

**Synod of the Diocese of Yukon
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**Personal Devotions: Our Love Affair With God
By Rev. Laurie Munro**

The expression ‘personal devotions’ is one that elicits a wide range of responses. For some, it brings anticipation with thoughts of a peaceful time out with God. For some it brings the images of a favourite book of daily readings to be read religiously. For some it brings feelings of guilt, with thoughts of the time they had meant to set aside, but missed because life just got so busy. For others it brings feelings of deep loss, with thoughts of just how distant they have drifted from God. None of these images capture the wonderful fullness of what personal devotions can be if we truly accept them as both personal and devoted. Once understood in this light, regular personal devotions become not only possible, but a delightful foundation on which one can build one’s life.

First, let us look at the word ‘devotion.’ Webster’s dictionary defines the term this way: an act of prayer or private worship; a religious exercise or practice other than the regular corporate worship of a congregation; the fact or state of being ardently dedicated and loyal. Using this definition, the questions we need to ask ourselves are, “Am I devoted to God? To Jesus? Am I ardently dedicated to him?” If so, we will find ourselves wanting to spend time with him, enjoying the love he gives to us, and offering our love in return because he really is our beloved.

If we are honest, though, I expect that most of us would have to admit to having times when we do not have those feelings - times when we are really living on faith – an act of the will in which we choose to believe in “what we hope for and [to be] certain of what we do not see” (Heb. 11:1). It is during those times in particular that our act of faith in turning to God and spending time with him is particularly important. As with any relationship, it takes work to keep communication going, and if our relationship with God is as important as we say, we need to be willing to make the commitment to meet with him daily and seek to get to know him better every day. Paul compared this commitment to the commitment that an athlete makes to training for the races: “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (1 Cor. 9:25). So our first task is to make the commitment to train ourselves for the race of a lifetime: the race into the arms of our Lord.

The next questions we consider must be, “How do I do it? How do I live my life so that this relationship with God will deepen and strengthen throughout my life?” The possibilities of how we will spend that time are endless, just as the ways in which couples express their love one for another are endless. Simply by calling them ‘personal devotions,’ we are acknowledging that there is an aspect of this time spent with God that is intimate and unique. Many practices may be similar to another person’s and some may be shared, but there is a place deep within each of us where the devotions connect us with the spirit of God in a way that conforms to the needs, hurts, delights and dreams that are ours alone. God waits to meet us personally, just as we are with all our joys and sorrows but often we somehow miss him. We sometimes build the ritual of devotional time into our schedules, but fail to find the personal relationship we want. We sometimes get so busy working for God that we don’t stop to listen to God. We feel as though we are feeding on enough crumbs to keep us alive, but we are certainly not enjoying the banquet

that others celebrate. So where can we turn to find guidance and help in developing the times of personal devotion that we really need?

In his book *Finding Our Way Again*, Bruce McLaren proposes that we would do well to look back to the ancient practices for guidance. He reminds us that Christianity is not just a system of belief that keeps us busy, but it is rather a way of life: a way to live in faith following the ways and teachings of Jesus (McLaren, 3). It is often when we lose sight of this difference – the difference between a system of belief and a way of being and living - that our faith becomes weak and brittle, and we become as the dry bones that Ezekiel saw waiting to be brought back to life (Ezek. 37:1-14).

The ancient ways that McLaren recommends we seriously consider using in our personal devotions include a number of practices that are often associated with the contemplative life: resting in the presence of God without words or work; reading and studying scripture and spiritual literature; practicing the awareness of God's presence in all situations; selecting specific times of day to stop all activity for a time of prayer; journaling; ending all prayer times in a period of silent listening to God; secret, generous service; meditation and memorization (McLaren, 95-7). He gives strong reasons for this recommendation. To explain the first reason, he gives the example of a master musician who, possibly seven out of two hundred performances, will be transported by the unexplained combination of audience, skill, and event, and will give a truly gifted performance (93-4). The exceptional performance cannot occur unless the musician has a disciplined life of practicing the music. We need to be practicing, or training to use Paul's word, in order to be ready to receive the gifts that God presents to us along our journeys. Practicing raises our awareness of the routine details of life with God and makes us more conscious of the exceptional times when God reveals himself in power.

