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A Quiet Pentecost: Inviting the Spirit into Congregational Life

President Amerson, Dean Rector, Chairperson Stead and members of the Board of Trustees, Bishops, students, graduates, friends, faculty and staff colleagues, thank you for the warm welcome. Thank you, Professor Seymour, for the gracious introduction.

A year and a half ago, I delivered a lecture here, in which I chronicled the development of Spiritual Formation as a field of study in Protestant Seminary education. Since 1996, the Association of Theological Schools has required all seminaries to document their work with students in “personal and spiritual formation.” This is a major development in Protestant seminary education. In the past, spiritual formation belonged primarily to the church-at-large rather than to the seminary. I came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, in liberal Protestant seminary education, there was no discussion of what we now reference as “personal spiritual formation.” After a decade of ministry in the 1970s, I hit my own personal vocational crisis. I likened my formation for ministry as being like a pitcher that had been extremely well filled, but in my decade of ministry, attending to crises in families, in the congregation, and in our community, I felt that my own pitcher of inspiration had been completely drained. I desperately wanted to find the “living water,” a way of accessing divine Grace not now and then, but in daily refreshment.

Like many pastors then and now, I turned to pre-Reformation, Roman Catholic resources, finding monastery classes on Christian contemplative prayer, learning Centering Prayer, the Jesus Prayer, meditating on scripture through the process we call *lectio divina*, and discovering my guide for inner awakening from the 16th century, Teresa of Avila. I found my way into a Ph.D. program that specialized in ways of cultivating the inner life. In 1982, I visited with one of

my former seminary professors and asked, “Why didn’t you teach us about the living legacy of contemplative prayer – this legacy from the desert fathers and mothers and this lineage of spiritual formation from the earliest days of Christianity?” He responded, “How can you give a grade for prayer?”

Well, after thirty years of teaching contemplative prayer in graduate education, I can attest that it’s quite difficult to give a grade for prayer. It is difficult because of competing goals for courses in spiritual formation – there must be an attitude of support as students learn to still their minds to hear God’s message in new ways; and there must be academic rigor for knowing the content of this discipline and being able to communicate that content well. The Association of Theological Schools is asking all of us to learn how to “give a grade for prayer” and we’re doing so.

Garrett-Evangelical was a leader in teaching spiritual formation practices in the 1980s. I began coming as a visiting professor to this campus in 1984, teaching spiritual disciplines in Doctor of Ministry classes; Barbara Troxell was appointed to a faculty position in spiritual formation in 1986. Some of you will remember that I dedicated that lecture a year and a half ago to my mother, Murlene Garrett Judy, who had envisioned the day that seminaries would regularly teach this curriculum in spiritual formation. Today, I am sharing the fruit of this teaching of spiritual formation in the seminary, that is taking place now in congregations, as our students and graduates share spiritual formation practices. I wish to dedicate my remarks today to my father, Marvin T. Judy, whose passion was the vitality of congregations, particularly Town and Country congregations of modest size. He served such congregations for 18 years, pioneering work in helping clusters of small congregations share resources to develop vital ministry together. He then taught this work at Perkins School of Theology for 25 years. He

would be very pleased with what I have to share with you today about the renewal of congregations through spiritual formation practices.

Concurrent with the need for our seminaries to learn the ways of prayer and teach them, the church-at-large has also been reclaiming this living tradition of contemplative prayer.

