

Practicing Ecclesial Patience  
*Patient Practice Makes Perfect*

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*PATIENT PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT*  
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## Practicing Ecclesial Patience

### *Patient Practice Makes Perfect<sup>1</sup>*

I GREW up in central Indiana, outside Indianapolis, on a little five acre farm our family rented for \$100 a month. We weren't real farmers. Our neighbor, George Shelton, *was* a real farmer: he farmed hundreds of acres, gave me all his old farm machinery catalogs that I spent hours thumbing through on rainy afternoons, and he once let the 10-yr-old version of me drive his combine a bit through his soybean field. But even though we weren't real famers, our family of six did grow a lot of our own food. And as anyone who's done it knows, growing your own food requires a good deal of slow, patient work.

I mention this because I'm rather sure if my parents were alive today they would be puzzled by the term "slow food." If they were to ask me about it (which they probably wouldn't—I can't imagine they'd care), and if I were to try to explain it to them, I'm rather sure my mother's reply would be something like this: "I think I hear what you're saying, dear, but that just sounds like *plain old food* to me."

In many respects, the term "Slow Church" is just another name for *plain old church*, or church as it likely needs to be embodied in most times and places. Just as the phrase "slow food" was made necessary by certain cultural conditions that contributed to our collective forgetting what real food was, so the phrase "slow

1. This pamphlet is a slightly edited version of a plenary address delivered at the Summer Gathering of The Ekklesia Project in July 2012 on the campus of DePaul University in Chicago. The theme of the Gathering was "Slow Church: Abiding Together in the Patient Work of God."

church,” if it’s helpful at all, is so by virtue of its ability to draw our collective attention back to the church’s primary mission.

There is, of course, no singular way to name what the mission of the church is; Scripture and the Christian tradition name it in different ways and with different metaphors and images: the breaking in of a new creation, the creation of a new humanity, our being transformed into the image of Christ, the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

However we choose to name the work of God in the world, and however we understand the church’s role within that work, it seems inevitable that we will identify that work, as the title of our Gathering does, as the patient work of God. Given the testimony of Scripture and the history of the people of God, there simply isn’t any reason to think that God is going about this work of cosmic restoration in anything other than the most graciously patient manner. There are a number of important theological grounds for God’s patience, but perhaps at least one should be mentioned here.

This God we worship and serve is a God of superabundant gifts, but for any gift to be received *as* a gift, it must be received in freedom. God cannot force this gift upon us and have it remain a gift; instead, it must first be offered and then God must wait patiently for our consent, our willingness to receive and enter into this gift.

Repeatedly the Christian tradition has wisely insisted that there is only one gift that God desires to give us: the gift of God’s own presence, the gift of being drawn deeply into the very life of the Triune God. Augustine saw this clearly, as did Catherine of Siena, who echoed Augustine so beautifully: “Eternal Trinity, Godhead, mystery deep as the sea, you could give [us] no greater gift than the gift of yourself” (from *On Divine Providence*).

If Augustine and Catherine are right, and I think they are, that God has no greater gift than God’s own presence, then it seems likely that the same is true for us, we who are made in the image of this self-giving God. For all we humans might offer to

one another, no gift is more precious than our presence, our full-bodied attention, our willingness and ability to enter into the lives of others and have them enter ours, our willingness and ability to know them and in turn be known *by* them.

This is something of a mystery, this capacity to take another person into our lives, our very being, and have our lives, our being, taken into theirs. In the divine Trinitarian life we call this mutual indwelling. Jesus says that he is in the Father and the Father is in him (John 14:11). But Jesus also suggests that something like this extends to us as well. In John 14 Jesus says: “I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” This is part of our glory as human beings, this ability for mutual indwelling, a glory and a beauty that unfold and deepen over time. We don’t come to indwell another person, or they us, in a moment, a day, or even a week. Mutual indwelling unfolds after months and years and decades of being present to and for and with another person.

At the heart of Slow Church—or just Church, if you will—is the crucial recognition that the most central and important elements of being human unfold slowly, over time. Receiving God into our lives, as well as offering ourselves to God; receiving another person into our lives and offering ourselves to them; making room in our lives to take in the beauty and wonders of the created order and offer ourselves in turn to its care—all of these unfold slowly, over time. None of them can happen at the break-neck speed at which all of us are encouraged to live. It is in this most profound sense that “speed kills,” for it undermines the conditions necessary to nurture a life of true presence, a life capable of receiving the presence of others and a life capable of offering one’s self *to* others.

