

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on May 16, 2021.

ROD DREHER: AN ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of god-what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:2

Today we conclude our series titled “Luminaries: Lives that Inspire.” We have looked at individual Christians through history who can teach and inspire us to be more faithful. Many of them have been famous men or women who shaped historical events or gave new insights to faith. All our previous Luminaries have left this earth.

We finish our series by looking at the life and work of Rod Dreher. Dreher was born on February 14, 1967 in Baton Rouge Louisiana. He was raised with his sister in the small town of St. Francisville. His family were faithful members of the local Methodist Church. While he loved his family, Rod never quite fit in with the rest of his family. He was bookish and introverted, while they were the active outdoor types. When his father wanted to go hunting, his sister went along, while he stayed in his room reading.

Rod was glad to leave home for college. He graduated from Louisiana State and headed east to begin a career as a writer. He has had many jobs including stints at the New York Post, Washington Times, National Review and the Templeton foundation. His earliest writings focused on politics. His first best seller in 2006 had the intriguing title ***Crunchy Cons: How Birkenstocked Burkeans, Gun-Loving Organic Gardeners, Evangelical Free-Range Farmers, Hip Homeschooling Mamas, Right-Wing Nature Lovers, and Their Diverse Tribe of Countercultural Conservatives Plan to Save America.***

In leaving home, Dreher had left his Methodist connections behind. But during a time of agnosticism he visited Chartres Cathedral in France. He tells us:

I did not understand this at the time, but God set the hook in me inside that cathedral. It was there that I began an ambivalent quest for him, not really wanting to find him, but also unable to deny the power of that revelation. I could not explain how I knew that he existed—I saw him and felt him and was overawed by him at Chartres. The presence of God radiated from the Chartres cathedral so powerfully that it even pierced the dark wood into which I had retreated.

In his quest for God it was beauty, not reason or argument that pushed Dreher on the journey that led to faith in Christ. When he was twenty-four years old, Dreher joined the Roman Catholic Church. Some time later he met Julie, he proposed to Julie in a church, kneeling before an icon. They started a family.

Dreher faced another crisis of faith. Working for several periodicals he covered the unfolding scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. He did some investigative reporting into the abuse of minors in which abusers were moved from parish to parish.

He wrote of the coverup by the hierarchy. His findings so disturbed him that he found it impossible to go to church without feeling angry. This crisis of faith was not with Christianity itself, but rather of faith in the Roman Church. Dreher and his wife left the Roman Church and became Eastern Orthodox.

During most of this period, he had largely put his family in Louisiana behind him. He felt they could not understand him. His father did not think writing was a real job. They all resented his leaving. But in 2010 his sister was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. Dreher began to visit home to support and reconnect with his family. The experience of his sister's illness and death caused him to write a wonderful book about his sister's faith.

This book is called *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*. If you have not read it, I recommend it to everyone. It is a wonderful story of a broken family that deals with tragedy and grace. Dreher's sister was a person who lived out her faith in a small town. She gave her love to countless people. She dealt with her illness by telling people that "We will not get angry with God." Ruthie died in 2011. Her brother wrote: **And yet Ruthie, in her simplicity, was an extraordinarily accomplished theologian—if, that is, a theologian is not one who knows about God, but one who knows God.**

The death of his sister caused Dreher to want to reconnect with his family. He moved his wife and children back to Louisiana to be near his parents and his nieces and brother-in-law. It was not an easy move. He found it difficult to connect with his parents and the rest of the family. Healing did not come easily. He experienced periods of depression bordering on despair. With the help of his Orthodox Priest and reading he found hope. He shares this experience in another wonderful book I would recommend to you called *How Dante Saved My Life*.

It took a long time for healing to come with his father. It was Dreher's Orthodox priest, Father Matthew, who laid down the law. "He said, 'You have no choice as a Christian: you've got to love your dad even if he doesn't love you back in the way that you want him to,'" Dreher recalled. "You cannot stand on justice: love matters more than justice, because the higher justice is love." When Dreher struggled to master his feelings, Father Matthew told him to perform a demanding Orthodox ritual called the Optina Rule. He recited the Jesus Prayer—"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"—hundreds of times a day.

Two life-changing events occurred after Dreher began the regimen of prayer. He was alone at home one evening, lying in bed, when he sensed a presence in the room. "I felt a hand reach inside my heart and put a stone there," he said. "And I could see, in some interior way, that the stone said, 'God loves me.' I'd doubted all my life that God really loved me." A few months later, Dreher stopped by his dad's house to organize his medications. Ray was sitting on the porch, reading the newspaper and drinking coffee. When Dreher leaned down to kiss him on the cheek, his father grabbed him by the arm. Tears were in his eyes. "He was stammering," Dreher recalled. "He said, 'I—I—I spent a long time talking to the Lord last night about you, and the transgressions I did against you. And I told him I was sorry. And I think he heard me.'"

