

STREAMS
in the
WASTELAND

*Finding Spiritual Renewal
with the Desert Fathers & Mothers*

ANDREW ARNDT

I'm always on the lookout for ancient wisdom made accessible to our contemporary world. Not everyone does this well. Andrew Arndt does. Andrew has given us a great gift in re-presenting “desert spirituality” for this generation. In these pages, you'll find the nourishment your soul longs for.

RICH VILLODAS, lead pastor of New Life Fellowship
and author of *The Deeply Formed Life*

In *Streams in the Wasteland*, Andrew Arndt shares with us how the Desert Fathers and Mothers have shaped his own faith, welcoming us to listen as they still teach us about God, others, and our world. Set against a backdrop of Scripture, this book invites us all to experience the love and inner freedom described by Andrew's ancient friends.

ALICE FRYLING, author of *Aging Faithfully: The Holy Invitation of Growing Older*

In Scripture, wilderness is where you find trouble. But it's also where we encounter the burning bush; it's the rugged country where God finds us and rescues us. In these pages, we hear—through a fresh and artful pen—these ancient voices who knew the wild places and the wild God. We're desperate for this wisdom.

WINN COLLIER, director of the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination at Western Theological Seminary, author of *Love Big, Be Well* and *A Burning in My Bones*

Andrew Arndt has made friends with the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and he invites us to enjoy their friendship too. His winsome book reveals how their wisdom sheds light on the problems we face today. One to read, underline, ponder, and share.

AMY BOUCHER PYE, author of *7 Ways to Pray*

Andrew is one of the clearest, brightest thinkers in the local church. This book takes us right into the presence of God, opening our eyes to the mystery and wonder of the resurrected Christ.

BRADY BOYD, senior pastor of New Life Church

With one foot in the stream of the desert dwellers from the fourth and fifth centuries and the other in our contemporary spiritual wasteland, Andrew Arndt shares with his reader the treasures that desert spirituality offers us in our own seeking. As Andrew gently insists, exploring these treasures will not draw us into a privatized faith. Rather, they lead us into transformed relationships within our communities of faith

and a more transforming engagement with God's world. This book will become a treasure for many seekers.

TREVOR HUDSON, author of *Seeking God: Finding Another Kind of Life with St. Ignatius and Dallas Willard*

In a cultural moment that chases celebrity and prizes originality, Andrew Arndt is calling us back to the hard-won wisdom of the wilderness. The monks and sages down through the ages have much to teach us if we will just listen. Simplicity. Sanity. Soul-satisfying anonymity. This book contains a great healing for our emaciated age.

DANIEL GROTHE, author of *The Power of Place*

In a time of fickle faith and rampant individualism, Andrew Arndt will encourage your journey. But then his words will poke and prod you to the point of offense. This, I think, is the making of a great book, unafraid to tell the truth with grace, but to tell the truth no less. Solitude, community, and mission—this is the Jesus way, the way the desert disciples revealed to be our life-giving source for the journey. Andrew serves here as a wise guide into *that* way.

AJ SHERRILL, priest and author of *Being with God: The Absurdity, Necessity, and Neurology of Contemplative Prayer*

Andrew Arndt invites us, with his constant posture of honesty and grace, to be re-centered by the wisdom and practices of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. As they have led him, they will guide you toward the power and presence of community so you may kneel down once again at the riverbank of Living Waters.

ANDI ROZIER, pastor of worship at New Life East

Amidst global crises and faltering faith, many find themselves in the desert, disoriented and disappointed. Andrew Arndt shows us that we are not the first to feel this way. The desert saints stood against the corruption of the church and the pollution of the world, embracing and embodying a different wisdom. The brilliance of this book is not simply in the way Andrew selects and synthesizes from the desert saints; it's in how he places their insight into our lives like water on our parched tongues.

GLENN PACKIAM, lead pastor of New Life Downtown, author of *The Resilient Pastor* and *Blessed Broken Given*

STREAMS
in the
WASTELAND

*Finding Spiritual Renewal
with the Desert Fathers & Mothers*

ANDREW ARNDT



A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tyndale House Publishers



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

For more information, visit NavPress.com.

Streams in the Wasteland: Finding Spiritual Renewal with the Desert Fathers and Mothers

Copyright © 2022 by Andrew Arndt. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

NavPress and the NavPress logo are registered trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO. *Tyndale* is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Ministries. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

The Team:

David Zimmerman, Publisher; Caitlyn Carlson, Editor; Elizabeth Schroll, Copy Editor; Olivia Eldredge, Operations Manager; Libby Dykstra, Designer

Cover illustration of God in Nature and Revelation, 1875, public domain.

Interior photograph of wood texture copyright © Chayanit/Rawpixel. All rights reserved.

Author photograph by Ashlee Weaver, copyright © 2018. All rights reserved.

Published in association with The Bindery Agency, www.TheBinderyAgency.com

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] *NIV*.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.[®] Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version. Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version,[®] copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the *ESV*[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®]), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NRSV are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked CSB have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible[®], copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible[®] and CSB[®] are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers. Scripture quotations marked KJ21 are taken from the 21st Century King James Version[®], copyright © 1994. Used by permission of Deuel Enterprises, Inc., Gary, SD 57237. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers [Apoththegmata Patrum]: The Alphabetic Collection* by Benedicta Ward, S.L.G., trans., CS 59 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975) are used by permission of Liturgical Press. All right reserved.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-64158-451-7

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For the saints of Believers Church, Marshfield, circa 1981–1999,
who first showed me holiness. Your witness still inspires me.*

Contents

Foreword *ix*

Introduction: Standing at the Crossroads *1*

PART ONE: Into the Desert with God 17

CHAPTER 1: For the Love of God *19*

CHAPTER 2: The Great Renunciation *37*

CHAPTER 3: Essential Habits for the With-God Life *57*

PART TWO: Into the Desert with Others 77

CHAPTER 4: Called to Community *79*

CHAPTER 5: Saved into Community *99*

CHAPTER 6: Restored through Community *119*

PART THREE: Into the Desert for the World 139

CHAPTER 7: Saving Speech *141*

CHAPTER 8: Sanctifying Work *161*

CHAPTER 9: Divine Generosity *183*

Acknowledgments *203*

Notes *205*

Foreword

“WE ALWAYS, EVENTUALLY, BECOME LIKE WHAT WE WORSHIP.”

