**Prologue**

January 7, May 8, September 7

*Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, as our hearts overflow with the inexpressible delight of love. Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom. Amen.*

The human journey is about learning and changing. A community is a school of love in which the human journey happens. Our relationships are not meant to be static; they are here to stretch and coax our hearts, to help us come to experience our hearts at greater depth. We come to live life through the vision of an expanding heart. No matter what our circumstance, no matter what our relationships are and are becoming – if we are learning to let go into the heart of love we will experience a sweetness to life that defies logic.

Sometimes this sweetness, this ‘slow burn joy’, is born in us only after life and relationship fall apart. Sometimes falling apart is the only way we can let go. The rule and community can be a support as we fall apart, a support as we suffer. In this, patience can grow and Christ suffers with us.

Sometimes this joy is felt strongly. It can be experienced as a delight that we ‘have’ and then can ‘lose’. Where has it gone? What have we done wrong? We are learning that living from the heart is less about feeling and more about persevering in a letting go into love. Yes, there will be joy and other times no. This is part of life. The spiritual life is not, ultimately, about feeling good; it is about growing consciously in love. Joy is a fruit of this that mysteriously grows by itself. In time, like peace, we do not go after it; it is just there, mostly in the background with a life of its own. It has been completed in the joy of Jesus.

As the prologue makes clear, an expanding heart happens when we are forgetting ourselves. Forgetting ourselves is living life less self-consciously. The Rule sets up a practice and a framework designed to foster attention into the heart and away from self-consciousness. We grow in living life consciously, that is, without thinking about it or having to imagine it first. As this happens love happens.

When we are attentive, be it to a kiss, to picking up the milk; on a loved one and their day; on cooking a meal, sweeping the floor; on whatever is in front of us, love has a chance to incarnate in the world. This too is what meditation is about as we practice attending to the mantra.

Passing through the narrowness of losing self-consciousness in the everyday, can feel like a risk, a constriction. The rule is clear about this. However, we are asked to trust and remain faithful to this way of love that the rule safeguards and grace grows us in. Life doesn’t have to be about thinking and feeling as the preservers of identity. It is possible, in time, to let go of our attachments to these and to be simply loving.

Rejoice in the Lord always; I sat again, rejoice. Let your good sense be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything; but in every prayer and petition make your requests known to God with thanksgiving, and the peace of God which is beyond all understanding will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:4-7, RNJB)