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## **“MONKEY SHOWERS”**

- 1 My first job after my ordination in 1956 was as Assistant Pastor at a large downtown Lutheran Church in Williamsport, PA, USA. I knew the Senior Pastor from my Seminary days, having served in his parish in Philadelphia as Seminary Field Placement Student. In my last years at Seminary, he had moved to Williamsport, where he remembered me, and in due course the congregation in Williamsport called me.
- 2 We got along famously! It was a supremely happy match, for me, for him, and for the parish too! I recall those days with great fondness.
- 3 Among my duties as Assistant Pastor was the shepherding of the congregation’s Youth Group. More than that: In a matter of months after my arrival in Williamsport, I was also chosen as Advisor to the Area Youth Group, composed of youth from more than a dozen local parishes. (In the words of a national Lutheran church official, central Pennsylvania was the place in Eastern USA “where Lutherans are the densest.” Hah!)
- 4 It was in my role as Advisor to the Area Youth Group that I met John and Ron. These were two vivacious young adults, post adolescents, and I fast became their friend and mentor.
- 5 Whenever the Area Youth met in Williamsport, John and Ron would stay overnight with me at my home. I was still a bachelor then, living on the third floor of a splendid Victorian mansion whose lower floors were used as the Christian Education wing of the church I served. Sunday School rooms, a lounge, a library, church offices.
- 6 My apartment was enormous: Three bedrooms, a handsome living room, a dining alcove and full kitchen, plus two wash rooms. So I could accommodate both John and Ron overnight with ease. I should note that other members of my parish also served as temporary hosts for other young people on such occasions.

7 When John and Ron were my guests for a night or two, I'd often propose that we follow a kind of monastic discipline, in my apartment, and begin the day with Matins and end the day with Vespers – from the old Lutheran Service Book and Hymnal (SBH, 1958), the worship resource of North American Lutherans in those days. We'd even use a kind of mid-day devotion, often The Suffrages, at noon. All of these so-called Daily Offices are still available, of course, in our present Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW, 2006).

8 John and Ron would acquiesce with some enthusiasm. They came to love the worship tradition of their church, as I did, and learning Matins and Vespers became a kind of sport for all three of us.

9 But it was with some confusion one day, when another meeting of the Area Youth Group was proposed for Williamsport, that I heard John ask, "Can we do the monkey showers?"

10 As you may have guessed, John's Western Pennsylvania accent, and my own poor ears, had betrayed me. He was speaking, of course, of the "monkish hours" we had observed during the days when we were together.

11 All of which (1-10 above) provides an extended introduction to the subject of my posting this month: The Daily Office and its place among contemporary Christians today.

12 The Daily Office, sometimes called the Liturgy of the Hours, arose from Jewish practice, like much of Christian liturgy. In Psalm 119:164 we read "Seven times a day I praise you..." The entire scheme, codified by the so-called Desert Fathers, especially Benedict of Nursia, composes a full eight, not seven, brief moments of devotion, centered in the reading of the entire Psalter over the course of a week, and later enlarged to include other Bible lections.

13 They are:

Matins (Latin: "morning") prayed very early in the morning, perhaps between 12 midnight and 2:00 am. It's often a kind of Vigil.

Lauds ("praise"), or Dawn Prayer, prayed around 3 to 5 am

Prime, the First Hour, prayed at 6 am

Terce, the Third Hour, Mid-Morning Prayer, prayed at 9 am

Sext, the Sixth Hour, prayed at 12 noon

None, The Ninth Hour, Mid-Afternoon prayer, prayed at 3 pm

Vespers, Evening Prayer, prayed at 6 pm

Compline, Night Prayer, prayed before bed, at 9 pm

14 Of these, most Lutheran and Anglican worship books have retained only Matins, Vespers, and Compline. The Suffrages (Responsive Prayer) is often included, with options for use in the morning, at other times (midday, in the afternoon, in the evening), and even before travel (The so-called Itinerary). In monasteries, and in other intentional communities of Christians, a fuller banquet of prayer hours is often provided, sometimes mandating waking up from sleep in the middle of the night to pray as a community.

15 You're probably aware that Muslims too have a long tradition of daily prayer at specific hours.

16 I've sketched out for you in a previous Essay my own personal routine for daily prayer: See Essay 211, "Daily Prayer". As I argued there, maintaining some kind of discipline of daily prayer should be simply part of Christian life. But there are other virtues to the Daily Office itself.

17 FIRST, use of the Daily Office is meant to be communal, corporate. In Matins or Vespers we are praying as a body, as a group. Apart from Holy Communion, that doesn't happen often enough in most Christian parishes.

18 Surely in large churches with multiple staff – in cathedrals, for example – some kind of schedule for daily prayer could be maintained. Maybe even utilizing at least Matins, Vespers, and Compline. Every day.

19 In an earlier year, when I had more energy, I developed and proposed an area-wide system for daily prayer at a large downtown church in my city. With the enthusiasm and help of a few sympathetic pastors, we led such a program every day, Monday through Friday, in the same church's chapel, at noon. We called it Sext. And we observed the Christian calendar's "red letter days", commemorating those festivals that did not fall on a Sunday, with a simple service of Holy Communion.

20 Alas, it lasted less than two years. Apparently Lutherans where I live are not accustomed to worship other than on Sundays!

21 SECOND, I can imagine that in our day, the notion of a community of Christians, living together under some kind of discipline of daily or even hourly prayer, would be attractive to some people. And not necessarily under a discipline of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, as in the Middle Ages, but perhaps for only a limited time period. And perhaps with spouses and families in attendance. Irish monks of the Dark Ages are said to have gathered with spouses and families in their monasteries!

22 FINALLY, I'm disappointed in the shape of Matins and Vespers in our new ELW. (There's not much I regret in ELW, but this nags at me!) I regret that the framers of that volume abandoned what I learned long ago as the classic form of those Offices – at their end, a series of collects, a series of short prayers in a classic form, including the Prayer of the Day from the previous Sunday or Festival. Instead, ELW substitutes, in their place in the final prayers, a kind of bidding prayer form, without congregational responses.

23 I had come to love the repetition of Sunday's Prayer of the Day each succeeding day during Matins and Vespers. By week's end, I had that classic Prayer memorized!

24 I suppose I still have my option to use these revised prayer forms with a certain evangelical freedom! Hah!

25 One more thing: The “John” of my introduction, 1-10 above, subsequently went on to attend Seminary, become ordained, and serve parishes in Western Pennsylvania. And in his retirement, he’s become...Abbot or Prior of the small but influential Lutheran monastery near Flint, Michigan!

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