A pioneer in this work and perhaps the most visible United Methodist has been Bishop Rueben Job. This day is not only about my personal calling into this work. It is also the celebration of a movement of Spirit within the church. As Garrett-Evangelical was pioneering spiritual formation studies in seminary education, Rueben Job was creating program ministries in spiritual formation for the church-at-large, when he directed The Upper Room in the early 1980s. Under his leadership program ministries were initiated, including the Walk to Emmaus and The Two-Year Academy for Spiritual Formation. The Upper Room has served as an invaluable publisher of curriculum resources in spiritual formation for the church. Bishop Job has continuously called the church of our time to a deeper discipleship through his presence and his writings including his most recent books, *Three Simple Rules* and *Three Simple Questions*. Bishop Job is an alumnus of Evangelical Theological Seminary and he has graciously allowed us to honor him in naming the future of our work in spiritual formation – The Rueben Job Professor of Spiritual Formation and just this summer in naming the Rueben Job Institute for Spiritual Formation, which will grow for years to come in providing resources for congregations and continuing education. We regret that Bishop Job's health has prevented him from being with us today. We seek to honor his legacy well into the future, as we raise \$2 million to endow the Rueben Job Professor of Spiritual Formation. I hope today's remarks will inspire all of us to complete that goal very soon!

If the first wave of this renewal of the historic Christian contemplative life was the renewal of seminary courses and offering of continuing education opportunities through programs like The Upper Room Academy for Spiritual Formation, the next wave of the spiritual formation movement is now upon us. This wave of renewal is taking place within congregations as our seminary graduates now share the riches of Christian contemplative prayer practices to “invite the Spirit into congregational life.” There is an amazing, still quiet movement of the Holy Spirit within the main-line Protestant church. My happy task today is to bring encouraging news to our denominations, which have become quite fond of rehearsing the dismal and real statistics of their numerical decline. We have become so enamored with this very real bad news about our future, that I believe we are missing what God is doing “on the ground, at the grass-roots” through you, our students and graduates, who are presently being called to ministry, as you listen deeply for divine inspiration.

In the late 4th and early 5th centuries, John Cassian travelled from the Roman world into the desert regions of Palestine and Egypt. He spent many years living with the desert fathers and mothers. Later, while in Gaul, his writings became foundational for monasticism in the West. He left a wonderful legacy to us of stories of the desert mothers and fathers, who became wise as they carefully studied scripture, as they meditated on scripture, letting the words of scripture seep deeply into their hearts; as they struggled with their own inner passions; and as they sought to be made over fully into the image of human dignity and compassion that we see in Christ. The stories of the desert show people who became wise, humorous, and generous in their relationships with others. Thomas Merton described them as persons, who sought their “true own selves rooted in Christ.”

While I have no illusions of personal sanctity like John Cassian possessed, I have thought of him as I bring you stories of people who, within the present desert wilderness of the main-line Protestant church, are also seeking to become their “own true selves rooted in Christ.” I think of these many teachers of spiritual disciplines and contemplative prayer now scattered throughout the church as being much like the desert mothers and fathers, each like the abbess or abbot of their own small communities of serious Christians, who are seeking a deeper relationship with God and their world. They have become true Class Leaders, renewing the Methodist understanding of small groups “watching over one another in love, helping one another to work out their salvation.”

Jeannie Crawford-Lee, Editorial Director of Upper Room Books, sat with me two years ago, asking me what was exciting to me now in spiritual formation studies. Immediately, I responded that the work you are doing... you, our students and graduates, you who are being called by God to ministry – that is what is exciting. For years I have pondered the progression of scripture, that the resurrection appearances of Jesus come first to individuals and to the few disciples gathered together, before the grand event we celebrate as Pentecost in Acts 2, in which 3000 people in the ancient world heard the news of God’s love proclaimed. As I have heard about your individual encounters with divine Grace, that calling that pushed you, our students and graduates, into ministry, I have often wondered, “if this mysterious Jesus is appearing to so many individuals in our time, can a new Pentecost be far behind?” And now, my great joy is that I regularly witness this renewal of the church particularly in our year-long Practicum/Supervision class in Spiritual Direction. Amazing new ministries are imagined and birthed every year in that course – recent ones have included an ecumenical community retreat house-ministry in Ruston, Louisiana, brought to full birth in two years by commissioned Deacon Cathy Brewton; clarity for

her lay ministry of spiritual direction for persons in health crisis by Whitney Simpson in Tennessee; the evangelistic outreach imagined by Rev. Sheila Wilson-Freelon for what she describes as the Sizzling South Chicago District of the AME Church, as each 5th Sunday several hundred members from the 19 churches in the district gather for a spirit-inspired afternoon at one of the congregations. They are so excited about what God is doing with them in these gatherings that they go out into the streets the day before inviting all to come and pray with anyone who has need. They have learned in our time how to do street evangelism with authenticity, love, and prayer.

