**Steve Spilde:** Today I am excited to introduce Sam Rahberg. Sam is a presenter in our Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. He presents a weekend about “Introduction to Spirituality.” Sam is also a longtime supervisor in the program, helping our participants with their work. I know Sam to be an incredibly gifted presenter and also a deep spiritual individual. It’s my pleasure to welcome Sam Rahberg.

**Sam Rahberg:** I’m glad to be here. It feels a little bit like people get to be a fly on the wall in the great conversations you and I have had in the past. I’m looking forward to it.

**Steve:** As I usually begin these conversations, I invite people to explain their own spiritual tradition. As you were young, describe the spiritual atmosphere in which you grew up.

**Sam:** I was a church-working kid. I grew up moving tables and chairs with my dad at the end of every church function. We were part of a Lutheran church, and he was the director of Christian Education. I like to joke that I had an 18-year-long internship with him about what it means to be a professional in the church, to be working in ministry. I grew up in that environment knowing not much different than the formal structures of the church. I was always hungry when we would talk about discipleship. Or when I’d hear about spirituality, I’d quickly chase down those types of texts and learning opportunities once I was an adult and able to recognize something was stirring. I followed on that trajectory. I still think of myself being involved in a ministry of sorts, although for the last many years I haven’t served professionally in a parish. My spirituality and my understanding of vocation and calling has shifted, with no less appreciation for parish work. I still admire most professors I had who would say, “You know I love you guys. I love what we’re talking about, but I would rather be with the people in the parish. I’d rather be serving in those intimate relationships than in an academic sort of setting.” They’re just different birds. I have a great deal of respect, and I had the good fortune of being able to support people in ministry – pastors and priests and deacons and lay leaders in congregations through spiritual direction or retreat formats, and [also] working one-on-one with people in supervision fields like equipping people for ministry.

**Steve:** You really grew up with a desire to be involved in that ministry. How old were you when that first desire came to your awareness?

**Sam:** Actually, in high school, I had anything but that desire. I had a stretch where I was wanting to go to the Air Force Academy. I wanted to be a computer programmer. I wanted to be a mechanical engineer. One of my high school teachers said, “Sam, you ought to consider becoming a teacher.” I said, “Well, maybe.” And then I realized, you know what I know how to do? I know how to do churchwork. It’s already who I am, [and] it’s already what comes naturally, so I bit on that and I did go [and] become trained as a director of Christian Education. Part of what I loved about that was that I was being trained and equipped to do the things that were feeding my own personal spiritual hunger, [and] that were giving me a way to integrate my study of Scripture, my spiritual reading, [and] my deep conversations with people into the work that I was doing. And to this day, I’m grateful for that privilege, [and] that I continue to be called into conversations that reflect some of the things that are most important to my inner journey. I’m grateful for that. I haven’t always been appreciative when days are busy or projects are hard, but when I can remember those moments, I do appreciate it.

**Steve:** How long did you work in a parish setting?

**Sam:** I had a yearlong internship, and then I was in a parish for five years before I went to the Benedictines and started working in retreat ministry there.

**Steve:** Talk about that transition. Did you make a decision to move away from the parish? Or was that opportunity with the Benedictines just more attractive?

**Sam:** I actually found the Benedictines before I left the parish in the sense that while I was on internship, before I’d even completed my training for churchwork, I had fallen in love with the Rule of St. Benedict and I had visited a couple monasteries and found this whole new world that I didn’t know through the Lutheran Lent. I came back to Minnesota from Washington state, where my internship was, and started poking around. I ended up taking a call to a parish in St. Paul for a year or two before I started my master’s degree at St. John’s. Again, the study was right in line with my inner questions. I was hungry to know more about monastic spirituality and about these visions for Christian discipleship that I didn’t know about spiritual disciplines and things that we only touched on in my preparation for churchwork, although we did get quite a good background in retreat ministry and the spiritual formation of teaching. I completed my studies at St. John’s and was feeling drawn to transition away from the church [and] away from churchwork, but I did not yet have a landing place. I had resigned my position and I said I would be finished up in the summer, which gave me enough time to finish out my master’s degree. I didn’t actually have a plan in place until I got a call from one of the Benedictines who said there was a position available at her community with the retreat center, and she wanted me to be open to the phone call that would be coming from the director of the program. It was similar to how my life began. I had actually been volunteering at that retreat center with her, moving tables and chairs.