These words house a warning, obviously, but they’re also pregnant with promise. At one level, they call us back to the searing reality of God’s holiness, pressing us to remember that God is not useful—never at our disposal, not in any sense a force we can wield or a power we can resource. At another level, however, they renew our confidence, reminding us that the God who always keeps his promises has promised to conform us to the image of his beloved Son (Romans 8:29).

This, then, is the warning: We become like what we worship; therefore, we must turn away from idols. And this is the promise hidden in the warning: We can, in fact, turn away from idols because God has turned his face to us. We have not only seen “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6, NRSV); we are also being “transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18, NRSV). In his light, we are becoming light.

God has made it possible for us to turn from idols, but that work can be done only in “the wilderness.” Why? Because, as the Desert

Fathers and Mothers knew, it is only in no-man's-land that we come to the end of our competencies, our consolations, and our kinships. We cannot really love our neighbors—including, especially, our dearest friends and closest family—until we have been set free both from their control and our own fantasies and suspicions. We can live with them nonpossessively only as we are able to divest ourselves of unnecessary possessions. We can be present to them only if we know how to withdraw—for their sakes as well as our own—into the presence of the God who so often seems to be absent. As Andrew puts it in his preacherly (but not at all preachy) way:

Abraham couldn't be a blessing to the world unless he first left his family. Moses couldn't deliver the people from their oppression unless he first threw off the trappings of Egyptian power. Rahab couldn't welcome the spies and save her family unless she renounced Jericho in her heart.

This, I believe, is the deepest wisdom of the desert: We have to turn not only from evil but also from the good as we have known it. We must learn what it means to say, "No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10:18, NRSV). We must discover why it is "more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). We must know how to choose "the better part" (Luke 10:42, NRSV).

Maximus the Confessor, reflecting on Christ's stripping of the powers (Colossians 2:15), argues that Christ went out into the wilds in order to ensnare the devil: "He provoked, by means of our temptations, the wicked power, thwarting it by His own attack,

FOREWORD

and putting to death the very power that expected to thwart Him.”¹ He stripped the powers of their power, Maximus says, by curing our nature, which he had assumed for us and our salvation, drawing out the “corrupting poison” of the devils’ wickedness and “consuming it like fire.”²

In the light of Maximus’s reflections, we can see that Jesus was able to overcome evil because he never let an imagined good separate him from the reality of God. He could refuse to turn stones to bread because he had no illusions about his own competencies. He could refuse to throw himself down from the Temple because he did not doubt the Spirit’s consolation. He could refuse control over the kingdoms of this world because he knew his kinship with the Father—and with us.

Thanks to his victory, we can live those refusals with him. But we must decide to live them! Andrew is right: We live in a spiritual wasteland because we have not yet joined Christ in his wilderness. So if we want to see the promised times of refreshment in our lives, then we need heed the wisdom of the desert, the wisdom of the Deserted One—turning aside to the cross that burns but does not consume, drinking deeply from the streams of living water that rush from the wounds of the Crucified One. All our hopes, all God’s hopes, hang on us becoming like him.

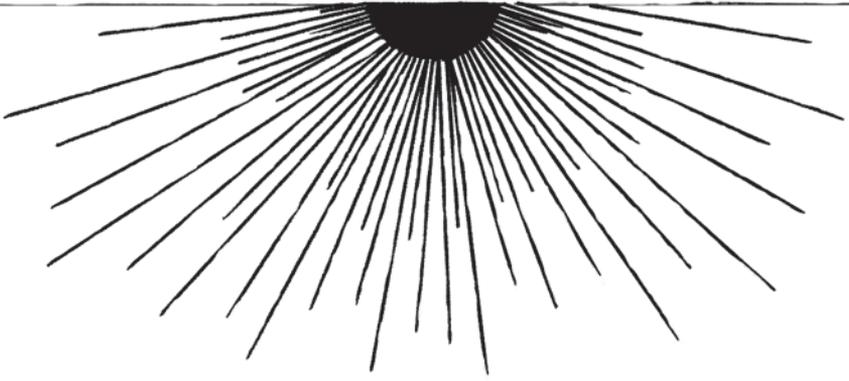
Lent 2022

Chris E. W. Green

professor of public theology (Southeastern University)

and director of St. Anthony Institute for

Philosophy, Theology, and Liturgics



INTRODUCTION

STANDING AT THE CROSSROADS

*This is what the LORD says:
“Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.
But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’”*

JEREMIAH 6:16

A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, “You are mad, you are not like us.”

ABBA ANTHONY

THE MAN APPROACHED ME after a worship service, and his story poured out. He'd been born and raised in a nonreligious home—had no spiritual background to speak of. He married young and started a business with his best friend. The company became very successful, very quickly. Then, after a decade or so, tragedy struck: His wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. They fought it with all their strength and all their resources—at times feeling like they had the upper hand in the battle; at others fearing that her precious life was slipping away.

Eventually, it did. The cancer metastasized and spread to her brain—pillaging her personality many months before it stole her life. She passed, leaving him behind with their two children. He returned to work only to discover that his friend had angled to push him out of the company they'd built together. Bereaved, betrayed, and grieving what had suddenly become of his life, with no spiritual foundation to speak of, he began to self-medicate to numb the pain. He entered a spiral of sadness and self-harm that would last several years.

“And so,” he explained to me, “my girlfriend and I wandered in here a few weeks ago. I'm not even sure why, but we did. And every time I sit in these services, I find myself weeping in a way that I haven't since my wife passed. I just sit here and cry and cry. I don't know what's happening to me. And I don't even really understand what you guys are singing and talking about. But something is happening to me. And I know that it's good.”

This man had stumbled across a well in the desert of his experience. He was finding God amid the desolation of his life. The existential hunger at the core of his life was being satisfied.

“Man is a hungry being,” writes the Orthodox priest Father Alexander Schmemmann. “But he is hungry for God. Behind all the

hunger of our life is God. All desire is finally a desire for Him.”¹
The psalmist said as much:

You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.

PSALM 63:1

We are hungry, we are thirsty—for God. The desperate longing of our lives is for God. And we—as Saint Augustine said long ago—are “restless” until we find God.² Unsatiated spiritual restlessness is always to our hurt.

In time, as the man in my church found himself satisfied in God, he also found his sadness healed and self-harm at an end. His humanity was being and continues to be restored. As a pastor and friend to him, it’s been a delight to watch. But my friend’s story, I think, is also a parable for our time. Whether we know it or not, God is our inescapable environment, our first and final truth. But many—even in the church—are not really aware of this. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke referred to God as “a web / of tangled roots” plunged deep into the dark soil of our existence, out of whose “avid warmth,” he said, “I rise.”³

Such rising only really takes place when we recognize and embrace God amid the dark soil. In the absence of this, we will—each in our own way, to be sure—try to satisfy our hunger for God with what is not-God, with relationships and success, with sex and power, with prestige and pleasure of every kind.