As I sat with Jeannie, she helped envision a book that will be published in February, *A Quiet Pentecost: Inviting the Spirit Into Congregational Life*. As I have collected stories from almost 50 people for this book, I have become quite inspired. Rev. Randall Hansen shares his experience of teaching contemplative prayer classes in all of the congregations he has pastored in Western Michigan over the past 16 years. He talks about the necessity of balancing pastoral care with teaching classes in spiritual disciplines, so that we are not only cared for in times of crisis but challenged in our faith development and given the tools to nourish our faith. Diane Stephens, our affiliate faculty member in spiritual formation studies, shares how she creates an independent ministry of spiritual direction. Steve Braudt, Karla Kincannon, Nancy Dibelius, Suzanne Clement and Stacey Gassman describe enlivening worship and congregational life with artistic expression. Lowell Black describes the dedication of a prayer altar for regular healing prayer during Sunday worship at First United Methodist Church in Valparaiso, Indiana. Janet Aldrich honors Alzheimer's patients with sensory-rich worship throughout the liturgical year. Janna Born Larsen relates the work of the Interfaith Council in her retirement center ministry, as these individuals take on the task of being "community ambassadors of good will," helping new

residents to live in harmony with persons of other faith traditions. Susan Amick shows how prayer sustains us in the latter stages of life, until we have learned with our last breath to Rest into death. Melanie Baffes describes her implementation of a faith-sharing group for high school girls here in Evanston. Kay McLellan shows how Parish Nurses offer physical and spiritual care within their congregations. Nancy LeValley and others are teaching contemplative prayer practices with their administrative councils. Some congregations are bold enough to invite Jesus to “lead them in real time” through meditation on the scripture and learning to question their first judgments about decisions they are facing as a congregation. Brian White shares a bold model for continuously teaching spiritual disciplines to seed the life of the congregation. Sheryl Palmer has taught her whole congregation a variety of prayer forms through a Summer School of Prayer, noting that their summer attendance was the highest in years as they learned to pray together. Drawing from the book *Soul Feast* by Marjorie Thompson, James Denton suggests intentionally teaching the congregation how to meditate on the primary scripture text in preparation for worship each Sunday, so that all come ready to really hear the Word of God together. Gene Turner relates his gripping encounter with God that led to mission trips to Liberia and the renewal of his two rural congregations in Western Illinois.

Jeannie Crawford-Lee invited me to gather up these stories. I have been honored to do so. Jeannie is here today and I want to ask her to stand to be recognized for her vision in allowing these stories to be collected.

After collecting these stories of “what the Holy Spirit is doing,” I do steadfastly proclaim today that there is “a quiet Pentecost” occurring within our churches, despite the dire warnings of our imminent demise. I am not alone in this positive assessment. In response to the announcement of today’s lecture, Cherri Johnson, Director of The Spiritual Life Center at First

United Methodist Church in Baton Rouge, LA, one of the contributors to this book wrote me: “We are on the verge of an explosion of grace/spirit-filled Community! From the bottom-up and from the top-down amazing things are happening...From the top-down seminaries are teaching spiritual formation practices and from the bottom-up our culture is changing and transforming. I feel so blessed to be a part of this Journey and God’s good and holy work as we labor together to bring forth the ‘new creation.’” On the back of your program, is a list of all of the Garrett-Evangelical contributors to the book. In addition to them, there are 20 additional contributors, some of whom are with us today. I would like to ask all of the contributors who are here today to stand and be recognized. And now additional persons who have been certified in Spiritual Formation or concentrating their present study in spiritual formation, would you please stand? Finally, the rest of our students and alumni in ministry, would you please stand? Thank you for your vision for ministry. Every generation seems to have some deep dichotomy that forms the life of the church. Ours today, is “spiritual, not religious.” You are the pioneers who are breaking down the current dichotomy of “spirituality and religion.” You are showing the church how to share the riches of Christian spirituality, balanced with historic wisdom of our Christian tradition.