**Steve:** That’s the theme. … Describe how that position eventually evolved. You became the director of the Benedictine Spirituality Center, correct?

**Sam:** Yes. I was with them for 15 years. I was blessed to build friendships with Sister Carol Rennie and Sister Virginia Mader and other members of St. Paul’s Monastery. Victor Klimoski was the director at the time, and he had deep roots in the Benedictine tradition and in St. John’s and at St. Paul’s there. They really brought me in and encouraged me to test and expand my gifts in administration, in facilitation, [and] in training as a spiritual director. Victor was really encouraging that step for me, as was Sister Carol. That enabled me to just become immersed in the most meaningful aspects and wide-ranging aspects of the retreat ministry. I was involved with everything from making the initial reservation to perhaps journeying with someone through spiritual direction. [I was] presenting the program and making the catalog. We had a very small team, and it gave me the chance to practice many different layers of the organization. After 11 years or so, I think Victor left that position, and I became director. But he had worked with me and groomed me in my comfort with leadership, moving me up from the initial hire as kind of the front door person up to associate director and then onto director. It was one of the most remarkable mentoring relationships I’d ever experienced because I had somebody who was listening to me and my questions. [I had somebody] who was helping me do my inner work alongside my vocational work. [I had somebody] who allowed me to experiment, and who called me on things when they weren’t right. But I could always trust that the best interests of the organization, the mission and my well-being were all in mind when we were talking and working. I wouldn’t trade that experience for the world.

**Steve:** I hear a deep spiritual presence in the midst of that relationship. How would you say God was showing up in that, and how that understanding of what you mean by God may have been different from an earlier time in your life?

**Sam:** It’s interesting you ask that, because just this week I had a dream in which my maternal grandfather appeared. I’ve been working over the last number of years to understand how much I had associated my grandfather with my image of God as a slow, steady presence [who is] humorous [and] effective, but just deliberate. And over the years, I’m also coming to appreciate the human dimensions of my grandfather – the way he told stories, the flashes of frustration, degrees of sarcasm. He was a real live human being, and so I have been exploring how my assumptions about God have been somewhat similar. That I have a picture or a box that I’ve created for God, and it was pretty comfortable for a while, and now I’m noticing that God is more complex and even loving beyond my own expectations, so how is that image shifting? But I mention that because I think that relationship with Victor and with other mentors was a way for God to show up in my life in terms of affirming again and again that I was accepted, that I belong, and that some form of challenge and growth is part of loving me. That some degree of freedom is real and holy, and there are consequences to that freedom, or there are limits to my wisdom and how I can use that freedom.

I also could see in that relationship, in that series of relationships, how – and this strikes me as I’m hearing myself as terribly Benedictine – but how communal that experience of God was, that I might come into retreat ministry hoping to grow as an individual, and what happens in the Benedictine context is that those relationships showed me more and more that I am myself “in community.” I am less “me” if I imagine myself all alone. There is solitude, but there is community, and that my gifts are to be used in community, and that any positional authority I have is a tool of the community. Very often as director, I would have to step back and say, “This is really complicated right now. What does this mission need from the director?” I actually kind of had to think of …

**Steve:** Step outside yourself.

**Sam:** Yes, yes. That I would have to look at myself within the context of the other people.

**Steve:** If I ask people, “What do you need to do next, what do you need right now, [and] what are you missing?” people really freeze up on that. But if I [ask], “What does Sam need, [and] what does Sam need to do next?” they find it much easier to ask that question, to really ask it from the third person. I’m hearing that same sort of, “What does this organization need from its director right now?” It’s easier than, “What do I need to do next?”