If we want to simplify to the extreme, we might say this: the Christian life is about being formed over time in such a way that we can more and more receive this greatest gift God has given us: God’s own presence. God will not force God’s self upon us; rather, our deepest desires themselves have to be transformed over time

such that we come more and more to desire this gift, to welcome this gift of God's presence, God's very self, into our lives. This process of transformation we might call sanctification, being made holy, being made perfect or complete, or being transformed ever more fully into the image of Christ.

But this process of transformation, this sanctification, isn't magic. Rather, the Spirit of Christ uses the rather mundane practices we engage in every day as a crucial means of our transformation into the image of Christ. In this sense, we might think of these practices in almost sacramental terms. The Spirit takes these practices—such as a sustained conversation over time, the faithful reading and hearing of Scripture, weeping with those who weep—and the Spirit blesses them and returns them back to us as a means of our own transformation. This is a slow process, a process that unfolds over the course of a lifetime. It is in this sense that patient practice makes perfect, makes complete, and it is in this sense that the church is called to practice ecclesial patience.

Before I turn to naming specific practices that nurture and sustain what we might call Slow Church, let me name *three dimensions of human presence* I want to focus on. I use the language of "dimensions" advisedly, meaning I'm aware that while we can talk about these three dimensions one at a time, what we *can't* really do is have or experience them apart from each other. Just as we may speak of the width or length or height of a room, you can't, in fact, have just one of them. You can't say, "Oh, I'll just take the width of this room, thank you." It doesn't come that way, and neither do these three dimensions. Rather, just as the three dimensions of a room help us name and examine a singular space, so the three dimensions I'd like to examine briefly help us name and examine three dimensions that make up what we might identify as the single most important gift the church has to offer to the world: what me might call real, three-dimensional, embodied flesh-and-blood presence, or "real presence" for short.

The three dimensions of real human presence I'd like to highlight are these: abiding, devotion, and attention. In some respects, these three practices or dimensions are simply another way of naming the three cardinal virtues of the Christian tradition: faith, hope, and love. The primary challenge to nurturing these virtues, of course, is that the practices and institutions which might nurture and sustain these dimensions of human presence are not cultivated in a cultural vacuum.

As we briefly sketch these aspects of three-dimensional presence, we'll be reminded that our culture has its own virtues it works tirelessly to instill within us, often forming and transforming us daily into something far less glorious than the image of Christ. A number of these so-called virtues, it seems to me, run counter to the desire to cultivate real presence. Although there are many, we'll only focus on three along the way, but they are three rather important, perhaps even central ones. Indeed, we might declare, with apologies to St. Paul: "But these three remain: productivity, efficiency and speed. But the greatest of these is speed."

## THREE PRACTICES OR DIMENSIONS OF PRESENCE

### 1. Abiding

The first practice or dimension of presence we might name "abiding." Abiding is that practice or dimension of presence that involves being with and remaining in another, a practice that is full of restful receptivity. In John 15, Jesus says:

"Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing" (15:4-5 NRSV).

Abiding makes reception possible; if a branch does not abide in the vine, the life of the vine cannot be received by the branch. The same goes for us: abiding makes receiving the gifts of another possible, and since as Christians we are well aware that all we have is a gift we have received, we should be mindful of the crucial importance of abiding.

There are numerous Christian practices in which abiding forms one important dimension, but let's just mention one at this point: the reading and hearing of Scripture in both the life of the Church and the followers of Jesus.

Jesus tells us: "If you abide in my word than you are truly my disciples" (John 8:31). This, therefore, is what we seek to do as the body of Christ. Indeed, this is what so many of you have committed yourselves to doing for the rest of your lives: helping congregations abide week after week, year after year, in the Word. There is nothing easy about this, nothing easy about cultivating within a people the slow, patient receptivity that abiding in the Word requires. In a world that demands increased productivity at every turn, few things seem *less* productive than abiding with these same scriptures, these same stories, week after week, year after year, especially when it's nearly impossible to tell if they are having any effect at all.

It takes time, a long time, for these texts, these stories, to begin to transform our imaginations and to lead us into this new world wrought by Christ. But so little in our experience prepares us for this long haul, and certainly not the images and metaphors for Scripture with which many of us grew up. If you were told when you were young that the Bible is a road map, a guidebook, an instruction manual, or more recently, God's GPS, then you won't likely feel any need to actually *abide* in the Word; all you need to do is read these instructions once—or at the most twice—and what you need to do, how you should respond, should be obvious *immediately*. Otherwise these aren't instructions worth having at all. Indeed, most of us would be understandably put off with a

map or guidebook or instruction manual that demanded we pour over the details every day for months on end, but which yielded no immediate, definitive guidance. But this is why abiding always demands faith, trust, and hope, for abiding demands staying with something or someone when it's not at all clear what the short term benefits might be.