During my research for the book, I came to see the new Pentecost differently than I had first imagined. I, like most of us, in our media-driven, spectacle-obsessed culture, have thought primarily of the grand Pentecost of the 3000. This is the one our tired denominations are desperately seeking and which regularly eludes us – one that we could understand as similar to a Super Bowl Half-Time show; or the opening of the Olympics – or could be celebrated with thousands of red, white, and blue balloons with confetti falling from the ceiling like the conclusion of our political conventions. But, there is an earlier outpouring of the Spirit, the one

that precedes the grand Pentecost. It is a very quiet Pentecost. In the 20th chapter of John, we hear of the disciples so terrified after the death of Jesus that they locked themselves into a room. They were afraid for their lives. They had been too close to this man, now dead because of his radical ideas of loving all people and his disdain of religious institutions that pitted one group of people against another. Yet, even when they were gathered together behind locked doors in fear, Jesus appeared among them saying, “Peace be with you.” And he “breathed the Holy Spirit upon them.” This quiet Pentecost is what we are now witnessing over and over, particularly in the ministry of small groups. The inspiration of the few precedes the grand Pentecost of the masses.

In my research for the book, I have collected stories of small group work in a variety of ways – groups meeting to meditate on scripture; Wesleyan Covenant groups meeting for over ten years within a congregation in Dallas; Centering Prayer groups; an ecumenical group of women in Houston called to pray the labyrinth for world peace on a regular basis as the drum beats of war were heating up following September 11; faith sharing groups; men meeting in a wilderness setting; inspiration coming from guided walks in nature. Many churches are using the excellent *Companions In Christ* materials, published by Upper Room Books over the last decade, to develop spiritual formation small group sharing. What all of these groups share in common is learning to develop a prayerful listening posture.

The quiet Pentecost is quiet for two reasons... one, it is largely unheralded as yet; and two, it is about quiet, learning to be still, learning to listen for God’s voice in the quiet. In our sound-bite, strident culture, such a posture of listening in the quiet is radically counter-cultural. We have forgotten how to trust that God will speak if we will be quiet long enough to listen. When we think of prayer, we usually think of intercessory prayer. We human beings are the agents of prayer requests directed toward God. What we have been recovering in the spiritual

formation movement is the other side of prayer, prayer as listening for God... broadly described as contemplative prayer forms, Centering Prayer, the Jesus Prayer, meditating on scripture, meditating in nature, meditating through the arts; praying before and continuously during the hour of worship.

Two of the most powerful testimonies to the importance of quiet come from campus ministry settings among 18-25 year old students. The campus ministry at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, led by Jeff Druery and Marybeth Leis Druery, is focused around a process called, Open Circles, which encourage students to share their faith struggles together. The ministry promotes “media-free” zones. Stillness is introduced gradually; art processes are used as a way to open the inner life. One young woman was in tears after 15 seconds of silence, because she had never experienced that long a time without external stimulation. Lest we jump to the erroneous conclusion that finding “one’s true self (in the quiet), rooted in Christ,” is a selfish endeavor, this ministry also engages 300 students annually in community service projects.