I want to follow up on that before we go further. We’ve talked about Benedict. We’ve talked about Benedictine spirituality. For someone who grew up outside the church, who was St. Benedict? What do we mean by “Benedictine spirituality?”

**Sam:** The first thing that comes to mind is a friend of mine who, anytime I mention Benedictines or monastic spirituality, he jumps to that clip in one of the Monty Python movies where the monks are walking in a row and they have their Bibles, and they’re chanting and hitting themselves on the head [“Monty Python and the Holy Grail”]. I think people’s first inclination is to either laugh or somehow distance themselves from the tradition of monks, a way of life that might be ordered by community or countercultural expectations. At some level, I imagine it’s uncomfortable. For me, maybe I can start with saying what brings me comfort in the Benedictine tradition. Benedict is a follower of the gospel from the 400s and the 500s. He sees the breakdown of Roman society, the invasions and the collapse of the [Roman] Empire. He sees the opulence in Rome, and he says, “I think that Jesus of Scripture is calling us to a different way of life – a way of simplicity and of relationship and of prayer with Scripture. So, I’m going to give up my privilege to go try to live that out.” He accepted a vision of discipleship that seems radical in our minds, or seems unbelievable given our degree of luxury today. And yet he’s speaking out of a society that sounds a whole lot the United States of America today – the challenge, the rhetoric, the opulence. And to have somebody step forward who says, “I, at least, am going to try to live according to the Gospel,” he didn’t set out to create communities. People were actually drawn to him. There were small groups of 12, then he ends up practicing what it would mean to live this life together. And over the course of his lifetime, he ends up writing what’s called “The Rule of St. Benedict,” which is not a list of to-dos but actually a description of how community life worked well for him and his 12 companions.

Over the centuries, by some interesting circumstances here and there, that rule spreads far and wide and becomes one of the most longstanding resources for what it looks like to live a contemplative, Christian life. Even other forms of spirituality, or other schools of spiritualities, find ways to push off of the Benedictine tradition and say, for example, we’ll pray “Lectio Divina” of the holy reading, but we have these emphases that are slightly different. I’m comfortable with the idea that Benedict is rooted in Scripture, that the themes of communal life he identifies seem to be consistent with Scripture. I love the practicality of everyday work and the challenges of community. I love the simplicity of an original intention for small groups of people and steady prayer and stability in one place. One other notion that is essential to Benedictinism is this ongoing conversion of life, or the idea that I’m always learning [and] I’m always growing within the grace and mercy of God. The Spirit is up to something – what will that mean for my life, [and] what will that mean for our community?

**Steve:** I remember something you said at a weekend at SDPP when you were presenting “The Rhythms of Daily Prayer,” the gift of that not as a you have to do, but [rather as] an invitation [of], “If I’m too busy that I don’t have time to pause for prayer, I’m just too busy.”

**Sam:** The whole discipline of daily prayer, as I experience it in the Benedictine tradition, is a bit of integrating Sabbath into every day. That no matter what I’m doing, the Liturgy of the Hours, that time we agreed upon to come together and acknowledge the presence of God and to pray for the world and for one another, that’s more important than my little project. It’s a practice of Sabbath, because whatever I’m working on can be paused for 10 minutes while I go pray midday prayer. It will wait that long. And if it’s not, I still have to ask myself, “Who is in charge of this right now? Am I feeling all-powerful, as if I’m the Creator? Or am I really humbly accepting my role as co-Creator in this?” I appreciate the gentle and steady reminder that punctuates every day. That particular discipline of midday prayer or evening prayer or morning prayer is a lot easier when you enjoy some of the other privileges of monastery life, like someone taking care of your meals and sharing the load for care of the facilities and those kinds of things. But the principle is one that I think can be helpful to us. What would it look like to set a timer that goes off at midday and just take a moment to breathe [and] to say, “Whatever project I’m working on, I could let it sit for a whole minute just to breathe deep and remember that God has been just as present in this project, as God was present this morning when I had a chance to walk outside or [had] time to read scripture or a spiritual text.”

