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Prologue

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR



Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

MATTHEW 7:7-8

The entry of postulants into monastic life should not be made too easy, but we should follow St. John's precept to see if they are from God. If, then, a newcomer goes on knocking at the door and after four or five days has given sufficient evidence of patient perseverance and does not waver from the request for entry but accepts the rebuffs and difficulties put in the way, then let a postulant with that strength of purpose be received and given accommodation in the guest quarters for a few days.

ST. BENEDICT'S RULE, 58

A book cover is a door of sorts. You have knocked on the door of inquiry and it has opened. This book is for you if you seek to learn what Benedict of Nursia, a sixth-century Italian monk, may teach everyday people about living a life grounded in God, attuned to the gospel, and open to change.

Many people knock on the doors of monasteries and gain entry into their chapels and guest rooms, but very few become monks. A Benedictine monastery door leads to a way of life with Jesus and those who abide in him. It is a regulated life but not a rigid one. By no means is it the only Christian way. Benedict's is a life for God alone, lived in community, marked by daily discipline and commitment to a set of principles and practices meant to form a person into one who is Christlike. Benedict lived in the late Roman Empire, and aspects of his teachings certainly reflect his time and place in history. But they endure because the essentials are timeless. He understood the gospel and what it takes for the human heart to be formed by it.

In quarters from Rome to Minnesota, from Wisconsin to Kentucky to New Mexico, and in Arizona where I make my home, I have been the guest of Benedictines who opened their houses to me, and not their houses only but also their rule of Christian life as Benedict envisioned it. He places a high premium on hospitality, going so far as to say that any guest at a monastery "should be received just as we would receive Christ himself" (RB 53). More than once when I have walked spiritually wounded to a monastery door and knocked, Benedictine hospitality has healed me. Small wonder, then, that I, a married Protestant clergywoman, would also be an oblate, a non-monastic associate of the Benedictines. No wonder I keep returning to the *Rule* by which they live, seeking entry into its wisdom. I will never be a monastic, and you need not aspire to be one in order to learn from Benedict.

The ready reception of guests that Benedict teaches is not the same as receiving people to reside permanently in the monastery. He openly states that entry should not be too easy into lasting membership in the monastic community. What a terrible marketing strategy it is, making it hard for inquirers to get past the front door. But Benedict is not selling a way of life. He is offering it free of charge to those who are ready to devote themselves entirely to the promises and practices of a wholeheartedly Christ-centered life with others.

What can those of us who will never be monastics learn from those who persevered not only in knocking on a monastery's door but in living within its walls and ways? We can learn patient perseverance, itself. We can learn to knock and knock again, to wait, to endure the nos that come before the yeses. We can learn to stay put and stay true to a quest even when the answers we get aren't the answers we want, and are slow in coming, to boot. We can learn to listen well for God's guidance, spoken to us through the words of Scripture, the wisdom of Benedict, and the trusted members of our communities. We can learn to let go of unhealthy attachments and receive the grace to change into people who more deeply love God and our neighbors. In this book I share some of what Benedict and his followers have taught me about staying put, listening well, and being changed by God. There's plenty more for me to learn, I'm sure. I'm a work in progress, but for over two decades, I've gained such good insights from the *Rule* of Benedict and those who live by it that I'm eager to share them with you. In these pages, I will also share some personal stories, reflect on Benedict's teachings and their relevance for everyday people, and consider what we can learn from the life-long promises made by those who persevere in Benedictine life well past their initial knock at the monastery door.

The waiting and wondering at the closed door, the slow-incoming answer to the knock, the rebuffs and difficulties that precede a seeker's admittance to monastic life's preparatory phase (known as postulancy) separate the merely curious from the serious applicants. If it all sounds rather unfriendly and exacting, consider this: like any lifelong commitment—to a marriage, for example, or to parenting, or to a line of work that requires training, practice, and wholehearted devotion—monastic life is nothing to rush into. At the monastery's point of entry, Benedict has installed a narrow gate, a needle's eye of sorts. Those who pass through it are meant to understand that the life they intend to undertake will require plenty of the patient perseverance that got them through the front door in the first place.