Rev. Jennie Edwards Bertrand, reports the power of simply setting the space for prayer and solitude without any other introduction. The campus ministry at Illinois State University for the past 6 years has held a week-long 24-7 Prayer Room ministry. Jennie reports –

Looking back I think the main reason that first group of thirty students was willing to try a prayer room is because it sounded crazy and undoable. They were competitive enough they wanted to be able to say, “we kept a human in that room for one hundred and sixty-eight hours. . . . oh yeah, and they were praying.” So the student leader and I went about the task of buying paints and canvases, covering the floor with cardboard, and the walls with newsprint. We labeled one wall a “Wailing Wall,” another wall the “Worship Wall” and on a third wall we hung a map and named it the “World Wall.” We included a stack

of Bibles, meditative and worship CDs, journals, and hooks on the wall for hanging painted canvases. And for one week, hour-by-hour students experienced the presence of God in the solitude of this room. One person would write a psalm on the Worship Wall, and others would follow suit. Names of loved ones in need of healing, and Rest In Peace statements began to fill the Wailing Wall. Confessions and expressions of pain followed. Articulate and painfully honest conversations with God began to fill the pages of the journals. Beautiful artistic expressions of love and forgiveness and healing covered the canvases. People highlighted countries on the map and asked for prayer, justice, and the end of poverty and war. By the end of the week the floor and every wall was filled with an outpouring of the deepest cries of our souls. Right in the middle of day-to-day life, an entire ministry learned how to pray, and experienced the power of God's presence.

I think that if Richard Foster had known the movement that was underway while he was writing Streams of Living Water, he could have included 24-7 prayer in his Contemplative Stream. "We all hunger for a prayer-filled life, for a richer, fuller practice of the presence of God." The corrective I add to this is that a generation raised in a postmodern, post-Christian world doesn't know it hungers for a prayer-filled life.

Jennie reports that the campus ministry with 30 active students six years ago, now regularly serves over 150 students annually.

Some congregations, like St. Luke's United Methodist in Indianapolis, have created a unique focus as a Spiritual Life Center, to offer the kinds of programs usually found at retreat centers for both their congregation and the broader community. After 16 years of ministry The Spiritual Life Center at St. Luke's has 2000 people on its e-mail list, only half of whom identify St. Luke's as their home congregation.

Sharing spiritual formation practices is a powerful form of evangelism in our time. Our culture is largely uninformed of Christian contemplative prayer. When people find themselves struggling for a moment of inner tranquility in our frenzied society, they think first of a practice of yoga, Tai Chi, or Buddhist meditation. We now have recovered the living legacy of Christian contemplative prayer. As we announce and share our classes in prayer and our retreats to our communities, we can invite all to come and partake of the “living water,” and perhaps look in a new way at the richness of Christian tradition. If I might talk just to the Methodists among us for a moment, Methodists can reclaim their “method” for growth in Christ, as small groups gathering around scripture and prayer to watch over one another in love, helping each other work out their salvation. Let us invite the world to join us.

Clearly, I can’t highlight all of the applications in our lecture today. Instead, I want to point toward the most basic Christian practice, that of renewing our relationship to scripture through prayerfully meditating upon it.

Rev. Marianne Chalstrom, retired UM Elder in Indiana shares the story of 9 women meeting together, from three congregations and two denominations, representing three generations, half identified as lesbian and half heterosexual in their relational life. They met together over several months. They started as strangers. As they were taught to meditate on scripture stories and journal their experiences in between their weekly meetings, they discovered profound sharing and a deep spirit of community to arise when the group gathered. Friends, this is koinonia, this is building up the Body of Christ as we learn to hold ourselves in silence before the scripture.

An anonymous contributor describes what happens in such a committed group, in this case a group of 6 women meeting weekly for six years.

After a short period of “coming together” we quiet ourselves by lighting a candle or striking a small Tibetan bowl to prepare ourselves for “hearing the Word.” The selected scripture is read out loud several times. Each time group members listen for meaningful words and images and finally for their invitation from the scripture for the coming week. We end with personal prayers that includes a prayer for and about one of the other group members.

