

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Third Sunday after Epiphany: January 26, 2025

“Monastic service - fulfilled in your hearing”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on the Third Sunday after Epiphany. This Sunday is often reserved to honor those whose lives fulfill the commandment to spread the Gospel, the Good News, to all.

Today we have Jesus reading scripture that essentially explains that he, Jesus, is God's promise to his people. He will fulfill the scripture as miracles are named off as coming to fulfillment in the present moment. And we who are followers of Jesus are also called to continue that legacy of “proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.”

So today I want to talk about something that is a profound part of our faith and Episcopal heritage – part of the body of Christ. Those who serve in religious orders, the sisters and brothers who serve God and their community. Those who quietly fulfill the scripture within their lives.

When Henry VIII broke from the Roman Church, the previously-allowed and numerous cloisters of nuns and monks were suppressed. It was 300 years later when the Oxford Movement in England inserted more Catholic ideals that allowed monasteries to return. Then the brotherhood/sisterhood began to flourish once more.

In Kent, England, one of the first monasteries to form after the Anglo/Catholic reformation was Malley Abbey. Their current website states, *“God calls some to respond to his love by seeking and serving him in the monastic life. The Rule of St. Benedict was written in the sixth century in times as unstable as our own, but the spiritual values, wisdom and discretion it contains still show us the 'path of life'.*

The Benedictine way is a Christ centered life of prayer, work and study. It is a life lived within the enclosure of the Abbey grounds and within a community where relationships are essential for the growth of each sister.

God seeks us. The truth, beauty and holiness of God draws us into the community. The love of God working in and through the community, transforms us into the likeness of Christ. With joy and awe, we need only say 'Yes'

Worship is at the heart of the Benedictine life. Each day in the seven monastic offices and in the Eucharist, we receive God's gift of himself in word and sacrament.

In our corporate worship we pray with the whole church, holding up the needs, joys, and sorrows of the world to the love and mercy of God.

In solitude and silence, we experience contemplative prayer as a gift of the Spirit who prays within us "according to the mind of God".

Our simple lifestyle both expresses and forms our reverence for God's creation and our stewardship of it. The life of our community is enriched by the interests and talents of each sister, which may find expression in writing, music, poetry, art or craft. Often, we are surprised at the creative gifts and skills we discover in ourselves.

In the United States, one of the founding monasteries was Nashotah House in Wisconsin. Nashotah began as a community inspired by the traditional monastic life of prayer, work, and study. James Lloyd Breck's vision was to create a center for Christian formation in the then-wild wilderness that would also be a movement to propagate other communities for the purpose of evangelizing the frontier. It was founded in 1842 and today, much of this vision remains intact and students still live a Benedictine cycle of prayer, work, and study. The life of the Seminary seeks to form the character of priests and leaders into the image of Christ. Various students have been involved in mission work around the Anglican Communion as well.

For us locally in San Francisco, I met and worked closely with Sister Jean from the Order of Saint Francis. She helped me develop my pastoral skills very early in my journey to chaplaincy and ordination, and this is what she writes about her life as a nun.

"You have made the world so wonderful, O God, and given people many wonderful gifts, gifts of creating beautiful things. Every home should be beautiful and shining clean, reflecting your love with a warm welcome to all. Those floors I did the other day—all beauty was hidden under the dust and dirt. Once clean and polished, they shone; the beauty of the wood was revealed like that of a bright, shining copper kettle sitting on top of the gleaming chrome of the stove. It was hard work, but once done, it was beautiful. See how you enable me to perform miracles, Lord!"

"Thank you, God, for the gift you have given me: this menial, ordinary, humble gift which transcends the living of my life. For enabling me to reveal the beauty hidden by dirt, restore the beauty marred by daily living, show forth your love through the clean and tidy room, seek your hidden beauty in those I serve, loving them with a love which comes from you."

"Each day I can find many opportunities for various domestic tasks. Each occupation is contemplative, a time when I am in touch with the creative spirit within me. A bunch of fabric, scissors, tape measure, needle and thread can become a beautiful vestment worn to the glory of God or a dress for a small girl in an orphanage in a Third World country. Amen"

Sister Pamela Claire another Franciscan that was part of my own journey writes, *"I find it hard to pull away from the demands of my outside ministry. First it was the many years of passionate involvement in the lives of Latin American refugees and immigrants in the '80s and '90s through my work with a small Latino congregation in San Francisco."*

"Since 2004 it has been the amazing privilege of receiving the trust of homeless and marginalized people who allow me to stand behind them (despite their PTSD) and touch their bodies with compassionate and skillful touch in the chair massage work that I do."

"I can't do this balancing act without coming back regularly to that still point in the center. The contemplative prayer which centers me in my spiritual heart, which takes

me beyond myself to that still point in the center of all creation—this is what keeps me balanced and when I get away from that center, everything comes toppling down — which it does from time to time! Amen"

I share these stories and these words to remind you of the many ways the Spirit works within the world and particularly in the Episcopal Church. We will soon be having our annual meeting where we reflect on the work of God that we here at Christ the Lord have done over the last year. We are part of an amazing community that is not without its flaws and foibles, but continues forward trying fulfill the calling of bringing good news to the poor and setting the captives free.

Preaching the Gospel and acting on it, as you can see even in the little things, is what we are called to do. We are called to fulfill the spreading of God's mercy and love in the world; we are called to continue Jesus' work. You may not see yourself as a contemplative and may be miles away from being a nun or monk, but we are all parts of one body. We recognize that the work is all the same and that God is even in the little things. Amen