

5 Values to Help You Master Life's Mundane Middles

The long expanse of ministry in which you are pursuing an idea or program that you were excited about starting a while ago - what I call "The Middle" - is rarely addressed at the conferences or meetings I attend.

No one ever addresses how to finish well either.

Instead, we are encouraged to take on new ideas, fresh starts, new programs all designed to grow the church, make ministry effective, be relevant, increase giving and tithing, bring revival, save the lost, be true to doctrine and on and on it goes.

But where do we find encouragement just to do what we are doing, to stick with things and to bring certain seasons to an end in a way that celebrates the meaning of that season in the first place?

Our society has capitalized on beginnings, new things, change and convincing people that boredom and unrest can be met only with the newest craze, fad or gadget.

No one knows how to live in the "middle" anymore - to work, eat, sleep, care for family, play with kids, go to church and to do that over and over again.

For me, none other than - and most ironically - the mystics from the Middle Ages are what have helped me get through my middles.

The Middle Ages were a time of great change in Europe, so there were many new things erupting in towns all over the known world.

Universities met the needs of the increasingly curious and ever-growing population of the merchant, "middle" class.

Monasticism promised an escape from the world, harkening opulent and flamboyant Catholic churches back to simpler times.

A new movement of mysticism exposed the notion that all this new wealth and learning and concentration of resources were not an end-all of things.

Several mystics marked the 13th and 14th centuries with writings, guidance and spiritual direction that reminded people that “boring” can be just as spiritual as “the new,” that God works just as much in the mundane routine of life as God does in the “urgent.”

Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, reformed his monastery by returning to the simplicity of Benedict’s Rule of Life.

He claimed that our hope is not always found elsewhere, say, in the bliss of heaven, but in creation as well; his writings focus on the incarnation of Christ.

Jesus saw it fit to become flesh and blood like us, so there is value in this life, value in our ability to love God and others.

Hildegard of Bingen was a renaissance woman of sorts whose art, music, teaching, preaching and prophetic witness sought to marry spiritual ecstasy with creativity rooted in earth, rules and routine.

For all practical purposes, she was the West’s first female naturalist; she was able to pay attention to the little things rather than be swept away by the shiny big things that captivated one too many hearts.

Julian of Norwich was also a romantic.

Her writings show a deep spiritual love for Christ grounded in the mundane routine of living, of loving passionately and of seeking Jesus’ face for the sake of obeying Christ.

She suffered from ailments that became for her sources of spiritual growth.

All of these mystics teach us what Marilyn Robinson calls the “inexhaustible ordinary.”

It has been my passion to teach my congregations this truth: that if you are always looking for excitement at church, a new program to jump-start your faith or the newest purchase to fill that restless hole in your heart, then you are missing the point of Christian discipleship.

It was Augustine who told us that our hearts are restless until they rest in Christ.

But the key word there is to rest - to Sabbath - to enjoy and to see routines and

daily habits as that gift that God gives us to live with intentional purpose and blessing and peace.

Here are five values for living in “the middle” that these mystics teach us:

1. The mystics valued the incarnation of Christ.

Make Christ the Lord of your routine (read Brother Lawrence’s “The Practice of the Presence of God” if you haven’t already). In “Old Paths, New Power,” Daniel Henderson points out that Jesus did not pray as a part of his ministry; he ministered out of a life of prayer.

2. The mystics valued incarnational ministry.

Become a naturalist and develop a sense of interiority that grows outward and beyond you, honing the ability to grow in awareness, empathy, observation, attentiveness. (A new book by Samuel Wells, “Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church,” addresses this.)

3. The mystics valued the rhythms of life.

Celebrate blessings; accept crises of faith as gifts. Ministry brings times of joy as well as hardship; do not avoid them, but treat them as potential opportunities to grow in Christ even when others around you fail to grow.

4. The mystics valued the naming of experiences.

Sometimes, these experiences resulted in making up images, words, phrases to best express them (like Julian of Norwich, who coined the curious moniker, “Mother Christ”).

Learn how to articulate your personal experiences of Christ and to offer that gift to help others describe the movements of the Spirit in their lives.

Read often to emulate how to wield language and construct alternative narratives whereby others can live.

5. The mystics valued routine.

Incorporate a rule of life. It is healthy, puts feet to your faith and promotes self-care.

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