Such abiding is difficult to do in a culture that tells us that if we can't see the results or transformation right away then it's likely because nothing is happening, and so we should hurry off to the next big thing that looks promising. And yet Christians for centuries have had the audacity to think that placing themselves before these texts does have an effect on us, even (or especially) when we can't clearly see it in the short run. One of the desert fathers likened this slow process of transformation to the work which a steady drip of water has over time on a stone. If we evaluate what's happening after any one drop of water, the answer seems clear: nothing whatsoever. But if the stone abides this steady dripping, even though no single drop of water by itself transforms the stone, the stone is nevertheless over time softened and reshaped.

## 2. Devotion

A second practice or dimension of presence we might name “devotion.” Devotion is that practice or dimension of human presence that involves the lavish giving of ourselves to another. If abiding tends to focus on receptivity, devotion tends to focus on donation, on the human ability to give ourselves as an act of devotion, as an act that embodies our deepest conviction about the inherent worth of that to which we give ourselves. The vine gives life to the branch, which in turn takes that life and uses it for bearing good fruit. The branch can do nothing on its own, but because it abides, and receives the donation of life from the vine, the branch can in turn pass on that life in bearing fruit. You and I have been given life, and in Jesus Christ have been given new life. As we abide in

him and he in us, we are empowered to give ourselves and the life we have received lavishly to others.

Again, there are many Christian practices that involve this dimension of devotion, but for now, let's name only one, and one which is so easy to overlook: we sing together. The church sings together. There are several things worth noting about this.

First, there aren't many places in American culture where we sing together, but where we do, it is almost always an act of devotion. National anthems, birthdays—there just aren't that many places or occasions. If most of us gathered here hadn't been singing together as a church for so long, I suspect it would strike us as very odd. Because singing involves more of a person than just speaking does, when we want to give ourselves to something completely, it's not surprising that we want to sing about it. (And here I can't help but mention the beautiful hymn sung last night by our friend John Rasmussen, a hymn whose refrain was "How can I keep from singing?") Yet that "something more" that singing requires also means that singing brings with it a certain vulnerability, since giving ourselves so openly makes public our commitments and convictions in ways that many people are reluctant to do.

And here's another thing that's easy to miss: singing tends to slow things down and, in so doing, creates space for being more fully present. Whatever you make of the national anthem, there's no arguing that it at least briefly interrupts the normal frenzy that often accompanies sporting events and makes room for a bit of sober reflection for those so inclined.

Likewise, when the church sings, it tends to slow down. If we just wanted to people to be informed by these words, we could instruct them to read them silently to themselves, we could have someone read them out loud, or we could even recite the words out loud together, but singing them together takes longer than all of these alternatives. The point, of course, is that the goal is not the efficient transfer of information, but formation and transformation, and singing these words, which takes more time and binds

them to music which continues to resonate in our hearts long after the song is over, has a transformative effect over time.

In addition, by encouraging us to engage in this practice together, corporate singing has the potential to draw us out of ourselves and remind us that we are part of something substantially bigger than what author David Foster Wallace once called “our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms.”<sup>2</sup> Singing together encourages us to add our voices to those around us and to glory together in the One to whom we collectively offer our praise and thanksgiving.

### 3. Attention

The third and final practice or dimension of human presence we might name “attention.” Attention is that practice or dimension of human presence that involves an intense and focused openness to another, a “leaning toward” another that remains in some sense briefly suspended between reception and donation while at the same time including both. In short, attention is itself always already a kind of donation and receptivity that both anticipates and makes possible further acts of each.

At this point I should show my hand: I think it’s nearly impossible to overstate the importance of attention to any human life worth living. John Ciardi, the well-known American poet and translator of Dante, once famously remarked: “We are what we do with our attention.”

Just as mutual indwelling is something of a mystery, so is human attention, this capacity to fix ourselves on something outside of ourselves. The French philosopher Simone Weil, who perhaps has written with more insight than anyone else about the spiritual aspects of human attention, has said: “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.” She goes on to say, with reference to attending to the suffering of others: “The capacity to give one’s at-

2. David Foster Wallace, 2005 Kenyon College commencement address,

tention to the sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it.”<sup>3</sup>

The reason this is so rare, the reason that attention is a miracle, is because attention, real attention, draws us out of ourselves into communion with God, with one another, and with the world. Yet as Scripture and our own experience amply testify, our natural tendency is to take this good gift of attention and do with it what we do with all of God’s good gifts: bend those gifts back onto ourselves to serve only ourselves and our own small agendas. This tendency of the human heart is what Augustine, Luther, Kierkegaard and others call “incurvature.”