**Steve:** As I listen to you, one of the things that strikes me is, I don’t know much about Islam. But I do know that that’s one of the tenets: regular prayer at certain times of the day – to pause, to take Sabbath – I think they use different terminology, but that same sort of rhythm really guides their life and gives it meaning.

**Sam:** I don’t know much about the tradition either, but I appreciate the connection to the similar rhythm.

**Steve:** One thing I want to hear you reflect on is I know that your work at the Benedictine Center was very meaningful to you [and] you did some amazing work there, but you don’t work there anymore – in part because the program has changed, [and] the support from the sponsoring community has changed. Could you say more about that?

**Sam:** I think St. Paul’s Monastery reflects some of the challenges that monasteries worldwide are experiencing in terms of declining numbers of core members. That’s not true in all parts of the world, but most of them. Communities are aging, and the difficulties are mounting when the ministries are being conducted more and more by lay people like me who are drawn to the charism [and] to the school of spirituality and who want to help, much like the folks at the Franciscan Spirituality Center – the excellent staff and the teachers and the teams that come around the Sisters there. It is both an intensive learning for me, and a great matter of grief, to have journeyed as long as I did with the community and to not be able to say now that I am still there helping them fight the good fight.

There was a theory of monastic revitalization that came out about 40, maybe even 50 years ago, the result of a study – I’d have to look deeper to find the reference – but what I remember about that [is] they were talking about the life cycle of organizations [and] how they’re born with this charism [and] this fire, how they expand as they have to institutionalize things, [and] how they flatten out when they’ve maxed out their capacities. Then there’s a decline – either a short period or a long period of decline – and there comes a moment of truth. Now what? There will be a transition; the decline can’t continue forever. The question is, what kind of transition will happen? Will this community become extinct? Will this community survive minimally, just scraping by? Or will it become revitalized? Naturally, the one that most people would hope for is revitalization, but it’s also the most challenging because something has to be let go of. Something has to be grieved because what you mean by revitalization is that it’s a new founding. It’s to reclaim that initial inspiration and vision. These researchers would say that the ingredients for revitalization are some captivating vision that has the hearts and minds of all the members of the community – some rebirth of a vision. And – I love this part – some central project [so] that there is a concrete expression of that vision that people throw their shoulder into. What’s the work? How is that vision moving into the world being expressed, because that’s the work of the community moving forward together, so that vision and work.

I think part of what is the grief for me, and the learning experience, is that not every community has the courage and capacity to either accept a vision that is on the table, or find the kind of leadership within their ranks to offer that vision. Without the vision, it is really hard to determine what the work is, [and] what the shared work will be. So, we fall back into minimal survival as long as we can, at which point we’re trying to prop up the existing structures. We’re trying to retell the same story with new words. We’re depending on the same individuals, and in the context of these monastic communities today, or the communities like the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, the beautiful opportunity is that they are surrounded by people – large numbers of non-religious, of extra-religious people – who want to be associates or oblates or partners in some ministry. I think the real work of revitalization will somehow include those new ranks of people who are knocking at the door.

**Steve:** As I listen to you, I can’t help but think about the political atmosphere we live in. No matter what side of the political divide you’re on, I think there’s an awareness of, I don’t think we can keep going on like this. We need to be doing something else, but there’s not yet agreement on what that something else would be. I don’t think it’s the left vision or the right vision. I think it’s some third way that we haven’t yet identified. My hope is that what you describe can be a template for how that happens.

**Sam:** It would be interesting to have some analysis about where we are on that chart because it sure doesn’t feel like the upward energy of founding. It doesn’t feel like we’re stable. At the very least, we are experiencing a strong degree of breakdown. Have we come to the point of dissatisfaction yet that would allow us to look for a new vision? I feel like at least there is some churning about that. There is some opening now that we are experiencing the coronavirus at a global level [and] facing racial and economic injustice. We are worn out from political vitriol. Maybe, maybe we have been ushered into a time of vulnerability and openness to a conversation or a new vision that would let the prophetic speak. I don’t know yet, but I will hope with you …