

## “Contemplatives: Loving God through Adoration”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

Fifth in a Series *Loving God Many Ways*

Psalm 63

February 15, 2015

You are my God, I long for you from early morning.  
My whole being desires you like a dry, worn, waterless land.  
My soul thirsts for you.  
In the sanctuary let me see how mighty are your works;  
your constant love is better than life itself, and so I will praise you.

I will give thanks as long as I live;  
I raise my hands in prayer.  
My soul will feast and be filled, and I will sing and praise you.

As I lie in bed, I remember you, O God;  
I think of you all night long, for you are my constant help.  
In the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.  
I cling to you; your hand keeps me safe.

Psalm 63

Voices United hymn book, p. 781

*Longing. Desiring. Thirsting.*

These are words we use to talk about romantic, passionate love. That is, if you are into that sort of thing.

Even if you are, would you these words – longing, desiring, thirsting – for God? The Psalm we just read, and then sang, sure does. It sounds like a love poem:

*Your constant love is better than life itself. . . .*

*I will give thanks as long as I live. . . .*

*As I lie in bed, I think of you all night long. . . .*

It is a love poem. Eww!!

These are the sort of things we might have said yesterday, February 14<sup>th</sup>. But this is Sunday! Worship is about us and God. Is it right to talk about God with ewey, gooey love words?

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. That's what Jesus told us to do. I do trust him. So I try to love God. But how?

When God says to us, "I desire your love,"<sup>1</sup> God is not asking us for something that we cannot give. God has made us as creatures who are capable of loving God. And because God makes us so diverse, we can love God in different ways.

## II

Once a month, since September, we've been celebrating different ways we love God. Gary Thomas calls these "Spiritual Pathways." I've listed them in your Sunday News.<sup>2</sup>

Caregivers  
Traditionalists  
Activists  
Contemplatives  
Ascetics  
Enthusiasts  
Intellectuals  
Naturalists  
Sensates

Each of us will be drawn to some pathways more than others. At the back of the sanctuary, you'll find a short questionnaire that can help you clarify your pathways.

Today, our focus is the fourth one, **contemplatives** who love God through adoration.

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Hosea 6.6.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Thomas, Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul's Path to God revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). Here are short definitions of each.

**Caregivers** love God by caring for others.

**Traditionalists** love God with our ancestors.

**Activists** love God by confronting injustice.

**Contemplatives** love God through adoration.

**Ascetics** love God in solitude and simplicity.

**Enthusiasts** love God by engaging mystery and celebration.

**Intellectuals** love God with their minds.

**Naturalists** love God outdoors.

**Sensates** love God by engaging their senses.

I've changed the order Thomas presents them, to fit my planned order for this series.

### III

Jesus says to us, *“I no longer call you servants. . . . I call you friends.”*<sup>3</sup> There is a big difference, right. Friends love each other. You are Jesus’ friend.

When I talked about activists last month, I mentioned Thomas Merton. Merton was an activist. He loved God by seeking justice. He was also a contemplative. He once said, *there are so many Christians who have practically no idea of the immense love of God for them, and of the power of that love to do them good, to bring them happiness.*<sup>4</sup>

You can love God when you realize, deep in your being, that God loves you.

Imagine yourself in these scenes.

*“Holding hands with God.”*<sup>5</sup>

Picture a couple walking together, silently. They’ve belonged to each other for so long, no words are needed. Just a touch and a hold. Imagine that’s you and God.

*Being in a “transforming friendship” with God.*<sup>6</sup>

It’s a friendship so deep that who they are is imprinted on you. They change you. Imagine that’s God, going through life with you.

*Bathing “in the ocean of God’s love.”*<sup>7</sup>

It’s sunny and hot. (Imagine hard!) You’ve waded into the water, just past your belly. You dunk under. It bites cold. Then, it refreshes. It holds you, playfully, gently and strongly. Imagine the ocean is God’s love for you.

This one is from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy:

*“Resting between God’s shoulders.”*<sup>8</sup>

God holds you close. Feel the warmth. Listen to the heartbeat. The Divine breath rises and falls. Have you been crying, and God is comforting you? Were you afraid, and God is reassuring you? Is all well, and you are simply at peace?