Are you standing at a gate in your life? Are you knocking at a door of potential commitment? You may be in a season of first tries. Or perhaps you're deep in a particular life because you passed through one doorway, leaving many other doors untried, and that passage changed everything. Maybe this is a transitional time in your life, between one season and the unknown next, and you're anxious to get there, wherever *there* is.

Now is a good time to notice the door in front of you, because there always is one. It may simply be the boundary between tonight and tomorrow morning, but what a difference those dark hours can make. Dawn is a door that opens to a day yet un-lived. No matter how mundane may be the plans you have made for tomorrow—to get your hair cut, perhaps, to pick up a few groceries, to duck into church for a quick prayer on your way to work—with attention and intention, you can knock on the door of morning and find it opens to a world you have never encountered before, though this day may look a lot like many prior days. Every day you can be a newcomer, even if you're an old-timer. May you go on knocking.

I'll tell you about some doors I knocked on. When I was in my early twenties, a trusted adviser suggested I enroll in a theological seminary. I had gone to him seeking counsel and guidance. All I really knew was that I felt increasingly uneasy in my intention to become a professor of English, but I felt at home at church. No other community or potential workplace made me feel, as church did, that I could be myself and become the person whom God was calling me to be. With perseverance that amounted to my persistent knocking on a church door, I came to understand that I could best be of service to others by being who I truly was: a person of Christ first and foremost, a writer also called to serve as a minister of word and sacrament.

My subsequent years as a theological seminary student amounted to a kind of novitiate season. I attended many worship services, attempted to pray without ceasing, took dozens of classes, read books for each one of them, wrote papers until my arm ached. I looked over the shoulders of mentor pastors and served a congregation as a pastoral intern. I took test after test, wrote statement after statement of faith, and addressed numerous presbyters who needed to hear about my reasons for pursuing ordination to the ministry. Something more than stubbornness kept me knocking. Call it, to borrow Benedict's language, an unwavering strength of purpose. Call it stability based on holy ground. The purpose was less my own for my life than it was God's for me.

My sense of answering a call as I persevered in knocking on doors was crucial to my forward movement into ministry. Nothing other than a calling could explain my perseverance. By making patient perseverance a credential for entry into the Christian life in community that his *Rule* describes, Benedict frankly leaves mysticism and emotional impulse out of the picture. I remember talking to a Benedictine Sister about my call-

ing to ministry. “I don’t know about calling,” she said flatly. “You make a choice and God works with the choice.” Her message was: *Take responsibility. Be decisive. Go after what you want, and harbor no romantic notions about it. Knock until your knuckles ache, if need be. Fancy no special exemptions in the terms of entry.*

In your own life, in the application you submit, the audition you tremble to imagine yet show up for nonetheless, in your proposal, your request, may you be every bit as unwavering and steadfast as those who stand behind the door at which you knock. They can unlock it and let you in. If they put you off once or twice, come back again until you’ve proven your perseverance and patience. Or, if you find your knock weakening and your resolve to gain entry dissolving, step back. Consider your call. Take time to soothe your swollen knuckles and look deeply at your motivations and desires. Test and try and sift and sit with your instincts and aspirations. Pray, and when you do, listen more than you speak. In time, you will come to know whether persevering at this particular door is right for you. If it is, God willing, you’ll be granted the courage to persist in knocking and the needed tolerance to wait out all delays.