I believe that the misidentification of spiritual desire combined with a staggering lack of practical knowledge about how such desire is satisfied is responsible for the madness of our time. It is responsible for things like codependency, promiscuity, and divorce; for the abuse of power, greed, and the senseless plundering of natural resources; for racism, classism, and sexism; for our pathological love of violence and fear of those who are different from us, as well as for every kind of substance abuse and destructive self-medication.

Less dramatically but no less insidiously, I believe that such misidentification is also responsible for the existential fatigue so characteristic of our age. Severed from our source, we are also cut off from any sense of purpose that might give meaning to our days. To use the language of the psalmist, we are like animals wandering about for food, howling because we are not satisfied (Psalm 59:15); and altogether too often, like animals, in our hunger we devour one another.

Ours is indeed a spiritual wasteland.

THE CROSSROADS

God's people are no strangers to this situation. We have been here before. Many times, in fact. In the sixth century BC, centuries of rebellion and wickedness finally began to catch up with the people of Judah and Jerusalem. The northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians in the mid-late eighth century BC, but what should have served as a cautionary tale for the southern kingdom of Judah instead became a point of pride. The people of Judah simply reasoned that they were *better* than their northern counterparts. They believed they were safe.

To the complacent southern kingdom, God sent the prophet Jeremiah with the words, "From the north disaster will be poured

out on all who live in the land” (Jeremiah 1:14). Judah’s sense of safety was an illusion. Disaster was coming.

And what was the source of this disaster? The Lord asked Judah:

What fault did your ancestors find in me,
that they strayed so far from me?
They followed worthless idols
and became worthless themselves.

JEREMIAH 2:5

We always, eventually, become like what we worship—for better or for worse. We are, by an infallible law of the universe, transformed into the likeness of the objects of our devotion. The idols of the nations, under whose spell Judah had fallen, were “worthless.” The Hebrew word for this is *hevel*—empty, futile, capable of nothing. Judah has exchanged their glorious God for facsimile gods; they’ve given up the living God for knock-off deities. And as the people of Judah gave themselves over to these idols, they “became worthless themselves.”

The Lord puts the matter in the sharpest possible relief:

My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

JEREMIAH 2:13

There are moments in Scripture where moral and spiritual insight rise from the page like a volcanic island out of the heart

of the sea. This is one of them. Jeremiah's words are a constant provocation to me. These two sins are the same for individuals, for families, for communities, peoples, and nations:

1. forsaking God, the only possible source of life; and
2. digging our own cisterns, which cannot hold water.

The consequences of living waywardly are not arbitrary. God is not a needy, insecure tyrant who lashes out with violence when he is ignored. No, we face the organic consequence of our choices. Should a thirsty man wonder that he dies when water is offered but he refuses to drink it? Should a starving woman wonder that she dies when food is offered but she refuses to eat it? Should we wonder that we die when Life is offered and we refuse to receive it?

But that is *exactly* what we do. And what's worse is, in our pride, we double down on our decisions. We feel the need to convince those around us—ourselves included—that the way we have chosen really is paradise:

From the least to the greatest,
all are greedy for gain;
prophets and priests alike,
all practice deceit.
They dress the wound of my people
as though it were not serious.
“Peace, peace,” they say,
when there is no peace.

JEREMIAH 6:13-14

We spend money we don't have on things we don't need and call it affluence. We work eighty hours a week at the expense of our families and call it #livingmybestlife. We pay our hourly employees the bare minimum and call it profit optimization. We starve ourselves and exhaust our bodies and call it health. We break faith with our spouses and children and call it "finding myself." Our personal lives and the life of our society together are one gigantic open wound, and we call it *peace*. In Hebrew, this word is *shalom*, the state of universal flourishing when everything in the created order is aligned as God intends, working as God intends. What Judah was doing, what *we* are doing, however much we try to call it "shalom," is anything but.

The prophet's job is to expose illusions, to rip the Band-Aid off so that we can feel the pain that compels us to seek the healing we need. Which is what Jeremiah does. If the diagnosis is "[We] have forsaken [God], the spring of living water, and have dug [our] own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (Jeremiah 2:13), the prescription is:

Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.

JEREMIAH 6:16

A RADICAL WAY

The paradox of the crossroads is that the only way to go forward is to go backward. To return to your roots, to the wisdom you once knew but had somehow forgotten. Jeremiah understood this. Judah

was suffering spiritual amnesia. She had forgotten things that ought to have never been forgotten. As a result, her life had become not only “worthless” but monstrous. To go forward, she would have to go backward, to her covenantal roots, to a core of sanity that lay beneath the centuries of accumulated madness and folly.

Judah did not heed Jeremiah’s warnings. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians.

Centuries later, another society was teetering. Toward the end of the third century AD, the Roman Empire was a vast and powerful network of provinces, territories, and colonies, which had been united under the so-called *Pax Romana*—the Peace of Rome. The *Pax* had brought unprecedented security, prosperity, and unity to an enormous number of people. Her emperors were worshiped as gods. And why shouldn’t they be? Through them, a kind of “salvation” had come.

But beneath the glamour of Rome, moral decay was setting in. Some of her sharpest minds knew it—and tried to call attention to it, to no avail. The Roman satirical poet Juvenal in the second century observed that the vitality of Rome’s commonwealth was being sapped by what he called “bread, and the games of the circus”—the people’s preference for entertainment above the cultivation of virtue and civic responsibility.⁴ In Rome’s decadent, entertainment-driven culture, human lives were routinely and unreflectively degraded in gory spectacle to amuse the chronically bored—the gladiatorial games being perhaps the most obvious and lurid example, where criminals, prisoners of war, and slaves would fight to the death for the entertainment of the masses. And all this so-called peace took place under the protection of the overwhelming military might of Rome, which maintained order by publicly crucifying dissidents.

Amid the decay, however, a group of people was bearing witness—often at the cost of their lives—to a better way. Since the mid-first century, from the same lands and the same people to which Jeremiah had once prophesied, a new way of being was sprouting up from the dark soil of the old. They claimed as their leader a man named Jesus—a Jewish prophet, teacher, and miracle worker, who had himself been crucified by Roman hands as a political threat and who, according to the reports of his followers, had been miraculously raised to life again by the power of Israel’s God. His resurrection was seen as the decisive validation of the truth of his life and a declaration of his universal lordship.

