

THE MONASTIC WAY

...daily insights to stir the heart and seed the soul.

DO WE EARN HEAVEN?

A young woman, the newspaper tells us, who had been nothing but heartache and shame to her family all her life, walked away from an automobile crash that killed everybody else in the car. She didn't "merit" that rescue.

I ran through the pane-glass front of a candy store when I was ten years old despite the fact that I was not to be in that particular store at that particular time. It was an expense that my parents could not really afford at the time. I sat on the living room floor all day long waiting for my father to come home and punish me. But all he said was, "Are you hurt? No? Then good, what did you learn from it?" I didn't "merit" that love.

And I have an idea that someplace along the line, even you have managed to escape the just desserts of your actions. In fact, if we think about it, we'd all be somewhere else right now if God were a God of arithmetic. None of us have perfect scores. All of us have been saved from ourselves and through no merit of our own. It's just that most of us manage to keep those times secret.

And that's the problem: If we have to merit heaven, we're never going to get it. Because we can't. We aren't made to be perfect; we're made

to be us. We're made to grow slowly. We're made to begin again and again and again. We're made to demonstrate God's justice and exercise God's mercy, both of which are clearly different from our own.

The Talmud tells us of an old man in the village who kept giving money to ne'er-do-wells. The villagers were aghast at such wantonness. "Why give these people money when you know they'll only waste it?" they wanted to know. And the old man answered, "Shall I be pickier with them than God has been with me?"

Michelangelo, on the other hand, gives us an insight into what perfection is really all about. He wrote, "The

greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it." If we're afraid to fail, it is very easy to be perfect enough to merit a small reward but it is very difficult to become human enough to realize that failure can be its own kind of spiritual director. In fact, God apparently intended it that way or perfection would be a given.



KAREN BUKOWSKI



TUESDAY, OCTOBER 1: If we waste time worrying about what heavenly score we got today, we may be missing the whole point of life. As Elie Wiesel puts it, “God gave Adam a secret—and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again.”

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 2: “The kingdom of heaven is within you,” Jesus says. So, what’s to merit? It’s not winning it that counts; it’s embracing it. Now.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 3: If all we concentrate on is meriting heaven rather than living into it here, we turn the spiritual life into a scorecard of good things and bad things and miss the entire rest of life—which is most of it.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4: The spiritual life is meant for growth, not for counting points.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 5: God is not something to be achieved. God is a presence to be responded to, but to whom without that presence we cannot possibly respond. What we must do then is what the great mystics did before us: we must practice the presence of God.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 6: God is not something for which spiritual athletes compete or someone that secret spiritual formulas expose. God is with us for the taking, but not for any spiritual payment, only for realizing what we already have.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 7: It is not a matter of our becoming good enough to gain the God who is somewhere outside of us. It is a matter of gaining the God within, the love of whom impels us to good.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 8: Heaven is not something that is awarded for perfect attendance, for perfect answers to imperfect questions, for perfect records on ritual and devotion—good as all of these may be. Heaven is about what I am inside, not simply what I do outside.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 9: “Did you hurt yourself?” my father asked when I ran through the pane of glass. “No? Then what did you learn from it?” Now that may be the most profound spiritual question of them all and the one God is asking us at every moment.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 10: I don’t merit God. I simply accept God. And God, God tells us, is here for the taking. “I am with you always.”

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11: The real question may not be about merit at all. It may be about heaven. If heaven is a place, then there may well be an admission fee. But if heaven is life with God, then we have it now. If we want it.