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit,” says the evangelist John to his own faith community, “but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). Benedict invokes this Scripture on discernment because he knows that naiveté can get us into trouble. Undiscerning openness can lead us to let into our lives people whose motives, beneath their presentable personae, are self-serving and destructive. Concerned to preserve the stability of the community even while providing ways for newcomers to enter in and by their uniqueness change its makeup, Benedict upholds an admission standard of biblical godliness. Are they of God, those seeking entry? Do they love God above all else and their neighbors as themselves? By their treatment of others and

their humble generosity of spirit, do they show forth Jesus' loving kindness? Does their manner of life confess Christ? And do they seek to grow ever more deeply into Christ's likeness?

Beyond human imperfection and fallibility, from which no one is exempt and for which God's grace more than compensates, Benedict wonders: Is there something sinister driving a soul to knock at the door? It should not be easy for someone with hurtful intent to enter in and destabilize a community. Unconscious of their damaging potential though they may be, those whom the evangelist John calls "false prophets" must be guarded against by means of discernment, and by the same means, those of sincere motivation must be welcomed with care. Benedict's wisdom on this point is as applicable to non-monastic people and their communities as it is to monks and monasteries.

We need to test our own spirits. We need to examine our intentions and ambitions, the reasons underneath our stated ones, for knocking at the doors of our desire. Why do we want in? Why do I? Why do you? Is a voice coming to you, a word of direction? Has an impulse to escape your present circumstances disguised itself as a vocation, or a true love, or a reason to make a big change and a major commitment? Sometimes we tell ourselves false prophecies—lies about the future we will have if we just end this relationship, quit this job, leave school, join the circus, join a new church where we can get away from all the old, familiar faces of the motley saints we're stuck with at our present church. We need to test our reasons for knocking on doors and determine, in the clear light of honest appraisal, if anyone will be harmed by our entry into this prospective venture. Will anyone be helped? Will we become our true and fullest selves in the place we're trying to enter? Does the receiver stand to be blessed by our admission, be it an entire faith community or a life partner, a stepfamily, an employer, a school? What is

the good we can do, once the door is opened to us? What is the harm we could cause if we enter under false pretenses or unexamined motives?

I know of a congregation whose hospitality a predator exploited. He began to visit, attending Sunday services with his wife, but his overriding purpose, it came to light, was to ogle and harass other women. The congregation's leaders, faced with a preponderance of evidence that this man habitually violated personal boundaries and misused the community's welcome, ultimately acted to prohibit him from entering the property. Sadly, his wife, his chief victim, left the church when he did, so bound was she to this man who used the worshiping community as a playground for his sexual compulsions.

Had the leaders looked the other way and permitted him to stay, the women he had made unsafe would have left and taken with them their many precious spiritual gifts. Foundational human expressions of God's steadfast love in that faith community would have been uprooted and lost. But the church's stability showed in its leaders' capacity to identify and remove a malevolent presence not of Christ, all the while commending the man and his wife to Christ's redeeming care through their prayers. "Many false prophets have gone out into the world," says the evangelist John right after teaching believers to test the spirits (1 John 4:1). It's a cautionary word, itself to be exercised with caution. Godliness and nothing else is the standard for distinguishing the false from the true, the unstable from the rock-steady, the person whose reasons for knocking at the door are so dangerous the door must be barred, from the person whose personality may be grating but whose motives are essentially benevolent.

What are you letting into your life? Who has gained access to your heart? Benedict's teachings on the testing necessary before the doors are opened imply that stability is crucial, even when

we're entering into a life that promises to change us. The stability of the one seeking entry and the stability of the receiving person or community need to be established and respected from the outset. Without mutual stability, without the rooted, spiritual groundedness of each party, both stand to be unhealthily destabilized. A spirit of destructive chaos is never divine. Jesus brought stability. He calmed violent storms, healed crazed minds, and stanching life-depleting blood flows. The changes he enacted brought about peace and the prospect of further life-giving transformation. Test the spirit of your own seeking and knocking, and test the world that lies beyond the door once it's opened. Enter in. If you discern that the ground beneath your feet is firm, if you sense the days that lie ahead and the way of life you'll live will lead you Christward, then by all means, stay put.