We see this if we turn to the practice of attention we call listening. We know as Christians that we are called to practice this all-but-lost art, this leaning in to hear God, to hear the cries of our neighbors, to hear the groanings of creation, and to hear all of these not just with our ears, but with our hearts. But how often do we really listen, or when we *do* listen, how often do we hear only what we *want* to hear? This is incurvature. But real attention, real listening involves an openness that is ready to be surprised, startled, unsettled, undone. This is a kind of listening that attends not just to words, but to subtle shifts in tone, to facial expressions, to body language, and to what remains unsaid. In short, this kind of listening, this kind of attention at the heart of real presence, renders the invisible visible.

And here it is perhaps worth noting that attention, because it is a kind of discipline, can in fact be trained. I often tell students, for example, that the most important class they may ever take at Milligan College is BIOL 363: Vertebrate Field Biology—also known as the Bird Watching class.

3. Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1951), pp. 111, 114.

Bird Watching? What could possibly be so important about bird watching?

This: it trains you to pay exquisite attention to something that has always been right in front on you.

You discover the subtle differences between different kinds of warblers, thrushes, and sparrows. You find out that they all have names and unique songs. All of a sudden, you begin to see, *really see*, these birds all the time. And you begin to hear their songs, their amazing music, not because they weren't there to see or hear before, but because you had never really paid attention before.

And for many students, this is a revelation. An epiphany if you will. It opens up a whole new world, and the new world it opens is not just about birds. Because once you learn how to pay attention to the glory of birds, birds that have always been there, you begin to wonder what else you've been missing, what else you haven't been paying attention to.

And before long, whole new worlds open up and you find yourself overwhelmed with wonder at a "world charged with the grandeur of God" (Gerard Manley Hopkins).

So these are three dimensions of presence: abiding, devotion and attention.

### ALL THREE AT ONCE

If we want to see an example of these three dimensions of presence coming together (of their inseparability) we might turn to the opening of Acts 3. Here we find the familiar story of Peter and John's encounter with the lame man at the gate of the temple called Beautiful.

Let me remind you of two things as we attend to this text. First, we have no idea how often this man has sat daily at the Beautiful gate, but the text suggests it may have been a long time. He has been lame from birth. Had Peter and John perhaps seen him before? Might even Jesus have walked by this man on his way

to the temple years earlier? We don't know the answers to these questions, but this man seems to have been abiding here for some time.

Second, Peter and John are on their way to the temple to pray in the middle of the afternoon, planning to give themselves to God in and through this act of devotion, observant Jews that they are. The lame man sees them about to enter the temple and asks them for alms. And then come the two verses to which I'd like us to give our attention:

"Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said 'Look at us.' And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them" (Acts 3: 4-5).

Here in the midst of this man's abiding and the apostles' devotion to God comes the moment of encounter, the moment of fixed attention. Peter and John fix their gaze upon this man, and Peter asks the man to do the same in return. At first glance this may seem like an odd request—"Look at us"—but perhaps it isn't. Most beggars know well that people avoid eye-contact with them because we know, almost intuitively, that if eye-contact is established a claim on each other's humanity is made. And so those of us who encounter beggars regularly have learned to cross by on the other side, and to divert our eyes, to pretend not to see. So over time, perhaps the one begging also learns not to really see, since it's too painful to suffer this rejection at the hands of real flesh and blood people. Better to think of them merely as occasional embodiments of pity.

But here, on this day at gate called Beautiful, everyone begins to see each other, attention becomes fixed, and the result? Real presence. And out of this real presence comes an overflowing of gifts. Peter and John, because they are people of the Spirit who are *really* present, *really* paying attention, are able to offer this man something more than he had asked for, a wholeness he didn't know was possible. The apostles, in return, receive an opportunity to live out an important truth: that even though they appeared to have

nothing to offer the man, their openness and attentiveness to him supplied an occasion for the God of abundance to provide exactly what the man needed.

*“The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.”*

## EXAMINING FAMILIAR PRACTICES THROUGH DIFFERENT LENSES

In the space remaining I’d like to employ this three-dimensional rubric of presence to take a brief tour of a number of other Christian practices in the hope of giving us a slightly different set of lenses through which to see these very familiar practices of the Church. Along the way, we’ll note how these familiar practices often slow us down.