The group has been a private journey traveled alongside people we have come to love and trust. We have shared “thin places.” The experience of God’s Presence has been powerfully felt in the weekly prayers for each other and as we have coped with serious illness and the deaths of loved ones. It has been a sustaining energy for one another – a place where we can bring our vulnerability and can count on needed support.

They wonder if their faithfulness to this practice, even though they remain anonymous within their congregation, may not be contributing to the dramatic increase in the adult education programs of this congregation during the years they have been meeting.

Notice in these two stories, small groups – a group of 6 and a group of 9. One of the common problems reported about small group ministries is our culture’s infatuation with success measured by large numbers. Over and over again, I hear stories in my Supervision class that these pioneers in spiritual formation ministry are criticized because a retreat had only 20 people in it instead of 50; or if 50 attended, they are criticized because there weren’t 100 present. When a small group is attended by 8 people, they are criticized for not having 20 people. There is a profound problem with this evaluation by numbers. When people are learning how to pray and share their intimate experiences of God with others; when they are learning how to listen respectfully to one another; the optimum number for such a group is 6-10 people. The spiritual

formation movement provides a profound way to cultivate small group ministries. But, the importance of small groups needs consistent interpretation to our numbers-driven culture.

Because of the intimacy developed through such small group sharing as people break open the scripture together, this same method can be used to discern shared mission for the congregation. Rev. Brenda Buckwell, relates the story of her arrival at First United Methodist Church in Zanesville, Ohio. The congregation was a long-time victim of economic downturn, their community sinking into poverty as evidenced in boarded-up shop windows of this Rust Belt city. At the first meeting with the leadership team of the congregation, Brenda asked what the mission of the congregation was. And a gentleman replied, “to keep the doors open until the last generation dies.” Brenda reports taking a deep Spirit-filled breath and responding, you can do that if you want. I can ask the bishop to send a pastor to close the church, but that won’t be me. Instead, let’s see if we can discover what God has in mind for this church. They began a six-month discernment process listening together with scripture stories. As they listened each month, they kept inviting an invitation from the scripture for this leadership team on behalf of the mission of the congregation. Then when each person had articulated a specific invitation, each person prayed for another person’s vision. In this way over the six months of discernment, they began praying for common vision rather than holding out for their own particular hopes. After six months, the common vision arose, that of opening a Free Store in part of their underutilized building. TheLifeWell Free Store really took off after the local television news announced the opening of a new store where no money would change hands. After serving 10,000 people they were too vital to close.

But, what about larger congregations, how can they be directed toward common mission? Eugenia Gamble describes the commitment of an old flagship congregation in Birmingham,

Alabama, that had suffered many setbacks, yet was able to commit to raising \$2.5 million for a homeless shelter for women and children. First Presbyterian Church was the first congregation established in the city of Birmingham when it was founded to be the steel center of the South. It was very proud of its legacy, including being the home church of Peter Marshall. But, when Martin Luther King, Jr., named this congregation in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail, the congregation took the challenge of racial segregation seriously and immediately lost half of its worshipping membership. The decline had continued for decades, when Eugenia arrived as pastor in the mid-1990s. The congregation had already opened its basement as a shelter for homeless women and children. But, by the mid-1990s, they knew more was needed. Within one year of Eugenia's arrival, they had committed to purchasing and restoring a nearby hotel as a much larger and more adequate homeless shelter. How did they do it?

Looking back (Eugenia comments), I really credit two things. First, we believed we were doing the will of God. There is a legendary saying from sixteenth century England, "I would rather face an army with swords drawn than one Presbyterian convinced he's doing the will of God."

Second, we entered into a nine-month School of Prayer. Each Wednesday evening at our weekly fellowship supper 70% of our worshipping congregation gathered for supper and to learn about and practice prayer. Each week I taught for thirty minutes on a different aspect of the life of prayer. Drawing on the rich traditions of Christian spiritual practice, each week addressed a contemporary need. For example: How do I pray when I feel stressed? How do I pray for forgiveness? How do I listen to God? We learned how to enter into silence together, how to speak to God together, how to pray our griefs, our talents, and our fears. We experienced writing in a journal and dancing to a psalm. We

learned the art of lament and the healing prayer of laughter. We worked each week around small table groups. We became a praying whole.

