The Trappist monks of Mepkin Abbey taught me how to pray again

So why didn’t I want to introduce my Methodist congregants to them?

by Jason Byassee in the December 15, 2021 issue

Trappist monks at prayer (photo courtesy of the Abbey of Gethsemani)

I first learned to pray from evangelicals who converted me at a Christian camp. Prayer was a “quiet time,” reading the Bible and petitioning God, usually at the start of the day. I was encouraged to pray with the acronym ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. This practice worked just fine for me, until it didn’t. After 20 years or so it started to feel like I was talking to myself.

In seminary, friends told me about Mepkin Abbey, a Trappist monastery in South Carolina Low Country, near the coast. We were learning about the great traditions of the church, including monasticism, and whatever Protestant bias I had was washed away as I recognized that the church had found wisdom and grace through monks and nuns for millennia. We cannot find a time, until the Reformation, when there was Christianity without monks and nuns. I sometimes now speak of Reformed

Christianity as an experiment in being Christian without anyone anywhere vowing poverty, chastity, and obedience. The early returns, 500 years on, are not positive.

The monks at Mepkin Abbey taught me how to pray again.

At 3:20 a.m. they gather for Matins, chanting the Psalms for an hour with a long break for silence. They include readings not only from the Bible but from the church fathers and mothers. Then they pray again at 5 a.m. and at 7 a.m. before gathering for Eucharist at 8 a.m. By the time most of us get to our cubicles, the monks have prayed up a month of Sundays—and they're far from done. They pray again before lunch, in the evening, and then, in the most incandescently beautiful of the offices, they pray before bed. They turn out the lights, light candles by a statue of Mary, and chant together the Salve Regina, an ancient prayer invoking Mary's help. "Oh clement, oh loving, oh most sweet Virgin Mary." They sing it with such tenderness it nearly overwhelms my Protestant objections.

"Beauty will save the world," Dostoevsky said, and I see this in these monks. They taught me to chant psalms, to revel in the tradition, to sit in silence, to pray while working, to delight in God's presence. In short, they retaught me how to be Christian. I'll never not give thanks for them.

My wife, Jaylynn, has a photo from our wedding day by the side of our bed. I have, in the same position, a photo of Mepkin Abbey. When I told her once that if I died, I wanted her to remarry someone as like me as possible while also somehow not nearly as good, she responded, "If something happens to me, you have my blessing to join the monastery." Romance at its finest.

In fact, the monks were part of our early romance. Jaylynn heard from me how wonderful they were, so she wanted to visit. I explained that we couldn't sit together at meals. I meant that the monks have their own dining hall and guests have a separate one. The door is open so that guests can hear the reading while we eat in silence. It's the way St. Benedict prescribed things in the fifth century.

But what Jaylynn heard is that she couldn't sit with *me*. So she gathered her tray and breezed out of the guest area—and right into the monks' area. She did as one does when one is nervous, like she knew exactly what she was doing, head up and eyes straight ahead. *I got this, eating with monks, righto.* She cruised over to the monks' block of butter and started to help herself, when 95-year-old Father Christian, with bent back and long beard and twinkle in his eye, asked, "Oh, I see you're joining us

today?” He was genuinely delighted. In the Benedictine tradition, guests are to be received as Christ. Father Christian took Jaylynn’s misunderstanding of the rules as a sign that Christ had a special grace for him and his brothers that day. We called him “Father Butter” ever thereafter.

Another time at the abbey I volunteered my paltry services to work with the monks. The monks used to run a chicken farm. (They’ve since changed to a shiitake and oyster mushroom operation.) I went out with two monks to shovel the chicken shit that they sold to local farmers for use as compost. We laughed while we worked, in an altogether more talkative way than I thought monks would be given to. Years later one of those monks, Brother Stan, became the monastery’s abbot. He now ranks equivalent to a bishop in the church’s worldwide hierarchy. I reminded him recently of those shit-shoveling days. “That was better than a lot of what I’m shoveling now,” he quipped.

At the front of the monks’ hand-printed Psalters there are two quotes. One is from Thomas Merton, the most famous Trappist. He prays that there will always be dark, quiet churches, so that even if folks don’t know how to pray, they can step inside a minute and breathe easily. The other is from St. Augustine, who acknowledges that when we pray through the psalms, Christ prays through us: “This psalm is spoken in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, both head and members. He is the head, we are the members. Not without good reason then, his voice is ours, and our voice is also his. Let us therefore listen to the psalm and recognize in it the voice of Christ.”

I was so fascinated by that that I wrote my dissertation on Augustine’s doctrine of the “whole Christ.” But I have also been fascinated by the way that some of the older monks at Mepkin don’t even have to open their psalm books. They know what has long been called “the whole David” by heart.

My love of these people is clear. So why didn’t I want to introduce the people at my Methodist church to them?

I was afraid they’d ruin it. Methodists would descend on the place and overrun it. Or they wouldn’t like it and they’d judge me for being too Catholic. Or maybe, more selfishly, I wanted to keep my spiritual treasure to myself, to not spoil it by mixing it with my work. I don’t know.

But one day, I finally changed my mind. I invited a few lay leaders and a few college students from the Methodist campus ministry, and away we went.

We arrived on the first evening later than expected. I led them all into the church, a dozen of us being as quiet as we could but still making a racket. We rounded a corner into the reserve sacrament chapel, and there the monks were. Every one of them. Silent in front of the reserve sacrament. They looked, to our untutored eyes, like Jedi. White robes, long sleeves, beards, and bald heads. We clomped in and sat down.

Now you see why I was hesitant to taint Mepkin with Methodists. What is the reserve sacrament? What's a monk? A monastery? Methodists are people who believe in individual conversion, study of the scriptures, evangelism. Monks seem against all those things. Couldn't this go badly?