From the very beginning, there was something refreshingly peculiar about these people. They were different. Believing that their founder was not dead but powerfully alive, intimately present, and still working wonders, they followed him. Their lives were rooted in the most ancient path possible: love—for God, for self, for neighbor, and for the created order—expressed in prayer and worship; in sexual purity and chastity; in shared living and generous hospitality; in self-denial and service; in affectionate devotion to one another and care for the poor; and in truthful speech and prophetic action, all directed toward the goal of seeing, in some small way, God’s Kingdom on earth at it was (and is) in heaven.

So living, they stood out among their neighbors, friends, and business colleagues, and they began to gain followers. While the early Christians were often accused of being subversive or seditious (like their Master), upon scrutiny, their way of life regularly proved wholesome.

In short, the Christians were *good*—with a goodness that sprang from their devotion to Jesus and issued in lives that were notable for their integrity and generosity toward outsiders. Toward the end

of the second century, the church father Tertullian remarked that followers of Jesus made manifest their difference in the care they showed not only their own vulnerable members but *any* “boys and girls who lack property and parents . . . for slaves grown old and ship-wrecked mariners . . . for any who may be in mines, islands or prisons,” resulting in their pagan neighbors saying, “Look!”⁵ The world, whether it knew it or not, saw the Lord Jesus in the faithful witness of the church.

A few short decades later, when plague began to ravage the Roman Empire, leaving masses of people dead or dying, Cyprian of Carthage could be heard exhorting God’s people not to try to *explain* the plague but to instead *respond* to it in a manner worthy of their calling: namely by doing works of justice and mercy for those affected by the plague—and this during a time of intense persecution for the church!⁶

It was this “way”—the radical way of Jesus—that slowly but surely won over the Roman Empire. From its meager beginnings of a hundred and twenty in the upper room (Acts 1:15), to perhaps ten thousand at the end of the first century, Christianity grew to five or six million people by the time of the emperor Constantine. The Jesus Way was a resounding success.

INTO THE WILDERNESS

But “success” often does funny things to a movement. Before long, if you’re not careful, the radicality and potency that once made it attractive will begin to ebb. The movement becomes a *victim* of its own success. As Christianity grew in numbers, finding not only legal protection but honor and prestige under Constantine, many worried that it had begun to lose its soul. And so, as the first Christians had once revolted against the illusions of the *world*, a

group of men and women now revolted against the illusions born of Christianity's *success*.⁷ They retreated into the wilderness—to the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Arabia—to recover the radical way of Jesus that had initially marked the early church.

We know them as the Desert Fathers and Mothers. They retreated not in scorn or contempt but because, to them, the God revealed in Jesus was “so Holy, so great, possessed of such a love, that nothing less than one’s whole being could respond to it.”⁸

And respond with their whole being they did. Their lives became radiant, and through them the Spirit began to move upon the church in a fresh way. David Bentley Hart remarks that “it was from them that another current opened up within Christian culture: a renunciation of power even as power was at last granted to the church, an embrace of poverty as a rebellion against plenty, a defiant refusal to forget that the Kingdom of God is not of this world.”⁹ Before long, men and women from every corner of Christendom began to travel, sometimes from hundreds of miles away, to seek out the wisdom of the fathers and mothers and plant it like seed in their own lives, trusting the Lord to make the barren places fruitful again.

Much of their wisdom is recorded for us. They remind us, as Macarius the Great did, that our salvation and the posture of our hearts toward other people are bound up with one another: “Do no evil to anyone, and do not judge anyone. Observe this and you will be saved.”¹⁰ They help us recall, as Amma Sarah does, that learning to die daily to self is indeed the only way to ascend to holiness: “I put out my foot to ascend the ladder, and I place death before my eyes before going up it.”¹¹ They teach us, as Abba Poemen did, that duplicitous speech is everywhere to be avoided: “Teach your mouth to say what is in your heart.”¹² And that, as

Amma Theodora taught, God is seeking our good in all things, even the hard things: “So everything that goes against us can, if we wish, become profitable to us.”¹³

And so it was that Christianity, which had once revolutionized the world, now began to re-revolutionize *itself* through the influence of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. By the example of their lives, they re-called the church to the radical way of Jesus. Their collected sayings eventually became the bedrock of the monastic movement, which spread throughout Europe and became a primary source of ongoing spiritual renewal as Europe descended into the Dark Ages. Their legacy of devotion to Jesus lit up the world—and it still does: a living testament to the truth that “the good life” is not to be found in this or that circumstance but in the ongoing experience of knowing the one whom Saint Francis of Assisi called “My God and my all.”¹⁴

A PERSONAL WORD

I first became aware of the Desert Fathers and Mothers through the writings of folks like Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton, and others. Nouwen’s *The Way of the Heart*¹⁵ (which draws on the wisdom of the desert to teach us the disciplines of solitude, silence, and prayer) in particular had been a treasure of mine for many years. I learned a great deal from it, and as a young pastor, I returned to it and taught from it often. But it took a personal crisis to throw me into the depths of “desert” wisdom.

As I wrote about in my first book, *All Flame*,¹⁶ our departure from the church we helped plant and pastor for seven years in Denver became for me an unexpected existential crisis. Leaving a city, a community, and work that I loved suddenly threw me into a personal space that I was not prepared for. Realizing how much

my identity and sense of self-worth had been built on what I did in Denver, leaving it behind for a new city and a new call felt, in all honesty, like being put in a witness protection program. *Who even is "Andrew Arndt" apart from the reputation I built in Denver?* I wondered often. The transition from Denver to Colorado Springs in May 2017 stripped me bare.

It was providential, therefore, that Benedicta Ward's translation of *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* wound up in my hands. Truthfully, I can't remember *how* it happened. Just *that* it did. And the hand of God was certainly on it.

As I cracked the book open and began to read, I found myself routinely astonished and comforted. In the midst of what felt like a great spiritual poverty (which I was having tremendous difficulty coming to grips with), here was a group of men and women who voluntarily *embraced* spiritual poverty, seeing it as the only sure path to God. What I had seen as threat, they saw as opportunity. What I had seen as suffocating darkness, they saw as a spacious place of God's light and goodness. What I had seen as emptiness, they saw as fullness.