To be clear, I’m not suggesting that there’s anything virtuous *per se* about moving through life more slowly. I’m not suggesting, for example, that if the average human walks at three miles an hour, we should wake up tomorrow morning and commit ourselves to walking at two. Rather, what I am suggesting, or perhaps more accurately, what I am wondering about, is whether caring deeply about presence—God’s presence to us, our presence to God, our presence to each other, our presence to and for the world and its presence to and for us—whether caring about all these things might require us to attend more carefully to how we move through the world. If your experience is anything like mine, you probably have a sense that there is a threshold of speed at which presence begins to dissipate, a speed at which presence cannot be fully received, cannot be fully given, and a speed at which *sustained attention to much of anything* largely disappears.

One caveat. In what follows I will continue to mention much about human presence, and how in some ways such presence is more important than the things we do. I do want to be careful here, however, because even though it’s true that our proclivity

toward productivity often undercuts our practice of human presence, I also don't want to draw a strong distinction between our gift of presence and the other gifts we might offer to the world as a result of our ability to produce things, make things, create things. In some sense, of course, when human beings make things, those objects carry, to a greater or lesser degree, some imprint of human presence.

When a painter brilliantly splashes color across a canvas, or a soprano sings a glorious descant, or a poet turns a phrase that burrows into our imagination, each stamps the material of their art with something of their own presence. In doing so, they leave behind, even if only in our memory, a trace of their presence, a hint of who they are and those things about which they care deeply.

My good friend David Butzu composes soul-stirring responsorial psalms for his congregation on a nearly weekly basis and in doing so, communicates something powerful about his profound love for the Church and the transformative, resonating work that scripture, set to beautiful music, can accomplish in our life together. So the things we make, the things we do, can very much be beautiful bearers of human presence.

And it's also the case that the things we make, the things we do, can *also* communicate something of our *twisted* convictions and passions. Brad Kallenberg, in his fine book *God and Gadgets*, tells the revealing story of Robert Moses, long considered the master-builder of mid-20th-century New York City.<sup>4</sup> Although Moses was responsible for much good, Kallenberg also recounts the rather sinister way Moses kept poor minorities from having access to the city's best parks and beaches. How did he do this? He constructed 200 overpasses in the city with a maximum clearance of 9 feet—much too low for public busses. So in a very real sense, these overpasses continue to be stamped by Moses' presence, bear-

4. Brad Kallenberg, *God and Gadgets: Following Jesus in a Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), p. 17.

ing witness in very concrete ways to some of his deepest, if darkest, fears and desires.

As we embark on this tour I hope you find it to be hopeful. Over time God has given the church remarkable gifts for cultivating a life of real presence before God, before one another, and before the world. I want to be clear: we don't have to worry about creating new practices for the Church; rather, we simply need to embrace a little more fully the ones that have already been handed down to us. So please receive this brief survey as a form of encouragement. I'm not offering a scolding; rather, I'm interested in helping us see how the Spirit is *already* nurturing slow church in the midst of a runaway world. More than anything, I want to pull our attention back to something we already know: the mystery, the beauty, the glory of divine and human presence.

## PRAYING

Surely much of Christian prayer involves *abiding*, opening ourselves up to God's presence and learning to abide in silence, stillness, and peace in the midst of God's presence. Surely much of Christian prayer involves *an act of loving devotion*, a learning to be as fully present to God as we can be, present in our praise and thanksgiving, present in our confession, present in our petitions for ourselves and others. Surely much of Christian prayer involves *learning to be attentive*, attentive to the stirrings of our own hearts, attentive to the suffering of our neighbors and the injustices of our world, attentive to the deep longings and groanings of a creation waiting for its redemption.

To state the obvious: there is nothing straightforwardly productive, efficient, or speedy about Christian prayer. Rather, Christian prayer is the slow, patient work of the Spirit in and through us, drawing us ever deeper into the presence of and communion with God. And lest we think our bodies don't matter, it might also be good to be reminded that the church has often

prayed on her knees, which certainly makes it a little more difficult to speed away.

## WEEPING WITH THOSE WHO WEEP

Few things strike against our productivity-oriented, efficiency-loving, and speed-crazed culture as much as do suffering and death. Although I'm sure it has never been easy to be present *with* and *to* those who are suffering, our culture's three cardinal virtues powerfully disincline us to placing ourselves among those who weep. Few people seem genuinely willing to slow down and offer real presence to those who otherwise weep alone. As a result, so many among us suffer in deadly silence and isolation, devoid of any real human contact, let alone real presence. Here, as always, the Church is called to bear embodied witness to the Compassionate One, the one who suffers for us, with us, alongside us. And we do so by *abiding* with those who suffer, who grieve, who despair, by drawing alongside and being present to them in whatever ways we can, being ready at all times to receive their tears, their grief, their pain. Often this will involve a largely silent attentiveness, a leaning in to hear their pain, their grief, their despair that may or may not be verbalized. This is not productive, efficient, or fast. This is the patient work of God.