Dreher has spent the last decade thinking about the role of the Christian Church in the larger culture. He has seen the end of Christendom and the cultural disintegration into many various ideologies competing for dominance. In thinking about our current situation, Dreher turned to another Luminary, St. Benedict. Benedict lived during the time of cultural decline. The Roman Empire which had given unity to a large part of the world was falling apart. Various philosophical and religious world views were floating around seeking adherences.

Benedict was born in a town in Italy around 480 AD and died in 540AD. He was educated in Rome but found the city so degenerate that he abandoned the city to seek to be faithful to Christ in the country. He moved south and founded Monte Cassino the monastery that survives to this day. Many of us visited Monte Cassino several years ago. Benedict created an intentional community seeking to live out the Gospel separate from the larger community.

Rod Dreher believes that the way forward for the Christians today is to follow the example of Benedict. He published a book in 2017 called “The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation.” David Brooks called this book “The most discussed and most important religious book of the decade.” In this tome, Dreher calls on Christians to create alternative communities that are faithful to the Gospel.

Dreher is not creating a whole new movement, but rather pointing to many different examples of people exploring this option. He writes the primary thesis in these words:

“What these orthodox Christians are doing now are the seeds of what I call the Benedict Option, a strategy that draws on the authority of Scripture and the wisdom of the ancient church to embrace ‘exile in place’ and form a vibrant counterculture. Recognizing the toxins of modern secularism, as well as the fragmentation caused by relativism, Benedict Option Christians look to Scripture and to Benedict’s Rule for ways to cultivate practices and communities. Rather than panicking or remaining complacent, they recognize that the new order is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be lived with.”

In these words, Dreher reminds us that we are living in a post-Christian culture. We are not going to change this reality soon. We should not seek some magic bullet to go back in time nor should we despair. Dreher wants us to think of creating ordered communities of faith that understand themselves as separate from the larger culture.

Your first reaction might be what does the monastic tradition have to teach us. The reality is that over the last fifty years, there are many Protestant groups around the world that have sought some form of separate communities. The Iona Community in Scotland, the Taizé movement in France, the Northumbrian Community in England, Sojourners in Washington DC are all examples of Protestants who have created communities of faith bound together by a commitment to living the Gospel.

These are small movements and experiments. Dreher, I think, encourages all Christians and most Churches to begin to see themselves as monastic communities. I should remind you that Dreher is far from the first writer to speak in these terms. Thirty

years ago, Methodist writers Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon published a book calling for Christians to see themselves as “resident aliens” in this world.

What would a Benedictine Church look like? It begins by recognizing that we are now and will remain a minority in a pluralistic and not always welcoming culture. While we do not control that culture, we can be a creative minority. Dreher tells us:

“We are a minority now, so let’s be a creative one, offering warm, living, light-filled alternatives to a world growing cold, dead, and dark. We will be increasingly without influence, but let’s be guided by monastic wisdom and welcome this humbly as an opportunity sent by God for our purification and sanctification. Losing political power might just be the thing that saves the church’s soul. Ceasing to believe that the fate of the American Empire is in our hands frees us to put them to work for the Kingdom of God in our own little shires.”

When we have given up the burden of thinking we are to run the world, the Benedict option means the importance of what spiritual writers call formation. Our task is to so live together that we will grow in holiness. This means a greater focus on sharing the stories of the Bible, teaching people to grow in prayer and spiritual practices, and sharing God’s love through service.

When the Roman world fell apart and learning, knowledge and faith were threatened during those times called the Dark Ages, it was the intentional communities of the monasteries that preserved western civilization and the Christian faith. We are living in similar times. We are called as congregations to be alternative communities that live common lives of faith. It is through simple acts of faithfulness and love lived in common lives that will preserve the faith for future generations. I close with these words from Dreher:

We live liturgically, telling our sacred Story in worship and song. We fast and we feast. We marry and give our children in marriage, and though in exile, we work for the peace of the city. We welcome our newborns and bury our dead. We read the Bible and we tell our children about the saints. And we also tell them in the orchard and by the fireside about Odysseus, Achilles, and Aeneas, of Dante and Don Quixote, and Frodo and Gandalf and all the tales that bear what it means to be men and women of the West.

We work, we pray, we confess our sins, we show mercy, we welcome the stranger, and we keep the commandments. When we suffer, especially for Christ’s sake, we give thanks, because that is what Christians do. Who knows what God, in turn, will do with our faithfulness? It is not for us to say. Our command is, in the words of the Christian poet W.H. Auden, to “stagger onward rejoicing.”