



*"We seek to be nourished by Christ in Word and Sacrament  
for our own participation in the work of God –  
nothing less than the drawing of all peoples  
into reconciled community through participation  
in the mysterious, self-emptying love  
of God's suffering and vindicated servant, Jesus."  
(SSJE Brother Jonathan Maury)*

### **Rev. Ruth Faith Santana-Grace**

The first time I approached the beautifully kept stone church was about 6 years ago. My motive for exploring the monastery was selfishly driven by my desire to find a place to stay while I might also visit my son during his four years at Harvard. It stood majestically, but hidden, by the Charles River in Cambridge, MA – adjacent to an enclosed courtyard. Built in the 1800s, the stone church is home to the Society of St. John the Evangelist (SSJE), a monastic order of the Episcopal church.

As I was oriented to the schedule of daily prayer, worship, meals and other amenities, I learned, much to my surprise, the monastery was a silent retreat house. Even our meals were in silence. I was not overly thrilled about what I initially encountered – but there I was for three nights. If I am completely honest, my initial sojourn into this sacred space was more as a skeptical observer – but the guest house was clean and the 14 or so brothers within the community knew how to sing and cook. The fact that I could see Dakota would make me endure almost anything – even the silence. And so it began – my reluctant relationship with a monastic order. Little did I know then that six years later I would yearn for the sanctuary of the silence that overlooks the Charles River.

As I walked into the courtyard last Tuesday, I felt this sense of welcome and peace as I made my way past the beautiful metal cross that stands as a welcoming embrace to the guest house. My goal was to disconnect from my rapid-pace schedule while reading and writing two articles for a new commentary for preachers. As an added bonus I would also get to see Dakota by the weekend—he lives in Boston but travels during the week. But it is clear that I now visit the monastery for me. This sacred space has taught me much about the rhythms of life.

It has enlightened me about the gift of silence – a silence not associated with secrets, isolation, or darkness; a silence not associated with abuse. This silence is different – it is a gift that allows for the busyness that occupies my non-stop brain activity to be overtaken

by the rituals of reciting the psalms, singing canticles, reading scripture, and offering prayers. What appears, at first, to be “rote and mechanical” slowly and rhythmically escorts me into a new mental landscape – one that allows me to enter “a vastness, a space of simple being, an abundant quietude.” **This quietude, in return, allows me to make space in my heart for what God might need me to hear. It allows me to engage the depths of my hopes and concerns.** I confess, I am smiling as I type this – as I would never have imagined myself as much of a monastic-style person – but I have found a nourishing freedom by what has now become my twice-annual sojourn to the monastery overlooking the river. And I have learned that freedom is an important part of what I need in order to maintain a healthy spirit of grace as I witness and engage in the reconciling ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. I believe it is something we all need.

As we prepare to gather next week as the Presbytery of Philadelphia, I am mindful that the rhythms of our lives can be overwhelming – filled with noises and distractions that keep us from God and one another. I invite you to consider where it is you have found or can find that intentional space that allows you to freely hear God and yourself.

Now that I am back in the Philadelphia area, I am aware that the rituals of the monastic space in Cambridge need to be replicated in this space as well. For me, that will be found as I begin swimming this week – as each stroke becomes a way of making space in my spirit for God’s voice to break in, as the sounds of the water echo the sounds of singing and praying. For you – it might be found in running, walking, bicycling, gardening – something that allows you to rhythmically find your spiritual freedom that, in turn, allows you to reflect God’s reconciling grace in all you do.

**The thing I’ve learned about monasticism is that it is not solely about the actual space – although there is no denying the gift of the monastery. It is about creating a monastic space as part of our spiritual disciplines – a place where our hearts can be liberated and nourished – as we seek to be a people of ‘Jesus hope’ in this world.**

