its own life.

I was rolling down the hill.





This past year, Br. Nicholas served as Guest Brother at the Monastery. He is pictured here with the Guesthouse Manager and two of the Monastic Interns who lived in the Guesthouse during 2016-17.

Did you struggle with the decision at all?

The only really scary thing for me was the question of whether or not this was my *life calling*. I kept wondering, “Is this where I’m going to end up?” I feel like I was asking God for assurances, because I wanted to stop moving around. I didn’t want to just try it. I wanted to know for sure that this was going to be it. But God never gave me that assurance. My clear sense was basically that God was saying, “I can only tell you what’s right to do *now*.” So then I just took a deep breath, and here I am.

Even once I arrived, I had to surrender to testing my vocation, and just trusting whatever happens next. Once I was able to surrender to that, life settled into a rhythm and time began to move pretty quickly. Now I’m just living here, living as a monk, doing monk stuff.

What surprises you about living as a monk?

I was surprised at first at how involved the wider congregation is in the life of the community. All the people who worship at SSJE on a regular basis, and repeat guests who come on retreat, make for a larger community. That was a little surprising, because my primary sense of vocation felt like a call to the desert. When I first came here, I was expecting more silence and less connection with

people. Even now, I would say that this life has a real tension between a call to the desert and a call to sharing the fruits of the desert with others. I’ve discovered that the more I feel centered in the desert within my heart, the less I feel like I need exterior desert around me. Sometimes I feel like I can bring the desert with me in all situations: washing the dishes, playing video games, offering spiritual direction.

What’s one of the greatest joys that you have in this life right now?

My greatest joy is the feeling of walking in the light of God’s presence. There’s a lot of talk in the Bible and especially the Psalms about peace and joy. In my experience, the greatest joy comes wrapped up in peace – “the peace that passeth understanding.” In this life, I have a sense of really profound stillness and resting, like Nicholas is letting himself totally rest in the stillness that is in the center point, his heart, where Christ’s light is. That’s who I truly am; it’s my real identity. Not a monk or even Nicholas. Just this I-in-Christ, who I truly am. And when I’m resting in that place, my identity becomes alive and it feels real. And it’s not even a question of *feeling* joy or peace. In a way, I feel like I *become* joy and I *become* peace, and that’s the greatest joy that I feel. 🙏



VOICES OF FRIENDS

Why SSJE? What’s your answer?

Share your story at www.SSJE.org/voices, or email us at friends@ssje.org



I attended Saint John’s Day and stayed at the Guesthouse. At first I was a little apprehensive but as I met others attending and talked to the Brothers, I was deeply moved and blessed. The message I kept hearing was not only to listen for God’s voice, but to choose to walk toward it. I will definitely make Saint John’s Day every year. – **Jaan Sass**

Stretch out your hands and be transformed

As monastics, my Brothers and I stretch out our hands in prayer. We stretch out our hands to one another as a sign of peace. We stretch out our hands to our guests, to welcome them for worship and retreat. We stretch out our hands to you now, asking you to join with us in this ministry, as we ask for your prayers and a gift to support our lives and work. We believe that we are all transformed through these selfless offerings. Thank you for being part of our lives. May Christ, who stretches out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross continue to transform the world.



– **Br. James Koester, SSJE**

SSJE is sustained by the kindness of friends

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We welcome Chris Kintzing (left), who replaces Christian Etherton as Guesthouse Manager in mid-August. Thank you Christian for welcoming our guests throughout this last year!



Br. Robert at a street market.



The Bodhi Zendo in the Peramul Hills.

Dispatches from India January, 2017

Dear Brothers,

I've just returned to Madurai after a most amazing and spiritually nourishing retreat at the Bodhi Zendo in the Peramul Hills. The setting was absolutely breathtaking. The place itself gorgeous and so peaceful. We spent six and a half hours each day in Zazen (seated meditation). I can't really say a whole lot because it's going to take me some time to unpack this. I've never experienced anything like it before. I am now more committed than ever to sustaining a meditative prayer practice.

Fr. Samy, the founder of the center who is both a Jesuit and a Zen master, was simply magnificent as well as being absolutely delightful. Both spiritually profound and light-hearted with an infectious laugh and sense of humor. Like the descriptions of Teresa of Avila.

Yesterday after leaving our retreat we went up to the top of the hills to a town called Kodaikanal, another wonderful place. We went to Mass at the church of the Sacred Heart, which had an interior that looked more like a Hindu temple than any Catholic church I've ever seen! I've never seen so many statues. Just about every saint in the calendar. Well, I'm exaggerating – but you get the point. The place was packed, with the congregation spilling over into the plaza in front of the building. I cried here too. I can't explain that, except that I was looking into the church, which was a sea of saris seated on the floor and adorable children in their Sunday best. Two little girls dressed as brides made their first Holy

Communion. And just before Eucharist was given out, Christmas tree lights, which were all over the altar, were turned on and began to flash! God's presence was so evident to me there. A woman came out into the plaza to give us our communion because there was no way we could have ever made it up to the altar in that sea of women and children.

Tonight during our cab ride home, Jamie [Coats] turned on his video camera and shot some really hilariously hair-raising footage of what I was looking at from my place in the front seat beside the driver. It's actually quite funny and gives a very good idea of what traffic is like and how absolutely chaotic everything is here. Because not only are there cars, motorbikes, rickshaws, and other assorted vehicles, but there are the goats, chickens, dogs, and of course cows, as well as pedestrians walking along the edge of the road. Traffic lights seem to be optional because drivers just go through red lights at will.

The cities are incredibly filthy. This city [Madurai] has over a million people and it still has open sewers and trash everywhere, with the dogs, cats, and cows just helping themselves to the mess. But it is still a wonderful place. I can't explain that to myself so I won't try to explain it to you. There is just so much life happening before your eyes. And the people are just incredible. Incredible in how they live their lives in the whole mess of it all with humor and equanimity. It must have been the source of much of [Anthony] de Mello's ideas about detachment and living life without constantly trying to live it on your own terms. They seem to have no terms. I don't know if I will ever understand it. I don't know that I need to, really. All I can say is that I have loved every single minute of my time here.

– Br. Robert L'Esperance



Mass at the church of the Sacred Heart in Kodaikanal.



A visit to the temple of Lord Shiva.



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