

Challenges in the 21st Century: Learning from the Desert Fathers

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Arsenius (360-449) was born to great privilege in Rome into a wealthy senatorial family. Emperor Theodosius appointed him tutor of his two princely sons.

While still in the Emperor's palace, he prayed to the Lord in these words,, "Lord lead me to salvation." And a voice came to him saying, "Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved." Having withdrawn to the solitary life, he prayed again, asking the Lord to lead him to salvation. And he heard a voice saying to him, "Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always. These are the source of sinlessness."

Over the past several months I have been praying and reflecting on our vision, missions, values and unique gift (*charism* in Greek) that we have been given by God. At the same time I have been reading and reflecting on the different ways the Holy Spirit has led the church through different times in history.

This has led me, once again, to the men and women who withdrew from society to the deserts of Egypt and Syria during the third to fifth centuries to seek God after the emperor had made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire. They wanted to free themselves from the worldliness found both inside and outside the church, truly find God and thus bring Him to both the church and the world.

At New Life Fellowship Church, we are not called to live in the desert, but rather to a congested, noisy, busy place -- New York City. We are called to be a local church, a community of believers that bears witness to the Lordship of Christ in the midst of working jobs, raising children, taking subways, paying our bills and sitting in traffic.

What relevance might the desert fathers have for us? Their way of life shocks, almost offends our modern way of life. Yet they hold seeds of insight for the challenges we face as we seek to live in and for the world.

The following are three qualities of our identity at New Life Fellowship Church that I believe God desires to deepen in us – freely chosen separation from the world, prayer and compassion.

1. Separation from the World. The desert fathers, like Jesus, freely choose a life of “apartness”. They affirmed that it was not necessary to conform to the world’s plan for human life. The world was not lord or master. Jesus was Lord.

In the same way, we too must find the “desert” in our lives and kinds of separation we need to pursue Christ. This will be found in our daily routines (e.g. Sabbath keeping, worship, community,) and the choices we make (e.g. time, resources, entertainment). The cultural climate in which we live subtly demands conformity. Jesus calls us out to authentic relationship to Him and to others.

2. Prayer –The very heart of life for the desert fathers was to seek the face of God continually. This is also the call of every human being. Ordinary people like us can share in a life of prayer. It will simply look different. Again we need the Holy Spirit to guide each of us.

It can be rightly said that learning to pray and living to know Him “face to face” in our lives is the goal of our church. In fact, the whole Christian life is to be centered in the “Abba” experience as it was for Christ.

3. Compassion – If all we do does not lead us to love, then something about our spiritual lives is not working. To many people’s surprise, the desert fathers understood this. The goal of our separation from the world is not our own inner peace but love for people who are “sheep without a shepherd.”

It is important that we discern how God wants to mold our activities, both personally and as a church, to ensure they are flowing from hearts of love for Jesus and others. We need to know ways in which we have “grown hard” – whether there are some activities or things we need to let go.

I invite your prayers for our discernment in the times ahead. Please let us know of any reflections or insights God may be giving you to help the rest of us. And we pray together at New Life Fellowship that God’s life and will come in all we do.