

LIVING JESUS: Moving Toward the Peaceful One

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This story is the second in a six-part series exploring Jesus through the lens of spiritual formation.

Spiritual movements are always happening within us. Gradually waking up to these movements, we discover a vast interior space where the soul and God are in constant conversation. Paying attention to what is happening within us is not an exercise in private spirituality. Rather, it is a critical practice for disciples who desire to root their lives in the same source as the One they seek.

In the past we may have referred to these inner movements as a divine nudge, a sense that something needed to be done, or that someone needed a visit or phone call. Occasionally, we trust these movements enough to respond, but they largely occur unnoticed and drowned out in the noise and clutter of busy lives in overstimulated cultures.

While sometimes we experience special moments of divine grace, these inner movements are consistent, rather than occasional. It takes practice to notice them, a willingness to get quiet from time to time just to listen. Sometimes simple reactions are a helpful place to begin. When someone says something hurtful and offensive, what moves in you? Anger? Embarrassment? Shame? Sorrow? Where does it come from? Where is it going? What might it reveal about where your heart is oriented, about what you choose to let influence you, about what perceptions and judgments affect your decisions?

When we react to emotions, we can be led astray by what we think they are telling us. When we approach emotions with curiosity, we follow them deeper to their true source and discern how to respond. Joy, gratitude, belonging, hope, and inspiration can teach us who we really are and who we are invited to become. Even when it feels like little is happening in our daily lives, boredom, restlessness, and inner aridity can be profound spiritual teachers.

James Finley describes the contemplative as one who learns to pay attention to the “intimate texture” of all that is happening within us and around us. He describes the purpose of prayer as an opportunity to:

...learn, day by day, to enter into an ever more habitual meditative awareness of and response to God’s presence in my life. In more specifically Christian terms, I realized that daily meditation was a way of following the promptings of the Spirit within me.

—Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God

Left unexamined, these inner movements can cause unintended harm in our personal and communal life. How many tensions have been left unattended? How much reconciliation or forgiveness withheld? How often does fear impact our choices? When do you catch yourself reacting to something that frustrates you rather than giving it a more thoughtful response (especially on social media)? Are we aware of how much we let the perceptions and judgments of others influence what we choose to prioritize and how we spend our time and energy? What are we allowing to form us in a daily way that is becoming a habitual response to the world around us? Is it our preferred news outlet and cultural assumptions, or is it the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Maturity in discipleship leads to the intentional alignment of inner movements and outward response. This is the heart of the question we have been invited to journey with this year. Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful One?

At first, this question might perplex us. How do we determine our proximity to Jesus, the peaceful One? President Steve Veazey, in his 2019 closing World Conference sermon, invited us to pay close attention to what is at the heart of our lives and actions as disciples of Jesus:

What is the spiritual attitude, trajectory, and focus of our lives? Are we enthusiastically on our way to Jesus in the priorities, character, and vision of our discipleship? As Community of Christ, are we listening and moving together toward Jesus in our relationships and concerns?

What inner qualities might we notice as we move toward Jesus, the peaceful One? Perhaps we might find ourselves more discerning than reactionary. We might grow in confidence about belonging to God, lessening the potency of rejection, real or perceived. We might find that our habits of thought, speech, and action reveal a life rooted in the Spirit rather than a frantic dependency on pleasing or impressing others. We might grow in compassion—boldly advocating for the marginalized when others are quick to pick up stones of condemnation. We might even grow in love for our enemies.

The content of our lives, thoughts, and imagination are places where the Spirit greets and invites us into the deeper journey of spiritual transformation. We begin to see that what happens within us impacts what we choose to do in the world around us. Discipleship is a daily choice to see all of life, even the simplest interactions and inner movements, through a Christ-lens. This choice is not just for our benefit, but for the welfare of every person and creature connected to our lives on this beautiful, thriving, and aching planet.

Waking up to the sacred quality and “intimate texture” of our lives and relationships is of greatest necessity. It takes tremendous courage and integrity to live the essence of the gospel, and people are craving that kind of substance and sustenance.

Rosemarie Freeney Harding, one of the mothers of the American civil-rights movement, described the spiritual quality cultivated in this undertaking of freedom, love, and justice grounded in faith. Recalling horrible atrocities and setbacks that might have been enough for any of us to cower, she wrote about the power of being with others whose lives were rooted in Christ as the source of their action:

Being constantly in the presence of people who lived so fervently in the power of nonviolence, who believed and acted from the understanding that love and forgiveness were essential tools for social justice; being surrounded by people like that fed those commitments in me, in many of us. And it infused the nation.

—Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism, and Mothering

This kind of spiritual posture, which led to tangible social change, started with the discipline of listening intentionally to that inner conversation always happening within. It was a source of strength and survival. Will I choose love or hate? Will I choose reaction or discernment? Will I choose courage or fear? Will I live in the integrity of my faith or choose what feels safer and easier?

Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful one? Let’s put this question in our pockets and carry it with us all day. Let’s put it on the nightstand before we go to sleep. May it be the first thing we see when we wake in the morning. May it grow more sustained attention to what is happening within and around us as we listen deeply to the Spirit present in all things. May it form in us a Christ-lens in daily life as a deep habit. May we move ever closer to Jesus, the peaceful One, in our hearts, thoughts, words, and actions. ■