On the first evening, one of the older members of the church came up to me as I was about to begin. She was angry and threatening to go home after the supper. “I’m mad as a hornet, Eugenia,” she said. “I have been a Christian all my life. All of that time I have been told to pray about this or that and nobody has ever taught me how. I don’t want to learn about prayer. I want to learn to pray.” She stayed, as did the rest of the flock.

Nine months later we were building a \$2.5 million dollar shelter.

Indeed, the same question I asked my seminary professor in 1982. Why didn’t you teach us how to pray? Now we have no excuse either in seminary education or in the curriculum of the congregation. We have recovered the living lineage of prayer, so that we can learn to still our noisy voices and minds to listen together for the Holy Spirit. In this way, we “invite the Spirit into congregational life.”

As we learn to pray together in the listening posture of contemplative prayer forms, we can enable a congregation to become a “praying whole.” We also learn how to keep listening for individual inspiration in our personal devotional life. This is the “living water” for which I was so desperately searching 30 years ago – the continual renewal of our hearts and minds and bodies for acts of meaningful service and life mission in the name of Christ in the world.

Cindy Serio, one of our Deacon graduates in spiritual formation studies, now living in Houston, Texas, writes of her calling to prison ministry during her time of personal devotions.

One morning as I was meditating on Luke 4:18 these words shimmered off the page straight into my heart “proclaim release to the captives.” Suddenly I knew God was sending me to the women at a local prison. After a long conversation, the Chaplain asked

me why I was there and I was honest. I said, “I don’t know. I only know that God wants me to be here.” He smiled a knowing smile and said, “Follow me.”

As I followed the Chaplain, we traveled a long and winding path to the area set apart for women residents. Female security guards were located in an elevated room with a view into three pods. Each pod held about thirty women.

As we approached the first pod, I turned and asked the Chaplain, “What am I supposed to do now?” He said, “Listen. Just listen. The ladies will let you know what they need.” After the chaplain left me alone, I sat at one of the metal tables. Women came and shared their sacred stories, which ranged from terrifically terrifying to merely mundane. An hour passed and the ladies sent me to the next pod. This “sit, listen, move” pattern would become my Monday afternoon rhythm over the next two years as I grew in my capacity to hold the healing space through holy listening.

Listen. Just Listen. Some weeks I didn’t know anyone who came to the table. Some weeks, I knew everyone. One of the ladies told me, “You are the only one who gives us hugs.” Another one said, “After you leave, there is a peace in this place.”

Listen. Just Listen. Some weeks a small need would emerge in their stories that I could meet. The King James Bible, so often donated but so hard to read! I created a resource to bring to the table. It was one page with a scripture passage (New Living Translation), reflection questions, and a prayer. One of the ladies told me, “Some of the women are too scared to come and sit with you, so I take the sheet back and we study and pray together.” I am humbled.

“Listen, just listen, and the sacred story will unfold.” Will we hone our inward ears to listen more and more faithfully for the Spirit?

What do you think? Couldn't we today declare these abbas and ammas to be as faithful as the desert fathers and mothers? Can you see why I've thought fondly of John Cassian and the stories he collected centuries ago, as I've collected these 21st century stories of a quiet Pentecost?

Friends of the Gospel, friends of the church, if we will come together, linger in silence together, we too will receive that blessing, the word our frightened institutional structures desperately need to hear from Christ: "Peace be with you." In gentle circles of trust, let us allow this One to breathe the Holy Spirit upon us again, 12 at a time; 10 at a time; 1 by 1; 300, 1000 at a time. Let us allow ourselves over and over again to discover "our own true selves rooted in Christ."

Listen. Just Listen. And the sacred story will unfold. Amen.