---

<sup>3</sup> John 15.15.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Thomas, 193.

<sup>5</sup> James Houston, quoted in Thomas 187.

<sup>6</sup> Also Houston, in Thomas 188.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, 193.

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 33.12. Translations vary as to whether it is the beloved, in this case the tribe of Benjamin, who rests between God’s shoulders (NIV, NRSV, CEB), or God who rests between the beloved’s shoulders (ESV). This suggests the Hebrew is ambiguous.

That's the Contemplative Tradition.

You see, being a Christian is not, at its heart, about believing the right things, or doing the right things. It is about intimacy with God. Of course, such intimacy leads you to want to know more truthfully about God (believing right). Loving God, you'll desire to do what pleases God (doing right). Yet believing right or doing right would be hollow, or worse, without love: knowing God's love for you, and resting in love with God.

*"The Contemplative Tradition is a response to God's longing that we spend our lives with [God], that we create space in our lives to be with [God]. Our lives are busy and full of worries and anxiety, and our usual response is to push God out of the way entirely. Practicing the disciplines of the Contemplative Tradition equips us to create in our lives the 'space' that God longs for and the intimacy that we need."*<sup>9</sup>

#### IV

How can we create space for adoration? Here are three practices you can try.

**Silence.** Spend 5-10 minutes each day in silence. Cultivate quiet. Remove distractions that keep you from adoring the presence of God.

When Barb and I were first dating, we went to a restaurant that was also a sports bar. It had televisions in different spots. Here's a lesson. Don't let your beloved sit right below a screen. As much as you want to focus on her, your eyes will keep wandering up to the NASCAR race. She won't like it much.

Silence can calm and focus us. You know you are close to someone when you can enjoy being together, without saying anything. Try sitting quietly with God.<sup>10</sup>

**The Jesus Prayer.** This is different from "The Lord's Prayer." It comes from the Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity. It is saying a simple prayer, over and over. Through a simple sentence, we focus our thoughts on God, so God can enter our hearts.

The most common phrase in the tradition is this:

*"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"*

---

<sup>9</sup> James Bryan Smith and Lynda Graybeal, A Spiritual Formation Workbook revised edition (San Francisco: Harper, 1999), 34.

<sup>10</sup> See Smith & Graybeal, 35 and Thomas 191.

Here's another, from a fifth-century monk named Cassian:

*"Come to my aid, God; Lord, make haste to help me."*

And another, from Psalm 51:

*"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."*

Each of these reminds us of our need for help. The help God promises and provides. When we are frenzied, a simple and memorable phrase can anchor us in the stability of God our Rock.<sup>11</sup>

**Secret Acts of Devotion.** Do something that only God knows about. No one knows that you've done it. If it is something you've done for someone, even that person does not know it was you. Do it solely because of your love for God, only for God's pleasure.

- give anonymously to someone who is in need;
- write something, or do some art for God, then burn it as an offering;
- sing a song when you are alone with God;
- choose a symbol of your love for God, and keep it hidden in a pocket or under your clothes;
- send an anonymous note of encouragement to someone;
- plant a tree in the wilderness or sow seeds in a field, and tell no one.<sup>12</sup>

## V

Let me finish with one caution, and then a most startling fact.

Remember when they saw Jesus transfigured on the mountain. It was a moment of such spiritual intensity and wonder. What did Peter want to do?

Stay there. Build tents there. Freeze the moment forever. Of course. Even a tiny glimpse of Jesus' fullness, and we want to sink deeper and deeper in.

But Jesus would not let Peter stay. Jesus brought him off the mountain, and continued his mission.

A danger with contemplation is that we'll suppose such moments resting in God's presence are what the Christian life is all about. We'll cling to the "sacred," and avoid the "secular" stuff in this messy world. That's not the way of Jesus. We get to visit the mountain. Then

---

<sup>11</sup> See Smith & Graybeal, 36 and Thomas 194.

<sup>12</sup> See Thomas, 195.

we come down and continue following Jesus into the world.

Now, something startling.

There is one thing that you can do for God, one thing that only you can do for God. The most holy saint cannot do it. Of all the people in the whole world, no one else is qualified to do what you can do.

Only you can give your love and your devotion to God.<sup>13</sup>

And God treasures it.

---

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, 205.