I quickly began to make a home for myself inside their sayings and the stories that came from their lives. They gave me language not only to *see* but to *embrace* the season I was in. Their wisdom charted my uncharted waters; they were, in their unremitting oddity, cartographers of the holy for me. When it felt like no one was clamoring for my voice anymore, I found comfort in the call given to Abba Arsenius: "Flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the source of sinlessness."¹⁷ When I was no longer *giving* direction in a community of faith but instead *receiving* it, I found help in the example of Abba John the Dwarf, whose superior planted a dead branch in the ground and told John to water it every day until it

bore fruit—which John did, and sure enough, after *three years* the branch miraculously bore fruit: the slow fruit of long surrender and blind obedience.¹⁸ And when I was tempted to make foolish value judgments on the turn my story had taken, I found solace in the gentle admonition of Abba Benjamin, who said, “Walk in the royal way, measuring the landmarks without meanness.”¹⁹

The fathers and mothers, in short, helped me claim the wilderness as a place of renewal. And that is what it became. Before long, I found my spiritual life bearing fruit in new and unexpected ways. I fell in love with the “wilderness.”

What is more, the nature of my circumstance taught me that the “wilderness”—and the renewal available in it—is not “out there” somewhere; it is right here, right now, all around. In the desolations we experience—the loss of a job, the loss of a relationship, the sudden loss of purpose; projects that fail, plans that don’t succeed, dreams that unexpectedly shatter; pain in our bodies, pain in our minds, pain in our spirits—*God can be found*. With the eyes of faith, we can claim the riven landscapes of our lives as holy ground, learning to worship God on scarred and broken earth.

But it is bigger than our personal lives. I have come to agree, and agree deeply, with Thomas Merton, who said that now, in the modern world, “Everywhere is desert. Everywhere is solitude in which man must do penance and fight the adversary and purify his own heart in the grace of God.”²⁰

The desolations which the fathers and mothers once searched miles and miles to find have come to our doorstep. Everywhere, we are surrounded by a spiritual wasteland. The promises of a consumer society—indeed, many of the promises being made by a consumer *church*, captive to the illusions of a consumer society—are proving empty, and the lives of many people, even

(where we have bought into the lie) our own, are existentially empty as a result.

But the wasteland need not conquer us. Indeed, if we have eyes to see it, the wasteland can become for us a place of deepening, abundance, spiritual vitality, and even cultural renewal. Jesus went into the wilderness and emerged full of the Spirit. So did the Desert Fathers and Mothers. So can we. They can show us how.

I've written this book, friend, to help introduce you to the beauty of the wilderness, to the wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Their words and the example of their lives can put us in touch, once again, with the radical way of Jesus Christ—which is the only hope not only for our own lives but for the life of the church and of our society.

The book is arranged in three parts—a grid for making sense of the call to the wilderness: (1) our relationship with God; (2) our relationship with others (that is, the call to community); and (3) our relationship with the wider world. Each chapter will be framed around a different component of what I'll call “desert spirituality.” I'll draw out sayings and stories that help us locate the meaning of that component, show how it is rooted in the way of Jesus, and talk about how practicing it can help us live more humanly in an increasingly inhumane world.

A fair warning: Should you decide to live this way, it will make you *odd*. Abba Anthony's prophetic words prove themselves more and more with the passing of time: “A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, ‘You are mad, you are not like us.’”²¹ But following the way of Jesus has always put us a bit out of step with the world. We are indeed “a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9, κϒν), for we have seen something different—the Kingdom—and

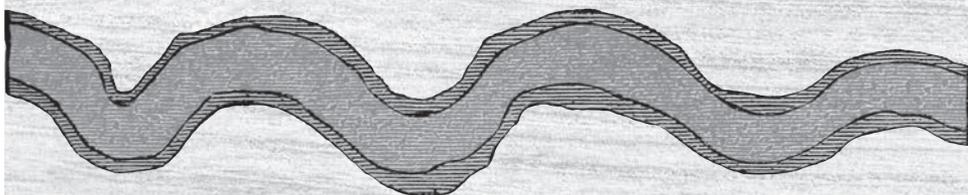
we are choosing to live in it, whatever it costs us. The quality of our beautiful, Christ-centered humanness will always strike the unbelieving world as odd—even “mad,” which only exposes the world’s own madness. But we know that our life depends on it. As Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry, one of the most prolific authors and social critics of our day (and also something of a Desert Father, in my opinion) put it: “To be sane in a mad time / is bad for the brain, worse / for the heart. The world / is a holy vision, had we clarity / to see it.”²²

And see it we must. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad . . . the desert shall rejoice and blossom . . . waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert” (Isaiah 35:1, 6, NKJV), which bring healing and renewal to the thirsty ground.

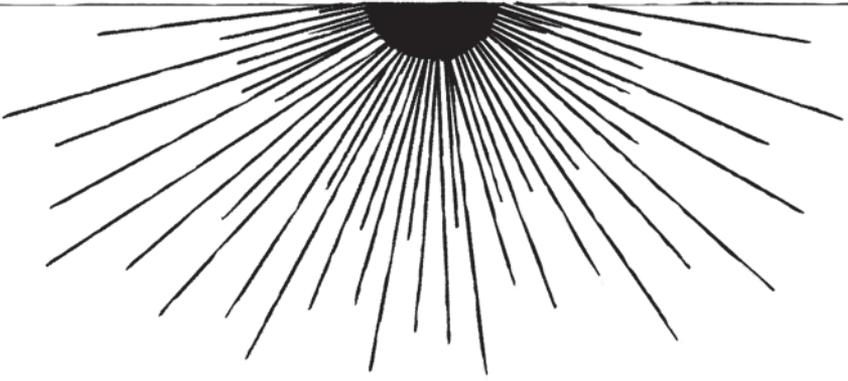
But *everything depends on seeing*. As Isaiah says, “Behold!” (Isaiah 35:4, NKJV). Renewal is available to us *as we discern God in the wasteland*. And the Desert Fathers and Mothers can show us the way.

PART ONE

INTO THE DESERT WITH GOD



*Here we begin to explore the call to the wilderness:
the spiritual horizon that guides our quest;
the renunciation of the heart that makes it possible;
and the practices that work the life of the Kingdom into us.*



CHAPTER 1

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

1 JOHN 4:16

*Abba Amoun of Nitria came to Abba Anthony and said to him,
"Since my rule is stricter than yours, how is it that your name is better
known amongst men than mine is?" Abba Anthony answered,
"It is because I love God more than you."*

AS TOLD IN THE SAYINGS OF THE DESERT FATHERS

I GREW UP IN A SMALL TOWN in central Wisconsin called Marshfield—so named because, well, that’s what it is: a network of marshes and swamps and bogs (bonus points if you know the difference between those three—or maybe *you* are from Marshfield, too?) and open fields as far as the eye can see. My siblings and I lovingly refer to Marshfield as “Marsh Vegas” or “Marshopolis,” if only to underscore that the place really is as unspectacular as the name implies.