*To be enlightened
is to know that
heaven is not coming.
Heaven is here.*

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 12: Merit is our idea. We don’t know if it’s really in the mind of God or not. After all, Scripture itself could be used to argue against it. God chooses the sinner David and the rebel Peter and the prostitute Rahab and the pagan Cyrus for special tasks and special favor. That doesn’t sound to me like our idea of merit at all.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 13: So far everything we’ve been taught about the mind of God has been false: as in what we were taught for years as the nature of creation, the nature of life and the nature of the universe. So why not our puny little notion of merit, too? Maybe we should just admit that God is with us—somehow—and let it go at that. Because if God is with us, then God is with us; no need to keep trying to earn it.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 14: Once we identify with the God within,

there is no room for anything else. No room for evil. No room for indifference. No room for judging others. Everything else simply burns away and Emmanuel—God with us—becomes every beat of our heart.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 15: The idea of merit turns God into a vending machine: If we put in so many good deeds, we think we’ll get heaven out. But it doesn’t take much to figure out the fallacy in that one. As Mark Twain says, “Heaven goes by favor; if it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in.”

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 16: It’s what we become inside here and now that determines who we are and what we shall one day become. Henry Ward Beecher put it this way: “Heaven,” he said “will be inherited by everyone who has heaven in their soul.”

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 17: Moral failure is the way we learn the difference between God and lesser things. As the mystic Julian of Norwich taught: “God does not punish sin; sin punishes sin... .”

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18: It’s we who learn from sin, not the points we lose by sinning, that counts in the end. Then we have a chance to become something right rather than simply do something right.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 19: “Each of us bears our own hell,” Virgil wrote. If by giving into greed we learn at the end that greed leaves us unsatisfied; if we come to understand that lust is no substitute for love; if the acid of anger has ever eaten away our soul; if gluttony has ever taken us over the edge into drugs and self-destruction—if, in other words it is our sins which in the end turn us away from sin—then we know that no ritualistic routine will ever merit us God. It is a matter of becoming what we say we are that leads us into the heaven of the self.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 20: Merit heaven? We're there already. "Eternity is not something," Charlotte Gilman wrote, "that begins after you are dead. It is going on all the time. We are in it now." So enjoy. You didn't merit being here. It is a gratuitous gift of God, as will be the rest of eternity as well.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 21: I keep trying to imagine God the record keeper. Absurd. Christina Thürmer-Rohr says it like this: "Morality is not tied to divine bookkeeping. God and humanity are not business partners checking out each other's claims."

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 22: Time is part of eternity, not separate from it. This is not a test. This is a taste. "Earth's crammed with heaven," Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote. Quit worrying about getting there and be conscious of what you have.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 23: When we talk about merit, we make of life some kind of spiritual athletic event with its emphasis on making the right plays and winning the game rather than on life as an experience of the love of God.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 24: We aren't here to merit heaven. We're here because we have the duty to create it. Jesus called it "the coming of the kingdom of heaven."

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25: The thought of having to merit heaven is a capitalist answer to a spiritual question. As if anything you and I could merit could possibly be heaven!

*I don't merit God.
I simply accept God.
And God, God tells us,
is here for the taking.
"I am with you always."*

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 26: While we talk about meriting heaven, we keep trying to create things here to take its place. For instance, they call the gambling region in the Bahamas "Paradise Island." Funny, isn't it, how we think of heaven as some kind of eternal solution to ageless struggles rather than as a frame of mind that makes the struggles themselves part of the glory.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 27: If you want a greater heaven, live a greater life. The effort we put into finding God here is the God we'll find there.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 28: When Jesus says to the Good Thief, "This day you'll be with me in paradise," it becomes crystal clear that it's not about meriting heaven, it's about living a life of faith on earth that counts.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 29: To live a life of faith is to live a life of union with God. That is the beginning of heaven.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 30: To be enlightened is to know that heaven is not coming. Heaven is here.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 31: We can't merit what we already have. The God who made us sustains us in life. All we can do is to grow more and more into God one failing, one faithfulness at a time.