But Mepkin Abbey had fed my soul. Who was I to deny this nourishment to others? I should have trusted my people to sort out what they stood to learn, what they should leave behind, and where Jesus was at work.

One of my lay leaders at the time has the impossible name of Johnny Carson. He's a round man in every way: midsectionally round, bald of head round, broad of smile round, love of Jesus round. He has the biggest heart I know. Our church in Boone, North Carolina, was rarely open when he wasn't there, ministering and serving and encouraging.

Johnny loved the monks from the start. He asked his first question: What are they doing with their hands? I didn't know what he meant. "You know, they rev their hands up when they pray, like they're getting going." Sure enough, I noticed in the next office: the monks circle their hands like they're cranking an engine. What's that about?

Their robes have long sleeves, and those sleeves make it hard to find one's hands. So they have to shuffle a little to free their hands to turn the pages in their psalm books. Johnny saw them cranking a motor. They were, in a way. They were praying.

Once several of the Boone Methodists processed out of their choir stalls and into the procession of monks for the liturgy. I was mortified. Surely they knew they shouldn't do that, right? Go back to your seats! But my Methodist friend Scott could hardly contain his smile.

I learned later that the monks had needed some assistance with a liturgical gesture, and the Methodists were nearby and ready to lend a hand. "I knew what you were

thinking," Scott said. "You thought we were going rogue. Actually we were obeying." Good lesson for a pastor. The people might move without you. You might think they're wrong when they actually couldn't be more right.

Mepkin is fairly unique in the Trappist world for how deeply it invites guests into its life. All Benedictines—the larger umbrella under which Trappists exist—pledge to receive every guest as Christ. Yet they also vow poverty, chastity, obedience, and devotion to prayer. Individual abbeys juggle these occasionally competing commitments in different ways. Several monasteries wall off guests from monks. You're in church, but your entry and exit are separate from theirs, and you can't go past the divide. Mepkin, by contrast, invites guests all the way up into their stalls for prayer. The sign asks you to sit in the back, but the request is only there, it seems, to be flaunted. You eat in a room catty-corner to the monks, but you can get to their butter without great effort.

Mepkin's openness is in some ways related to its topography. It is in the South's Low Country. Before air conditioning that meant you had to angle your house on the land so as to catch the best breezes. Mepkin sits above the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, so its pre-AC builders did what sandlappers do and set the buildings at an angle. There was no room for a wall, and if there were, it'd have just blocked the breeze. A building commitment rooted in the local ground became a commitment to welcome the guest with particular vulnerability and openness.

I learned to pray again at the abbey. So why was I hesitant to bring others there?

As with most human beings, the monks' strength is close kin to their weakness, their superpower not far from their Achilles' heel. Their openness has allowed them to be easy prey for, among others, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, who objected to their chicken farm and forced its shutdown. But it also allows them to inculcate their charism with particular intensity. Methodists go home knowing how to be Methodists again.

The pilgrimage gave us Methodists time to talk to one another about things less prosaic than our standard pre-church chatter about the weather and football. Perhaps ironically, when you devote eight hours a day to prayer, it seems you have all the time in the world. You get up ungodly early, sure. And you go to bed weirdly early to compensate. But there's no TV. There's no work for guests to do, other than volunteering to shovel if you want. We had unhurried time to talk. I learned about

my parishioners' upbringings, their siblings, their parents, their children, their loves I wouldn't have known anything about without that time together.

The main thing I learned from taking Methodists to Mepkin was about prayer. I had no trouble getting folks to go on the trip; in fact, more wanted to go than the monks could accommodate. And once there, no one had trouble getting up at 3 a.m. for the first daily office. Every morning, hours before the sun, the monks and the Methodists bowed and twirled and chanted psalms. The retreat master finally took me aside. "Look," he said, "I can't get Catholic priests to come to this place. If they come, they sure don't bring laypeople, and they sure as hell don't get up at three o'clock in the morning. What are you feeding these Methodists?!" Our people were hungry to pray like monks. They were relearning prayer, as I had done years before.

I think the reason they took to monastic prayer so profoundly is that Methodism is a revivalist sect. We were born when the Wesleys asked their fellow baptized members of a state church: Are we going to take Jesus seriously or not? If not, fine, but if so, here's the way to do it: Meet in small groups. Pray. Ask who sinned this week. Make promises to do better. Visit the poor. Evangelize. Encourage prisoners. Teach the illiterate. Since Methodism is a revivalist sect, if we're not reviving anybody, what are we doing?

These Methodists knew in their bones they were supposed to pursue a disciplined way of prayer. But as a church we had long since forgotten how. At some point a lot of Methodists went from being despised for their seriousness about the gospel to being just another tall steeple country club. The monks were giving us back our Methodism. Pray like this, at this hour, in this way, and with these people. Don't want to? Do it anyway. And maybe in spite of yourself, you'll start to become more like Jesus.

One night when the Boone Methodists were there, the monks held an anointing service for their ailing members. They brought out the eldest and most infirm monks and sat them in front of the rest of us. Then they prayed, wept, begged God for their health, and lined us all up to pray for them, one by one. We put our hands on their old, bald heads and prayed God's blessings of life and health and peace, on these brothers who are also our brothers. Several Methodists commented on how infant-like their bald heads seemed, some with little white hairs jutting out, some not. Father Butter was there, 102 years old. He stage-whispered to each one of us with inappropriate loudness, "When you're 102, I'll come pray for you." Abbot Stan stood

off in the corner, his shepherd’s crook beside him, and openly wept. The Holy Spirit was brooding in our midst, bringing healing and life where, on our own, there would be only sorrow. God was busily making all things new.

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