And yet, I knew some pretty spectacular people there. One of them was a guy named Bill. When his wife died of an incurable brain tumor in the mid-1980s, leaving him widowed with two small children, Bill resolved in his heart to be a man of unusual holiness, dedicating himself to prayer, to his children, and to his church. He owned and operated a small construction company, and so was able to work just as much as he needed to in order to meet his family’s needs—which he intentionally kept to a minimum. The resulting freedom allowed him to give himself over to a life of deep devotion and ministry to the church. There was a kind of studied austerity about Bill; his lean frame matched his lean life—which, paradoxically, made Bill large with the ministry of the Spirit.

And what a ministry it was. Besides the time spent in prayer and fasting at his home (which he built just up the dirt road from the church), Bill spent hours in prayer at the church. We ran a little Christian school out of our church, and I remember frequently bumping into Bill while I was trekking across the sanctuary for one reason or another. Hands folded behind his back, head down, Bill would make circles around the sanctuary for hours, praying in tongues, interceding for the church and its leadership, watching and waiting, listening to the Lord.

Bill lived his life in the presence of God, and it showed. Our church's leadership frequently sought Bill out for spiritual insight. His words had *gravitas*, weight. When Bill began a sentence with, "You know, while I was in prayer the other day . . ." you listened; a word was coming that would cut right to the quick. When Bill prayed *for* you, somehow you knew that those prayers were going to make a difference. When Bill prayed *over* you, you buckled your seat belt—anything could happen.

And yet, for all that, do you know what I remember most about Bill? The kindness in his eyes. How when he looked at you, it felt like he really *saw* you. How his countenance opened to receive you. How, when he laid his hands on you, for all the spiritual power so evident in his life, he laid them *gently*, without any attempt to conjure a feeling or manufacture an experience. His awareness and confidence in God gave him an easy demeanor. His was a life given to the love of God.

Bill, in his own understated way, was a radical. A Desert Father for the modern era. One of the things that convinces me the way of life practiced by the Desert Fathers and Mothers is possible for us today is that the more I read them, the more they sound like people I know. For all their "otherness," they are familiar to me. I have known many of them. I know many still. And their lives are saturated with divine love.

A MONK'S OBJECTIVE

Sometime during the late fourth century, a young man by the name of John Cassian made his way down into the Egyptian desert to learn the ways of holiness from the great monks. Cassian was an educated man and was determined to not only learn but also to try to shape the teaching of the Desert Fathers and Mothers for a

wider audience. After years of sifting, sorting, and organizing the material, Cassian wrote two books, *Institutes* and *Conferences*—the former a kind of handbook on the monastic life and the latter a more systematic philosophical treatise on the thought of the Egyptian fathers. In the early fifth century, Cassian founded a monastery near Marseilles (France), which put into practice what he had learned while in Egypt. This monastery also became a kind of template for later monastic movements, including that of Benedict of Nursia, whose famous “Rule of Saint Benedict” still influences Benedictine, Cistercian, and Trappist monks to this day. Cassian’s careful distillation of the spirituality of the desert lives on.

What strikes the reader about the *Conferences* is the philosophical orderliness of it. The book is presented as a series of conversations with some of the most prominent figures of the Egyptian desert, and each conversation builds on the next in a more or less logical order. The first conversation is crucial, as it sets the foundation for all that is to come.

Sitting down with Abba Moses, one of the most compelling Egyptian monks, John Cassian and his friend Germanus engage Moses on the life of the Spirit. “Every art,” Moses begins, “and every discipline has a particular objective, that is to say, a target and an end peculiarly its own.”¹ Moses then goes on to describe the hardships and toils that farmers, businesspeople, and professional soldiers endure—doing it all for the sake of their objective: an abundant harvest, the hope of profit, military glory. In the same way, Moses tells them, the monk endures for a single goal, a single objective. And just what is that objective?

The aim of our profession is the kingdom of God . . .
but our point of reference, our objective, is a clean heart,

without which it is impossible for anyone to reach our target.²

So, according to Moses, where we are *headed* is the Kingdom of God (our aim, or our goal), but our *objective* (or what we are trying to achieve via the habits and practices of the desert) is a clean heart, a pure heart. He continues:

Everything we do, our every objective, must be undertaken for the sake of this purity of heart. This is why we take on loneliness, fasting, vigils, work, nakedness. For this we must practice the reading of the Scripture, together with all the other virtuous activities, and we do so to trap and to hold our hearts free of the harm of every dangerous passion and in order to rise step by step to the high point of love.³

Did you catch that? The pure heart for Moses is ever rising “step by step to the high point of love.” The goal of desert spirituality is one thing: love. And if you miss that, you miss the whole thing.

Fasting, vigils, scriptural meditation, nakedness, and total deprivation do not constitute perfection but are the means to perfection. They are not themselves the end point of a discipline, but an end is attained through them. To practice them will therefore be useless if someone instead of regarding these as means to an end is satisfied to regard them as the highest good. . . . The demands made on the body are actually only the

beginning of the road to progress. They do not induce that perfect love which has within it the promise of life now and in the future. And so we consider the practice of such works to be necessary only because without them it is not possible to reach the high peaks of love.⁴

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

Oftentimes the impression we have (if we have one at all) of the Desert Fathers and Mothers is of a group of austere, somber, joyless folks living basically solitary lives, mostly because they couldn't stand to be with people—extreme introverts seeking religious justification for their contempt for society. Though this was certainly the case with some of them (many would have been absolutely terrible guests at a dinner party), the most clear-minded and spiritually vibrant among them show us by word and example that the goal of the spiritual life is one thing: love. In fact, they thought that lovelessness was a sure sign of either spiritual immaturity or that something had gone disastrously wrong in the spiritual life. If you don't love, you just don't *get it*—"it" being God and his Kingdom. At all.

And of course this is precisely what the New Testament teaches us. As the apostle Paul wrote,

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. . . .

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

These three remain: faith, hope and love. *But the greatest of these is love.*

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3, 13, EMPHASIS MINE

The greatest thing. Love.

As you read Paul's epistles, you see that every chance he got, he made love the centerpiece of the spiritual life of the church. To the Philippians, he wrote:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

PHILIPPIANS 1:9-11

To the Ephesians, he wrote:

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

EPHESIANS 5:1-2

And to the Thessalonians, he wrote:

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's

family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-10

Love is the purpose. Love is the goal. Love is what it's all about. One of Jesus' best friends, John, who knew the love of God made manifest in Jesus as well as anyone, put like this:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. . . .

Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

1 JOHN 4:7-8, 16

John's words leave us with absolutely no wiggle room—if you don't love, you don't know God because God's very *essence* is love. Period. Full stop. And, of course, all of this was simply an ongoing *exploration of* and *elaboration on* the teaching of Jesus himself, who said not only that the whole Old Testament could be summed up by the commands to love God and one another (Matthew 22:40) but also that by love and love alone the world would know that we belong to him (John 13:35)—to him who is Love Incarnate.

This is what the Desert Fathers and Mothers—at their best—were after: the pure heart, the stripping away of *everything in their lives* that did not serve the purpose of love, the destruction of *everything in their hearts* that blocked or hindered the flow of the love of God in their lives. Love was what drew them to the desert. Love was the goal of their ongoing spiritual efforts. Everything

they did was undertaken for the love of God and others. The point of spiritual discipline for them was the disciplining of the heart for this one thing: *love*.

A fantastic example of this is that of Abba Amoun, who came to Abba Anthony one day and said, “Since my rule is stricter than yours how is it that your name is better known amongst men than mine is?” To which Abba Anthony answered, “It is because I love God more than you.”⁵ The story should make you chuckle. I laugh every time I read it. I mean, where does Anthony get off saying something like that? But of course he *can* say it—and say it without a trace of hubris—because it is quite simply the truth. Amoun was stricter with himself; Anthony is happy to concede the point. But Amoun had missed the goal and purpose of the spiritual life. That purpose was love. Anthony got it. And his life was radiant with love.

The story illustrates precisely what Abba Moses sought to convey to Cassian and Germanus: that strictness or severity of one’s “rule” (the set of commitments a monk made that ordered their lives) was not the goal of the spiritual life. The “rules”—the patterns of fasting and prayer and self-denial and devotion—were put in place to help guide the heart into a greater love for God and neighbor. Without that overriding goal, they were sure to degenerate into self-justifying demonstrations of religiosity. But *with* that goal in place, the spiritual disciplines served as trellises by which the vine of the heart grew up, fanned out, and became fruitful in love.

And Anthony’s own life demonstrates it well. Though he was certainly known for profound acts of self-denial, he was ultimately *better* known for a rare quality of tenderness, of care for others, of gentle love. As he served as a spiritual father to a handful of

monks, Anthony's leadership was marked by wise and gentle care. Consider the following story:

A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself with the brethren and he was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man [Anthony] said to him, "Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it." So he did. The old man then said, "Shoot another," and he did so. Then the old man said, "Shoot yet again," and the hunter replied, "If I bend my bow so much I will break it." Then the old man said to him, "It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch the brethren beyond measure they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs." When he heard these words the hunter was pierced by compunction [meaning that he was cut to the heart] and, greatly edified by the old man, he went away. As for the brethren, they went home strengthened.⁶

How we treat people matters. Our care for people is the measure of our devotion, a sure and inviolable index of our love for God. Jesus and the apostles taught that. So did Anthony: "Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ."⁷ Of Abba Anthony's teaching, one of the most prolific theologians of our day, the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams remarks that "winning" our brother or our sister is not about "getting them signed up to something or getting them on your side." It is, rather, about "opening doors for them to healing and wholeness. Insofar as you open such doors for another, you

gain God, *in the sense that you become a place where God happens for somebody else.*"⁸ "What is to be learned in the desert," he says, "is clearly not some individual technique for communing with the divine but the business of becoming a means of reconciliation and healing for the neighbor."⁹

And that very thing—becoming a means of healing and reconciliation for the neighbor—is just what the Desert Fathers and Mothers were known for. On one occasion, some old men in the community brought a young woman, pregnant out of wedlock, to Abba Ammonas, a disciple of Anthony's who had become a bishop in the community. They wanted him to give her a penance. Instead, he made the sign of the cross on the young woman's womb and ordered that six pairs of fine linen sheets be given to her. The old men were stunned. "Why did you do that?" they asked. "Give her a punishment," they demanded of him. Ammonas replied, "Look, brothers, she is near to death; what am I to do?" Ammonas knew that no punishment could be worse than the shame and fear that the woman felt. What was needed was not judgment but mercy. At his words, the old men departed, speechless, their accusations shattered by Ammonas's tenderness toward the young woman.¹⁰

A loving, tender heart toward others—that's what we're trying to cultivate. If we don't have that, nothing else matters. Abba Agathon remarked that "a man who is angry, even if he were to raise the dead, is not acceptable to God."¹¹ In the same spirit, Abba Moses counseled that we should

do no harm to anyone, do not think anything bad in your heart towards anyone, do not scorn the man who does evil, do not put confidence in him who does wrong

to his neighbour, do not rejoice with him who injures his neighbour. . . . Do not have hostile feelings towards anyone and do not let dislike dominate your heart; do not hate whom who hates his neighbour.¹²

Think about that. The kind of heart that we are trying to cultivate is not only one in which there is no dislike whatsoever—but even more, it is one in which there is *no dislike for the person who dislikes others*. This kind of love is capable of tender affection for everyone. Like God’s love is—the kind of love that finally makes lovers out of the loveless.

A WORLD DEVOURING ITSELF

I think we need to pause here for a moment and reflect on how crucial this all is given the world that we live in—a world that is always all too capable of alarming acts of hatred.

On January 6, 2021, in Washington DC, a violent and angry mob stormed the United States Capitol building. Breaking through police barricades, dozens of people stampeded into our nation’s seat of power (many of them, ironically, carrying crosses and placards saying, “Jesus saves”), attempting *at least* to protest and *at most* to overturn the results of the recent presidential election. Five people died in the melee.