LET'S SHARE OUR THOUGHTS

The following discussion questions, Scripture echo, journal prompts, and prayer are meant to help you reflect more deeply on *The Monastic Way*. Choose at least two suggestions and respond to them. You may do it as a personal practice or gather a group interested in sharing the spiritual journey.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

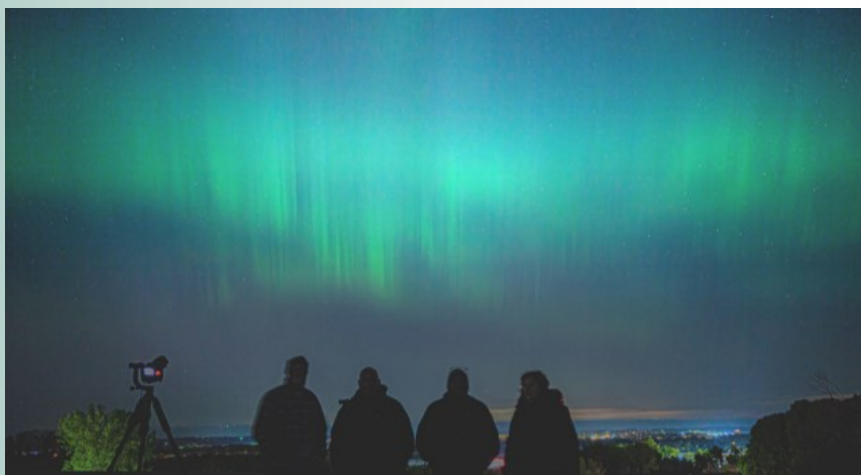
1. How do the reflections in this issue fit with your understanding of heaven? Have you had any experiences of God's presence that led you to feel like heaven can be felt here?
2. Which daily quote in *The Monastic Way* is most meaningful to you? Why? Do you agree with it? Disagree? Did it inspire you? Challenge you? Raise questions for you?
3. After reading *The Monastic Way* write one question that you would like to ask the author about this month's topic.
4. Joan Chittister uses other literature to reinforce and expand her writing. Find another quote, poem, story, song, art piece, or novel that echoes the theme of this month's *Monastic Way*.
5. On October 12, Joan Chittister writes that "merit is our idea," and suggests that God sees us very differently than we see ourselves and each other. What do you make of that thought? How do you think God sees our efforts?

JOURNAL PROMPTS

Prompt 1: Here are a few statements from this month's *Monastic Way*. Choose one that is most helpful to you and journal with it.

- We are not made to be perfect, we are made to be us.
- If you want a greater heaven, live a greater life.
- The thought of having to merit heaven is a capitalist answer to a spiritual question.

Prompt 2: Spend a few minutes with this photograph and journal about its relationship to this month's *Monastic Way*. You can do that with prose or a poem or a song or....



KAREN BUKOWSKI

PRAYER

Prayer for Holiness

“My eyes grow weary searching for God.”
Like the psalmist from ages past, I look for you in creeds and catechisms.
I search for you in miracles and visions.
I watch for you in prayer and stillness.
I gaze upon you in tabernacle and host.
I seek you in Scripture and story.
I glimpse you in ocean and insect.
I behold you in pilgrim and beggar.
My eyes grow weary searching for you, O God.

—Mary Lou Kownacki

SCRIPTURE ECHO

Jesus said, “To what shall I compare the Reign of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.”

—LUKE 13: 20 - 21

Joan Chittister FUND FOR PRISONERS



“Prisoners are the most forgotten people in society and the least served in Christianity.

Help me change that.”

—Joan Chittister

We work with a network of prison chaplains and volunteers across the country to send thousands of free copies of *The Monastic Way* to women and men in prison.

A donation of \$12.00 will send a one-year subscription to a prisoner that can:

- provide beauty to battered and bleak lives
- deliver daily positive reflective messages to stir the heart and seed the soul
- enable caring conversations that give people in prison something to believe in and a sense of the presence of God in themselves.

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JOAN CHITTISTER is an internationally known author and lecturer and a clear visionary voice across all religions. She has written more than 60 books and received numerous awards for her writings and work on behalf of peace and women in the church and in society.

KAREN BUKOWSKI, an Erie native, is a nature photographer and former LPGA and PGA Golf Professional who holds a master's degree in public administration.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION: Each month, join the staff of Benetvision on a free Zoom call to discuss the current issue of *The Monastic Way*. Several times each year, Sister Joan leads the Zoom session. Subscribers will receive invitations to register for these calls in their email inbox.

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