

The Strong & Silent Type

Moving Upward through *Contemplative Prayer*

The Fifth Sermon in the Series “Perspectives on Prayer”

Ps. 62:5-8; Matthew 17:1-5

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Ever wonder how a male psychotherapist might describe his own father? A few years back, I read one such description by a private practitioner and author named Terrance Real. Fortunately, because he isn't a PhD, I don't need to refer to him as Dr. Real. That would seriously be too much! Anyway, I like his work with men's issues, work that no doubt came naturally to him given the description he offers of his own father ...

“It took me twenty years to get my father to talk about his own life. I remember the first day he did. I recall the prickly feel of our old yellow couch as we sat together. He was a big man ... six two and well over two hundred pounds, with broad arms, a barrel chest, and a great potbelly that thrust out before him like the bass drum of his booming voice, his laugh. He begins with the usual maneuvers: he adopts surliness, then he jokes, evades. He lapses into silence for awhile, then he begins.”

In sum, Mr. Real's dad seems to be the strong, silent type. It wasn't until his son sat with him, “armed,” as the author describes it, “with the fledgling skills of a young therapist” and having “learned a few lessons in the craft of opening up a closed heart” that any really soul-searching admissions were made between father and son. Once that center spot was tapped, what flowed from his father was a discourse on how tough growing up during the Depression was, the toll it took on his family, and how it led his father to describe himself as being “pretty hardboiled.” (*I Don't Want to Talk About It*, pp. 15-19)

I've encountered many men such as described by Terry Real; certainly enough to validate any stereotypes of what makes for a “real” man. Myself, however, I've never fit into the mold of the strong, silent type -- the kind of guy who exudes authority and bold character yet does so in a quiet, stolid fashion. I'm more of the strong and exuberant type. My resilience often reveals itself in my balancing seriousness with silliness. I did have a few hardboiled years as a teen, but not enough to conceal that at heart I'm really more of a pouched egg. It only takes a little poke and I'll gladly run out my life story for you.

Yet, by the grace of God, the more I grow in my spiritual life as a Christian, the

more my relationship with Jesus Christ is deepened, the more I've begun striving to be a strong and silent type. And I've begun wanting other guys to grow into the same. I need to clarify, however, that the strong, silent type I'm talking about doesn't align neatly with cultural stereotypes. Rather, I'm referring to the desire to become more and more of a "contemplative" person. That is, someone who has the mature self-discipline to practice contemplative prayer, which is both a strong and silent way to pray.

"In its most basic and fundamental expression," writes Richard Foster, "Contemplative Prayer is loving attentiveness to God ... more an experience of the heart than of the head." Foster knows that writing about men having heartfelt experiences might quickly trigger his male readers to tune out. So he just as quickly affirms how talk of contemplative prayer can strain and distress us – men and women, by the way -- because "We have been trained throughout our lives to distrust our feelings, and the very idea that we could gain some knowledge of truth and reality by way of feelings seems ludicrous." Foster then adds a big clarifier by cautioning that the feelings referred to by practitioners of contemplative prayer are not necessarily what we quickly assume them to be. "In using the language of feeling, contemplatives are," instead, "referring to a deeply experienced sense of God." These are not merely the feelings of psychoanalytic talk, then. Nor are they merely the feelings of movie-like melodrama and Hallmark moments. These "feelings" are instead what surfaces while having a profoundly intimate, soul touching encounter with God.

You know when you pause long enough to really contemplate something and suddenly you have sort of an "aha!" moment? A moment when a thought or a gut intuition suddenly seems extremely, intimately real? That's how I can best describe what the feelings resulting from contemplative prayer are most like for me. What I feel is a sense of profound spiritual homecoming.

Jesus, for the most part, wore his emotions on his sleeves. He laughed, he wept, he even raged a bit. But there was a deeper level to his emotional existence. One that was experienced in silence, as when he would leave the crowds and take a break from his disciples and go off to a mountain top to speak with his heavenly Father in private. It's the type of strong, silent, contemplative communion with God the Father that Jesus then taught us to make time to have with him. He asks us not to just have a comfy or charismatic sentimentality for him, but to actually abide in him as he abides in us and in God, that all may be one. (cf. Jn. 15:4, 5, 11; 17:21).

Foster offers a great image for what this contemplative union with Christ is like.

He says, “Consider the image of a log in a fire: the glowing log is so united with the fire that it *is* fire, while, at the same time, it remains wood.” In other words, the goal of contemplative prayer is to be totally consumed with the presence of God while remaining human.

This is not something that comes easily to any of us. Especially since so many of us today are unceasingly tethered to our digital tools and toys. We are on our cell phones talking or texting. We are shooting emails and instant messages back and forth on our personal computers. Yet despite these technological marvels, Foster makes the excellent point that “We now have the dubious distinction of being able to communicate more and *say less* than any civilization in history.” It is the practice of contemplative prayer that by-passes this techno-spiritual tension and can “free us from our addiction to words” so that we may be “immersed” in the instructive “silence of God.”

The process of this “immersion,” of contemplative prayer, is three-fold. To use Foster’s terminology, it involves *recollection, quiet and ecstasy*.

Recollection is where we begin. This is a centering step, a way of focusing our attention on the fact that the Lord is very much present to us. To do this we “let go of all competing distractions until we are truly present where we are.” And we put away “all obstacles of the heart, all distractions of the mind, all vacillations of the will.” The goal is to release all those things that distract us, that demand our fidelity, that compete with our deeply held desire to discern God’s will and way. All electronic devices are turned off on this prayer flight. Other people are politely turned away so we can commune exclusively with our Creator. We strip down our circumstances so as to re-collect the core of our being as children of God.

Once re-collected, we enter into quiet. “At the center of our being,” writes Foster, “we are hushed.” It’s like a parent who successfully calms and quiets a hysterical child by helping that child realize that true security and serenity can be found only in the power of that parent’s heart. And once hushed, once we reach a certain inward attentiveness where we can honestly say we are listening for God, we are then able to experience “the Divine Whisper throughout all life’s motions – balancing a checkbook, vacuuming the floor, visiting with neighbors or business associates.”

Re-collection and quieting pull us toward spiritual ecstasy. That’s a powerful word, isn’t it? Ecstasy. So powerful, in fact, that Foster admits that while writing this part of his chapter on contemplative prayer he feared he was “writing on the edge of un-lived truth.” This guy can really turn a phrase! I feel like I’m writing on the edge of un-lived truth every week! Foster uses the words of another spiritual writer to best

capture what this part of the contemplative process is like. He quotes Theodore Brakel as saying, "I was ... transported into such a state of joy and my thoughts were so drawn upward that, seeing God with the eyes of my soul, I felt one with him."

So being the spiritually strong and silent type means having the prayerful self-discipline to radically locate yourself in an awareness of God's presence; to be hushed to the point of feeling "more alive, more active, than we ever do when our minds are askew with muchness and manyness;" and thus to have a feeling of being fully and joyfully lifted up to touch the loving face of God. I can't stress it enough – Jesus is our very best example of how to live as a contemplative, as a spiritually strong and silent type whose every thought, word and action are aligned heavenward. He is with us still. He is the real deal Mr. Real. We are with Him. All together, we are one with God the Father. Amen.