## STOPPING

From early on in their relationship with their Creator, the people of God have been commanded to enter into a certain rhythm of life that includes periodic full stops. It was called Sabbath, or *Shabbat* in Hebrew, which simply means to cease or stop. For our purposes, we need not wade into the whole discussion of Christian Sabbatarianism, about whether, and if so how and when, Christians are called to observe the Sabbath in our age. Instead, we do well first merely to focus on the sheer *gift* of stopping, the goodness and beauty of stopping, particularly as it relates to real

presence. Too often we have focused on Sabbath as obligation and have, as a result, missed the gift.

The simple truth is that we are much more likely to be present, fully present, when we have come to a full stop. God somehow knew how easy it would be for us to get caught up in ourselves, for any one of us to overestimate our importance to the running of the world and thus run ourselves so completely ragged that our human presence would become thin and dissipated. And so God commanded us to stop, to cease from our labors, to be liberated from our sense of self-importance and to take delight in the sheer goodness and giftedness of God, one another, and God's creation.

The gift of Sabbath, the gift of stopping, is the gift of a rhythm of life governed by something other than the incessant drive to always be busy, always be productive. A Sabbath rhythm is one born not of the anxiety that seeks to prove to ourselves and the world that we are someone, but a rhythm which embraces all God's abundance as gift, assured that in the face of Jesus Christ we have seen clearly even our own giftedness, have even heard the loud and clear declaration that we already *are* someone.

We also know that that this practice of stopping had other cycles besides the weekly one, such as the Sabbath year and the Jubilee year. But there is also the daily rhythm of work and rest, and here it might be worth pausing a moment to talk about sleep as a theological issue, as a practice of abiding. As has been widely reported, we have a number of health crises at the moment in our society, and although obesity receives the lion's share of attention, a number of others are of serious concern, including sleep deprivation. And there is even mounting evidence that sleep deprivation increases the likelihood of type-2 diabetes as well as other behaviors that contribute to obesity.

But I'm not a scientist or a physician, I'm a theologian, and so here all I'd like to do is raise a few questions:

First: What do we make of the fact that God designed us, best we can tell, to devote roughly a third of our lives to sleep? If all God cared about was productivity, couldn't God have designed us

to work around the clock? And is sleep simply about efficiency, about resting so that we can be more productive during our waking hours? Or might sleep be a daily call to abide in the truth that every good and perfect gift is from above, and not simply the result of our own hard work?

Second: What does our unwillingness or anxious inability to sleep say about our level of trust in the giftedness of God's present-and-still-coming kingdom? In short, how much of sleep deprivation is but another symptom of our sense of self-importance, the sense that God can't bring the kingdom without our round-the-clock efforts?

Third (and here I get personal): What does it say about my life and its rhythms, its foundations and its manifold animations, if I can't make it through the day without a rather sizeable influx of stimulants? And I ask this, to be clear, not to induce guilt, but to encourage us to be honest with ourselves. What might this say?

## STATIO

There, are of course, other practices of stopping besides Sabbath and sleep. One of these comes from the Christian monastic tradition and is called *statio* –a Latin word meaning “standing still” and the root of our word “station” (as in train station or stations of the cross).

The practice of *statio* involves stopping one thing before we begin another. It's what monastics do before prayer: they arrive early and “stand still,” so to speak; that is, they leave behind what they had been doing and seek to be fully present so when their prayers begin, they are fully there. Churches seek to do this as well when they pause for silence before worship begins, or after the reading of Scripture, or after the homily or sermon.

The practice of *statio* can also helpfully spill out into our daily lives where we are often caught up in the endless cycle of running from one thing to the next and never really being present for any of them. How many of us have caught ourselves walking into our

homes at the end of a long day and engaging in conversation with our housemates only to discover—or more often than not, have *them* discover—that we are not fully present? *Statio* is the few minutes I take to gather myself on my walk to the classroom in order to leave behind what I was working on in the office and prepare myself to be fully present to my students. *Statio* is the few minutes I take on my way home to let go of my work and prepare to be fully present to my family and my neighbors. This, too, is the patient work of God.