The moment, for me at least, was apocalyptic, in the sense that it revealed (the Greek word *apokaluptó* means “to uncover” or “to reveal”) a great deal that is wrong not with *them* (whoever was and is responsible for the riot) but with *us*. For of course the fracas of January 6 was only the latest in a line of recent outbursts in our country—outbursts that, it absolutely must be said, cut across party and ideological lines. As many sociologists are noting,

we are more “tribal” than ever as a culture, building our universe of meaning on the notion that “we” (whoever “we” are) are good and that “they” (whoever “they” are) are bad, and that in truth, the world would be better off without “them.” As Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt so brilliantly point out in their book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, the “cancel culture” that we live in is not in any way accidental but rather the predictable result of toxic tribalism and institutionalized contempt for the other that we have made a normal part of our lives.¹³

What is perhaps most alarming is that while the world is devouring itself with its suspicion, fear, and hatred, the church so often seems either unwilling or unable to stand against it. Indeed, in many quarters, the church is guilty of fanning the flames of hate, of providing fuel for the fire, of egging the culture on. When conservative Christians demonize Democrats and progressive Christians demonize Republicans—when it, in other words, takes a massive spiritual effort to acknowledge the image of God across the party line; even more, when it takes a massive spiritual effort to acknowledge that those who voted differently than we did might actually be brothers and sisters in Christ—we know we have huge problems on our hands. We’ve exchanged the worship of our glorious God for idols (Jeremiah 2:11). We’ve given our calling away.

And that calling is to be a people of love, a people who love with the love that heals and unites the world. What was ironic about those crosses at the riot on January 6 is that, according to the New Testament, the very thing that the cross of Jesus Christ saves us *from* is precisely our culture’s endemic hatred and contempt for other people. Watch how Paul puts it in his letter to Titus:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

TITUS 3:3-7

Did you catch the progression Paul lays out there? The ultimate manifestation of our “enslavement” to sinful passions and pleasures is that we live “in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.” By contrast, when the love of God made known in the crucified and resurrected Jesus is poured into our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit, it goes right to the root of our wayward passions and pleasures (such as the passion we have to be right, to win; and the pleasure we take in seeing others suffer loss), destroying the antagonisms that enslave and divide us.

“Being hated and hating one another,” friend, is simply what unredeemed humanity *does*. It is Cain and Abel after the Fall of Adam and Eve. It is the enmity of Jacob and Esau. It is the sad and tragic history of Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. It is Israelis and Palestinians. Hutus and Tutsis. Democrats and Republicans. The list could go on and on.

And this—*precisely* this—is what God in Christ saves us from. Of the barrier between Jews and Gentiles (and he elsewhere extends

this to the barriers that exist between *everyone*) Paul writes, “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. . . . His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Ephesians 2:14-16).

This is what God in Christ has done and is doing by the power of the Spirit. And therefore the more we determine in our hearts to live in constant, deep proximity to God, the more we will be transformed into a people who ache for what God aches for—for healing, for restoration, for reconciliation, for peace. As Abba Nilus put it: “Prayer is the seed of gentleness and the absence of anger.”¹⁴ We become soft in our spirits toward other people. We begin to see them with the eyes of love. Our hearts begin to feel for them with the same tender love with which God in Christ has loved us and will always love us, from eternity to eternity. In our lives, the vicious circle of hate by which the world devours itself is broken, and redemptive love is released into the world, little by little—each act of love a living witness to the Kingdom that *is* and *is to come*, the Kingdom of divine Love that is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Kingdom by which all things are made new.

ALWAYS LEADING US TO FRIENDSHIP

My friend Dave worked at an Episcopal church for a number of years. The church was large and had a fairly sizable pastoral and support staff comprised of people from all walks and seasons of life—people who loved each other and the church but also had differing perspectives on what was best for it. Staff meetings could be both energetic and, at times, highly contentious.

During one of the more contentious meetings, debate raged back and forth and lines were drawn in the sand until someone finally noticed that Father Art had been silent the entire time. Art was an Episcopal priest on staff in his latter years of life and ministry. A man who walked with God and had seen it all—conflicts, crises, schisms—and whose age and spiritual maturity meant he was never enamored with the *conflict du jour*.

“Father Art,” they asked, “you haven’t told us what you think. What’s your opinion here? What do you think we should do?”

Art sat back thoughtfully in his chair for a moment and then finally leaned in toward the group and said, “I think that the Holy Spirit is always leading us into friendship.”

The wise writer of Ecclesiastes said that “the quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools” (9:17). Proverbs notes that “a gentle tongue can break a bone” (25:15). Art’s wise, quiet, gentle words broke the tension in the room and made it possible for the contentious issue to be handled more constructively.

I think about that story often. It is an example to me of the kind of people we become when we walk with Jesus—namely, people whose disposition makes the Kingdom consistently manifest. And notice—and this is crucial to say—Art’s words didn’t paper over the differences present that day. Rather, *they made it possible for the differences to be handled in a way that built up and didn’t tear down*.

I am afraid that many people in our day associate the call to love with a kind of sappy, whitewashing sentimentality that closes its eyes to the pain of the world and plugs its ears to the cries of the world while it wistfully hopes that someday, somehow, a global kumbaya-fest will spontaneously emerge. But this is not so. If what

Christians mean by “love” is whatever we see in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, then we know that the very *last* thing that love does is turn a blind eye to the world. This love is not conflict-avoidant. Indeed, it *leans into conflict*—like Jesus did. But it does so in a different way than the world does—courageously telling the truth while also being willing to suffer loss for the reconciliation of others; unmasking the powers that be while also pleading, as Jesus did, for those seeking our harm: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34, ESV).

Perhaps no one in our time has expressed this fundamental thing as clearly, persuasively, and powerfully as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who, in the thick of the struggle for civil rights for Black Americans, said,

To our most bitter opponents we say: “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win *you* in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”¹⁵

That's it, right there. King understood what Abba Anthony knew so well: that "if we gain our brother, we have gained God." And of course, both were drawing on the teaching of Jesus, who said that if and when offense falls between us and a brother or sister, we ought to seek to resolve it *immediately* (Matthew 5:23-26)—and that we ought to not only love our brothers and sisters but even (and especially!) our enemies, with the same perfect and perfecting love that God the Father has and forever is showing us in Jesus the Lord (Matthew 5:43-48). This love made us who were once enemies the very friends of God (Colossians 1:21-22).

So it comes down to this: The spiritual life is about love. If we don't understand that, or if we lose sight of it, we'll miss the whole thing. But make no mistake—growing into a person of love does not happen accidentally. It takes hard work—a lifetime of it, in fact. Which is why Abba Moses concludes his discussion with Cassian and Germanus by insisting that while spiritual discipline is not the *point* of the spiritual life, it is nevertheless *indispensable*:

Every hour and every moment working over the earth of our heart with the plough of Scripture, *that is, with the memory of the Lord's cross*, we shall manage to destroy the lairs of the wild beasts within us and the hiding places of the venomous serpents.¹⁶

The Cross makes this way of life possible. And—as the fathers and mothers of the desert knew so well—not just Jesus' cross but also the many crosses *we* are called to carry on the way to the Kingdom; crosses that free us *from* the world and *for* the Kingdom.