I remember once when I was in China we were travelling through a busy market square. Cars vied with bicycles for inches of movement. People thronged around tightly packed booths, selling a bewildering assortment of goods. Children laughed and cried. Salespeople called out their wares above the noise of the crowd. It took a while, but when we finally made it to the other side, the guide said to us, "Did you notice the blue door at the far end of the wall? It was open. It's never open!" None of us had noticed it. To the guide, the square was a familiar place with all of the movement having meaning. To us it was a meaningless jumble of colour and noise. Only the practiced guide was in a position to recognize the extraordinary, the different. Similarly, only those who are practiced at looking for the presence of God will recognize the extraordinary, the difference he makes as he takes action in his world. Contemplative practices or personal devotions prepare us to recognize the grace of God to surprise us as he touches our lives, and when we recognize that he has touched our lives, we are transformed and our personal devotion deepens. If we want to be people who are transforming the world *for* Christ, we need to be people who are continually in the process of being transformed *by* Christ. It is through our personal devotions that we can be *in* the world and *in* Christ.

Once we have looked at our lives and determined that we want to deepen our devotional lives we are faced with the dilemma of deciding exactly what to do about it. The list above is a daunting one that could, in itself, become a block rather than an aid to growth. It is helpful to think of the list as a group of staples that one has in one's pantry. Different ones are combined at different times to create a variety of foods. Having regular devotional time is important. We need to keep our dates with God, but what we do on those dates may vary according to God's call and our need. However, some of the items should be included as basic ingredients in every recipe.

Key to all forms of personal devotion is the ability to be still with God. Still. Not speaking. Not working. Not striving. Still. This is for some the most daunting aspect of a

relationship with God. Be still and know that I am God (Ps. 46:10). It is in silence as we stand alone with God that all of our masks fall away. In the simple act of being in his presence, we begin to see ourselves as we truly are and are humbled. When we become aware of our sin, we become aware of our need to repent. When we become aware of our inadequacies and brokenness, we become aware of our dependence. When we become aware of all the gifts and blessings we have received, we become overwhelmed with the goodness of God. It is in the silence, as we see ourselves revealed more and more clearly and surrender ourselves to him, that we may come fully into contact with the love of God. It is only when we are truly able to receive God's love that his love can pour out through us to the hurting world.

The second essential element of personal devotion is to feed on the Word of God. Many of us live on a starvation diet of scripture. They say that a starving or fasting person will get to a point where they no longer feel hungry and will feel ill when they try to begin eating again. That is what has happened spiritually to many Christians today. Some get their weekly 'fix' listening to the lessons each Sunday and go on their way believing that they have received enough spiritual nourishment to carry them through their week. However, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. (Mt 4:4). Our spirits need regular feeding just as our bodies do.

Thirdly, we need to take time to let the scripture work its way into our hearts. We do this by responding in some way to what we have read. We may choose to talk with God about it, to journal it, to later share what we have discovered with a friend, or to take some positive action. Whatever means we choose, when we respond to the reading we are opening ourselves to let God speak more deeply in us and through us.

When we end our personal devotions by returning to silence, we are allowing God to have the last word. As we rest once again in his presence, we will often feel a sense of his peace or his direction. This also allows us to gradually turn our attention back to our busy lives, carrying his love and care with us.

It sounds as though this could be a process that takes hours and, indeed, for some it is. It can take as little as 12-15 minutes, however: 2 minutes of stillness followed by 4 minutes of sacred reading and 4-6 minutes of response time, ending with 2 minutes of silence. A quote from F. B. Meyer that I keep at hand says: "Watch the morning watch. Do not see the face of man until you have seen the face of God. Before you enter on the day with its temptations, look up into His face and hide His Word in your heart."

One of the most common criticisms made of Christians is that we do not practice what we preach. We preach love and understanding but are often bitter and angry. We preach generosity and anonymous giving but are often very public about our good works. We talk about community but often claim a private, solitary faith. We preach the gospel but do not read our own scriptures. The criticism is valid when directed at the church in Canada. The further we drift from the devotional practices that fed the body of Christ throughout the ages, the more evidence we see of trouble in our church. A common thought that is being put forward recently is this: what would the world be like if no one had ever practiced the ways of Jesus, and what could the world be like tomorrow if all Christians walked in his ways? Which world shall we choose? Our personal devotions are the power switch. It is for us to turn it on.

Respectfully submitted to the 39th Synod of the Diocese of Yukon
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