## EATING TOGETHER

I doubt few Christians need to be convinced of the importance of table fellowship for the ministry of Jesus. Nor is it difficult to see how eating together might be an avenue and occasion for real presence. Eating together is intimate, it quietly signals our mutual vulnerability, and it provides us a beautiful opportunity to offer each other the life-sustaining gifts of food and companionship.

In short, eating together is often a beautiful act of abiding, devotion and attention.

Too often, of course, eating in our society is dominated by concerns about efficiency. Efficiency involves getting the most bang for your buck, the most work or effect for the least amount of effort expended. There's nothing wrong with efficiency *per se*; indeed, there are lots of areas of our lives where we might be happy that things run efficiently. I'm pleased that many of the stop lights in my city are efficiently synchronized. If we're going to drive automobiles, I want them to be as fuel-efficient as possible. And I have to confess, I'm pleased that when I want my friend in San Francisco to receive a hand-written letter from me, I can drop it in the mailbox rather than have to hand-deliver it myself. But it's one thing to acknowledge the good of efficiency in some settings and circumstances and quite another to make efficiency a god to which all other concerns must bow.

And this can happen even when we eat together as a gathered community. I remember a few years ago when a student returned from visiting a large congregation and commented on how efficiently they had handled serving communion to several thousand worshipers at once. Their secret? Distribute to everyone at the entrance a small wafer wrapped in cellophane atop a small container of juice the size of a coffee creamer. At the appointed time, everyone pulls two little tabs and partakes “together.” As you might guess, these ingenious supplies are marketed to churches because they are not only hygienic but also terribly efficient: no time wasted in preparation or clean up, no time wasted processing to the altar to receive the Eucharist, and so on.

If efficiency involves accomplishing a desired task with the least amount of resources expended (time, energy, materials), then we might be forced to agree that this is brilliantly efficient. But it might also be wise to ask: efficient at *doing what* exactly? If all we care about is that each person present has distributed to them some bit of bread and juice in the least amount of time with the least amount of effort, then yes, this is the way to do it; this is efficiency at its best.

But what if we care about other things more?

If you’re like me, you know plenty of congregations who have members who take exquisite care in baking loaves of bread for use during the Eucharist. There’s nothing particularly efficient about this; rather, it’s an act of devotion. It’s a small way of giving yourself to others.

If you’re like me, you may also find that some of the most consistently and profoundly moving times of gathered worship are when we as a congregation process to the altar for Eucharist. Here, each time, I am made newly mindful of all these beautiful flesh-and-blood saints who walk this pilgrim way with me, whose lives have become inextricably intertwined with my own, and whose deep joys and painful struggles I often know. I watch some members process whose children grew up with my own and others

who taught our children in Sunday School and helped to shape them into who they are. I see wise old saints of the church whose quiet, faithful presence each week has been a source of inspiration to countless people, including me. I see students who I have been blessed to teach and who have in turn made me more than I would otherwise be. I see a new mother cautiously processing with her infant swaddled close to her, and behind her a physician from my Sunday School class who I know is slowly dying of cancer and who has decided to forgo further treatment. And all of us, shuffling slowly toward the altar to have a piece of bread pressed into our cupped hands and hear the words, “The Body of Christ.”

There is, of course, nothing particularly efficient about this procession, but best I can tell, no one seems to mind. Indeed, we seem happy to take our time, slowly, patiently moving toward the front, and then, once we have returned to our seats, taking in the faces and bodies and lives of those who are processing after us.

I mention all of this not because what I describe here is unique; nothing could be further from the truth. This profound and beautiful drama is played out week after week in congregations and parishes everywhere. No, I mention it because it's so easy to miss, so easy to overlook and underestimate how such patient practices shape our imaginations, our affections, our lives.

## OTHER PRACTICES OF PRESENCE

There are, of course, lots of other Christian practices that might nurture real three-dimensional presence. Here I'm thinking of such things as the slow patient work of forgiveness and reconciliation. The truth of the matter is that human presence isn't always automatically life-giving. When we have wounded and pained other people, our presence to them can continue to be wounding and painful. This is one important reason why forgiveness and reconciliation are so crucial to our life together.

Or what about all the practices around what we call Christian hospitality? Or the practices of honest conversation that have been the hallmark of churches such as Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis, practices of conversation that are also at the heart of the Congregational Formation process of the Ekklesia Project? Or what about such practices as friendship, rearing children, and communal discernment in congregations? The list is endless.

## STABILITY

I'd like to close my survey by noting some of the practices around what we call "stability." Here we often rightly point to the ways people bind themselves to each other and to certain places as a means of being more fully present to and with and for those very people and places. Such binding is itself a kind of abiding, a kind of devotion, that often leads to greater attentiveness. And we see such bindings at all kinds of levels of human interaction.