Chapter 1

STAYING PUT



But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability.

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. **2 PETER 3:13-15, 17-18**

When the decision is made that novices are to be accepted, then they come before the whole community in the oratory to make solemn promise of stability, fidelity to monastic life and obedience.

ST. BENEDICT'S RULE, 58

A monastery is a place to stay and grow in Christ. Even people whose monastic stays are brief (compared to the lifelong commitment of Benedictine monks who make the solemn promise of stability) attest to the powerful connection between staying put and spiritual growth. “Benedictine stability,” writes Judith Valente, “[is] about being faithful to our daily responsibility to care for one another.”¹ Mutually committed, steadfast relationships are fertile soil for our growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ, whose Spirit abides with us long after Christ’s ascension into heaven. Even physically absent from us, Christ stays with us in Spirit, teaching us stability of heart, a slow-to-ripen fruit of faith worth waiting for.

By the time monastic novices make their vow of stability, they have proven their capacity to stay put according to Benedict’s requirement: “If novices after two months show promise of remaining faithful in stability, they should have the whole of this Rule read to them and then be faced with this challenge at the end: that is the law under which you ask to serve; if you can be faithful to it, enter; if you cannot, then freely depart” (RB 58). It’s a generous discernment period and a forthright presentation of the terms for entry that Benedict wisely provides, attaching no apparent negative judgment to those who elect to “freely depart.” Benedict well knows that monastic life is not for everyone. No one who says yes to it can later reasonably claim that its demands were undisclosed.

Ah, but who among us really knows what we’re signing up for when we make our promises? You can read and reread the *Rule*, or meditate on the marriage vows before you walk down the aisle, or scrutinize the contract and consult your lawyer; you can plow through a library of childrearing books, but until you’re in the life you’ve committed to living, you cannot truly know its daily demands, delights, and disappointments, its meaning for

the long haul. And so, whether it involves vowing to dwell with God among these monks, or love this spouse exclusively, or raise this child well at the cost of your own freedom, or serve this community, a promise of stability is a leap of faith before it's a life of fidelity. Even after continual exposure transforms the initial unknowns into the deeply familiar features of the promise you are keeping, there come changes, if not to your situation, to your soul. Personal transformation is the purpose of the Benedictine promise of stability. You stay put in order to be changed. In the chapter on being changed, I'll talk about the nature of transformation as Benedict's wisdom fosters it. Now, let's turn to a question of stability.

DOESN'T ANYBODY STAY IN ONE PLACE ANYMORE?

Carole King sang the question plaintively in her song "So Far Away," released in 1971. It was a time of cultural upheaval, comparable in some ways to the tumultuous sixth century in which Benedict sharply criticized wandering monks: "They spend their whole life going round one province after another enjoying the hospitality for three or four days at a time of any sort of monastic cell or community. They are always on the move; they never settle to put down the roots of stability; it is their own wills that they serve as they seek the satisfaction of their own gross appetites" (RB 1). Benedict described as "the strongest kind" monks who serve Christ by practicing stability in a monastic community led by an abbot and regulated by a rule of life (RB 1).

An existing (if little used) monastic rule, the spiritually severe and unforgiving *Rule of the Master*, served as a template for Benedict's own *Rule*. Somewhat like the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which contain parts of the previously written Gospel of Mark yet expand on the older account, the *Rule* of Benedict contains parts of the *Rule of the Master* but is different from it.

Benedict envisioned a monastic community in which sensitivity to differing human needs, mutual respect, compassion, and care for the vulnerable are essential aspects of an ordered, holy life. In other words, Benedict's *Rule* describes a community in which monks would actually *want* to stay put for life. It is a book of scripturally infused wisdom and practical discipline based on its writer's love for the God who loves us all. "Pray with confidence," Benedict writes in its Prologue, "because God, in his love and forgiveness, has counted us as his own sons and daughters. Surely we should not by our evil acts heartlessly reject that love." Benedict intends for his *Rule* to help spiritual wanderers reject evil and embrace God through a shared and well-ordered life. Crucial to this life is the discipline of staying put, remaining committed, keeping promises even when hardships or temptations make leaving look better.

