



*Eric Muhr*

Deep into my 20s, I noticed a rising unease with the way I'd been experiencing faith. I wanted a challenge, to be growing into truth. I wanted an experience, to be connected to reality while also living spiritually. I wanted authenticity, to be fully myself, not just a collection of roles. I wanted an integrated community, a place where faith and vocation and neighbors all came together. I wanted to know God.

I suspected that there must be others who felt the same, who longed for the same, and then, all of a sudden. I started running into those people. We talked. We decided to do this thing. And we committed to meeting together. Silence and sharing and snacks on Sunday afternoons. A meal and conversation on Thursday nights.

What I've shared in this week's devotional essays are reflections from that time in my life—some of the ways God became more visible to me through community.

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 17:20*

For years I was part of an international chess team that played all its matches online. So late at night I would log on to the Internet to play chess. In between moves, I checked my e-mail, read the news, and thought.

It's quiet at the end of the day. But peering through computer screen—mystical aperture—brings close the noisy conflict of a war-torn world. There was so much noise: A foreign power vows vengeance. Warnings of a terrorist attack. One hundred twenty-seven New York passengers injured when one train bumps another. A boy who died in an oven.

Sometimes the news is almost as strange as it is tragic. It was always tragic (or at least that's how it felt), and every night, reading the news, my life felt small.

I prayed—I still pray—that God will use what I have, that I might be a harbor of peace and a vessel filled from streams of living water. I pray that I might be a friend to the afflicted, a living message of hope. I know I have no such store of good things for I, too, am impoverished. But I pray.

And I remember his words: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed....Nothing will be impossible for you.”

I pray for faith—small faith. I pray for change.

*SONG: Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, give me faith. Help me to be faithful. You ask for so little, and you offer so much. Thank you.*

—Eric Muhr

*BIBLE READING: John 15:1-11*

I used to help cover politics for the Idaho Press-Tribune in Nampa. One day, I interviewed a local man, a profile. He was seeking a legislative seat. He was anti-tax and wanted to bring more jobs to Canyon County. He spoke of education and construction and the elderly. And while I jotted notes, I thought how similar this sounded to all the rest of the people I'd interviewed, each one defining their character according to accomplishments. Each list—the same—with clubs and causes, offices, endorsements. The only differences I could see came from the details of what a person had done and what they opposed.

This seems an apt metaphor for many of us. We have fences but no foundation. It's an apt metaphor for me. I'm guilty of self-image by comparison. Instead of seeking Christ's character, I create a rubric for success, assessing myself by personal performance and how much better or worse it is than what I see in others. This is not the way of truth.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (v. 5).

A metaphor. Spiritual growth, the discovery of personal purpose, can never come from comparison, one branch to another. I have tried to define my being by what I do, and all this time, I had it backwards. God loves me because I'm connected to him. God loves me because I'm alive.

*SONG: I Need Thee Every Hour*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Thank you, Jesus, for making room for me to abide in you, for loving and sustaining me.*

—Eric Muhr

*BIBLE READING: John 12:24-26*

This morning, thinking about what it means to minister, I remembered a thought that came to me years ago. I was struggling with the measures we use to evaluate outreach activities in the church. We were counting people, and we were counting in order to judge whether we were accomplishing much of anything. At least that's how it seemed to me. It didn't feel right.

I wanted to be changed by the work and to see others changed by their participation in it, by their interaction with one another, by the ways in which we experienced God together.

Richard Foster describes the contemplative tradition in *Streams of Living Water* as “a loving attention to God.” I know now that this is what I had been longing for. I know now that this is the kind of faith community to which I long to belong: a place and a people who show up for each other, who physically re-member Christ's body—broken for us on the cross—every time they gather. I know now that this is what we need if others are to glimpse Christ alive in us and begin to recognize their own hunger for what is real.

At Jesus' triumphal entry, the Pharisees said of the crowds, “Look how the whole world has gone after him!” (John 12:19b). But Jesus didn't count on the crowds. Instead, he spoke of his imminent death and promised, “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me” (v. 26).

*SONG: Open Our Eyes, Lord*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, help me to remember that the number of people who show up isn't what matters. What matters is that you are present with us. Thank you!*

—Eric Muhr

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 6:25-34*

Not so many years ago, my brother finished his first year of college. My mom and I drove to Kansas together to pick him up and bring him home for the summer. It's a long drive from here to there, so I'd made plans for the shortened week I'd face on my return. There are things that have to get done, and time keeps ticking into the future. That's where I spend most of my days—in the future: thinking, planning, strategizing, worrying. But I don't believe that's where I'm called to live.

“Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” Jesus asks in verse 27. Later, in verse 34, he offers this advice: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

It's advice that makes sense, but I find it's almost impossible to let go of my plans and petty concerns. God calls me to live in the now and experience life as he created it—one day at a time. Instead, I race ahead, looking to what comes next, concerned by my preconceived notion of what may or may not occur. And I too often miss the treasure God has created for me in this moment.

*SONG: This Is My Father's World*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, help me to grow up. Teach me to calm down. Guide me in your love. I desire your peace, but I don't know how to get there.*

—Eric Muhr

*BIBLE READING: Acts 4:32-37*

Have you ever longed for a different kind of life? I used to want to live in a commune—to be with people, to be part of something. The integrated life is what I called it, but looking back, I think that part of me was just trying to get away from all the silence of living alone. If I've learned anything about myself, after all, it's that I too often seek the easy way out of uncomfortable questions.

Sometimes, I choose not to use the gifts God has given because I'm too busy, don't have the time, don't need the hassle.

Sometimes, I commit to a cause for which I have no passion or calling.

Sometimes, I sit in silence rather than speak up for what is right. Rocking the boat gets everyone wet and makes the voyage unpleasant.

Sometimes, I ignore my own convictions (especially when they're inconvenient).

Sometimes, I see all my faults in the people around me and choose to judge them rather than admit my own need.

These are real problems, not just symptoms. And they point the way out of my disconnectedness, the way back to who God created me to be. But I'm going to need help. And I'll have to be honest: about my weakness, about my failings, about my need.

This then is what I think I was searching for: a collection of people who can love me in spite of my weakness; and people who also need me.

*SONG: Jesus, Lord, We Look to Thee*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, help me to vulnerably let others love me. Teach me, also, to love.*

—Eric Muhr

*BIBLE READING: 1 Timothy 6:6-10*

Lightening our load of possessions brings a lightness of spirit, even freedom.

A friend of mine left for California one early spring morning not so many years ago. He was working there for the summer, and he was supposed to have everything packed and ready to go by 6:30 that morning. Of course he put it off until the last minute. Of course his alarm clock didn't go off. And he wasn't able to finish his laundry. And he didn't have room for even half the stuff he wanted to take.

I noticed something interesting as he rushed around, trying to get out the door. His priorities had changed (or finally come to light). Many of his prized possessions—television, computer, books, new clothes—had to be sacrificed because they wouldn't fit (and the journey was of primary importance). He couldn't afford to take anything that would hold him back.

Maybe this is how we should view our own lives in the world: as a journey. What are we spending time on—career, possessions, responsibilities, relationships—that we don't have time for? What people, things, or activities are holding us back from fully experiencing this journey to which God has called us? And of all the things that we desire, how many of them do we actually need? Are they good for us?

I hope to travel a different road.

*SONG: Be Thou My Vision*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Help me, Lord, to consider all of the things that are making it hard for me to see you, to hear you, to be with you.*

—Eric Muhr

*BIBLE READING: Acts 2:42-47*

Sometimes I wonder what early believers talked about as they broke bread from house to house. The Scripture makes it clear that they prayed and ate and praised God, but I wonder if they also talked about what kind of a community they were becoming and why.

I was in a group like that once. Most of us attended different churches on Sunday mornings, but we all got together on Sunday afternoons to sing, to wait in silence, to talk about where we were seeing God at work. Mainly, we were just curious about what God might be doing. There was one conversation in particular that keeps coming up in my memory, a discussion about what the church could be.

A woman spoke of her desire to be part of a place where people seriously struggle with what it means to believe instead of simply showing up for the social connections or from a sense of duty. Another shared his vision of creating a place that was open all the time—a kind of community center—a place where people gather to seek counsel, to come together with friends, to discuss and take action on issues of social justice. A third talked about an increasing individualism in society that competes with our desire to be known. We long for community but struggle with commitment.

And I wonder—what about you? If you'd been with us, what might you have shared? What do you long for in a faith community?

*SONG: The Church Is Wherever God's People Are  
Praising*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: You are so creative in the ways you bring us together into your body, Jesus. Help us to pay attention to the possibilities you've created for us.*

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