I think about my former next-door-neighbor Zelda, who every day gets up and drives to the long-term care facility for Alzheimer's patients and does her best to be with and take care of her husband of over 50 years who long ago stopped recognizing who she was. A long-time Presbyterian minister, Don now often swears like a sailor at this unfamiliar woman who daily intrudes into his room.

Or I think about people like our EP friends, Victor and Lynne, who give themselves tirelessly to addressing the medical and emotional needs of their daughter Monica every day, having no guarantee that their efforts will ever bring identifiable, quantifiable results.

Or I think of the congregation of which I am a part, a United Methodist church nestled in the heart of downtown Johnson City, Tennessee. About 15 years ago the congregation was in the midst of intense discussions among its membership. The subject was whether to expand our existing, aging facilities at their current rather land-locked location in downtown Johnson City, or to build

a new campus out in the suburbs north of town where nearly all of the city's growth was taking place. You can imagine what consultants recommended. But the congregations decided not to move and we had some very specific reasons to stay.

The main reason was bound up with an event that had taken place nearly a half dozen years before on Christmas Eve, 1989. As church members were gathering early that evening for candlelight services, they were horrified to discover that the former John Sevier Hotel, a 10-story building that sat right across the street from the church, was on fire. The city's tallest building was no longer a hotel, but had been converted to apartments for nearly 150 elderly and disabled residents. The church immediately canceled its services and became the hub of operations, including the gathering and disseminating of information about missing residents, as hundreds of firefighters and paramedics converged on the scene. Before the bitterly cold night was over, the church also became a triage center and temporary morgue, with 16 residents losing their lives that night.

Needless to say, it was a sobering Christmas Eve. But one long-term effect on the congregation was to make it more attentive to its downtown neighbors. Sometimes the *beauty* of the world grabs your attention; at other times, *tragedy* does. Many members confessed to having previously paid scant attention to the folks who lived right across the street from our place of gathering. Even though the former hotel was at one point the pride of Johnson City, when it was repaired and reopened after the fire it operated as an apartment complex exclusively for low-income and disabled residents. And so the church began to examine ways it might be a better neighbor to these long-neglected folks across the street. So by the time these conversations arose about moving to the suburbs, the church was for the first time becoming involved with its neighbors. And this was the reason the congregation decided to stay, to abide, in downtown Johnson City. We believed we were there for a reason and that to leave would involve not merely abandoning an

address and piece of property, but would mean abandoning these neighbors with whom we were trying to be in relationship. And so we stayed.

As a result, over these past 15 years the church has become a hub of care and aid for all of our downtown neighbors and not just our friends at the John Sevier Center. But it is slow work, and there is still so much of our own transformation that needs to happen. We are still far better at “doing for” than we are at “being with.” But, we are trying to do better, and each year I think there is a stronger and stronger sense that our neighbors are making us more than we would be without them, for *in them* we often meet Christ.

In most every respect, none of these stories of stability is remarkable. They are stories that are repeated in different ways in different places all over the world every day. And that is the point, I think. The patient work of God goes on every day, all around us, but because it so often is quiet and unassuming, it’s easy to miss. The patient work of God is rarely dramatic, rarely eye-catching, rarely newsworthy. More often than not, it remains largely invisible except to those who have been given eyes to see the hand of God at work in the world, slowly, often imperceptively, transforming the kingdoms of this world into the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.

God is in the business of sanctifying a people, a people who by their very life together, their very God-bearing presence, bear witness to something of who this God is and what this God is doing in the world. And this God doesn’t seem to be in a hurry. Our ultimate destiny is to be gathered into that new city where there is no temple because God dwells eternally in our midst. Until that day, we are called as the Church to make ourselves available as channels of God’s life-giving presence, a presence that takes concrete form in our acts of abiding, our acts of devotion, and our acts of attention.

May it be so.

*God of grace and gifts:*

*Give us eyes this day to see your patient work in the world. Give us eyes to see your patient work in your Church and in our congregations. And on those days when we are tired and tempted to despair, when we seem to have so little real presence to offer, we pray that you would gather up even those scraps of our human presence, our seemingly insignificant little five loaves and two fish of human presence, and take them, and bless them, and make them more than we are. And in so doing, may your Spirit continue to move afresh and anew in our lives, transforming us ever more fully into what you have already made us: the Body of Christ for the world.*

*We pray this through the One who has from the beginning lovingly devoted himself to us, who continually and faithfully abides with us and in us, and who is ever attentive to us, even Jesus Christ.*

*Amen.*