Twenty-first century people are big on leaving. We quit jobs, partnerships, homes, neighborhoods, faith communities. We commonly pursue second careers, finish starter marriages, relocate, and switch religious traditions. Tragically, we even choose to leave this life in alarming numbers, as rising suicide rates indicate. On the one hand, taking our leave can mean liberation from circumstances we've outgrown, or from a brutally circumscribed existence, from meaningless toil, spiritual captivity, or abuse. Some even argue that the Right to Die movement, promoting assisted suicide, signifies advancement toward a society in which terminally ill people are free to leave life on their own terms, opting out of suffering unto death. Whether we find our culture's penchant for exits problematic, compelling, or some complicated combination thereof, we can be sure that Jesus commanded his followers to stay with him: "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” (John 15:4–5).

To abide is to remain, to stay put, and in some cases, to stomach that which we would rather spit out. The point of the Benedictine vow of stability is not to practice fixity for its own sake, but to abide in Christ with others. By staying put in the community of faith, residents grow into people who know and love God ever more deeply. They change into more Christlike women and men whose lives reflect love for their neighbors. At its heart, monastic staying is not about the monastery; the monastery is a vehicle (if that’s not too mobile a word) for abiding in Christ.

Those of us who will never live in a monastic community nevertheless abide in Christ. We can gratefully borrow Benedict’s wisdom on stability, applying it to our significant relationships and commitments in order to nurture and tend them. Although I made some necessary and defining departures from schools, jobs, and relationships in my younger years, and I recognize the essential impermanence of all our worldly situations, the second half of my life keeps teaching me that the blessings of staying put often outshine the thrill of moving on.

I will share with you some reflections on my own experiences of instability and stability, but first I want to comment on my life and yours in the context of twenty-first century American culture. My purpose when I tell personal stories is neither to uphold my life as exemplary, nor to imply a judgment, positive or negative, of yours. Like me, surely you have made wise moves, mistakes, decisions you regret, and choices that turned out to be far better than you could have anticipated. You have done all your living, your distinct combination of staying put and moving on, in the context of a culture whose premises, promises, and haz-

ards imbue the air you breathe, the news you read, the pressures you respond to, and the possibilities to which you aspire.

Abiding in Christ means rooting yourself in an extra-cultural relationship, that is, in a life with God, who is before and beyond human society, language, and images. And yet, what else have you got? Human society, language, and images mediate the message of the gospel. God became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth precisely so that we would have God's own presence in the very earthy stuff of history, humanity, and society. The challenge that Jesus' contemporaries faced is yours too, and mine: to see eternity in Christ, whether he's standing there in person on the Galilean lakeshore or speaking from the pages of a Bible translated into our language. When Jesus says "abide in me as I abide in you," he's challenging us to dwell in his everlasting love and truth, to let these shelter and shape us first and ultimately, so that the bulwarks and the vagaries of culture, influential on us though they are, come second, always second, to the gospel and to God.

Our culture highly values mobility, especially upward mobility. That mobile phone upgrade? That home equity loan? The promotion and the raise, the "best life" you can live? All of it, and a thousand other examples you could name of the gotta-have-it betterments perpetually pitched at us, are products of a market-driven society, one core belief of which is that to stay put is to fall behind. It's hard to abide in Christ—it's hard to know how to—in a culture whose leading voices badger us to trade up, to place our faith in the latest and the next developments. Abiding in Christ requires us to question and resist outer lures and inner urges toward advancement, if advancing means going into unnecessary debt, exchanging the homely but serviceable car for the one with bells and whistles we don't really need, or more insidious, if it means forsaking the flawed but faithful spouse for the intriguing crush we don't really know.