

February 5th, 2023

2 Corinthians 1:7-11 “Opening Spaces”

Last month I promised that we’d spend some time between now and Easter talking about what it means to develop a deep Christian spirituality. That phrase is borrowed from the vision statement of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which is: “To be a faithful, growing church, that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality and a passion for justice.” When you see this statement on the General Church’s website, you’ll see that Micah 6:6-8 is credited as the inspiration. Now, I hope you all have a better understanding of that verse’s context after last week’s sermon. The point I was trying to make last week is that our relationship with God does not depend on rituals. It does not hinge on us doing the right thing to avoid wrath or punishment. It’s about actions that are born out of our desire to represent God and do what God calls us to do. God is quite frankly *uninterested* in empty rituals. It’s not that God is against rituals because they certainly have their place in our spiritual development. It’s just that God doesn’t want them to be a box to check off at the end of the day. God is more interested in what we should *be*, not what we should do.

This week I want to start out with what it means to *be* spiritual. I think we all have different images in our minds when we think of a “spiritual person.” Depending on who you ask, this might be a “mellow” person with a serene ... holy expression on their face (whatever that means). Some think that a “spiritual person” is one who lives apart from others when it comes to things like what they wear or what they do or do not do. You know like – Spiritual people are vegetarians who only drink fair-trade coffee and tea. They would never eat junk food like Doritos or turtle brownies or Rice Krispy treats. And they only wear un-branded loose-fitting cotton or wool clothing. With sandals of course. Well, that’s just one stereotype. Some Christians may have a different idea about what it means to be spiritual. Back in college, I knew this young woman who was a volunteer for Campus Life. Her practice of prayer was a little more ... public than most folks. You know how some people

take a moment to give thanks before they eat? Even if she was sitting alone at a table in a coffee shop, she would lift one hand in the air and say a rather lengthy prayer that, in addition to thanking God for her coffee or pastry, included a prayer for salvation of the unsaved. I remember going into a 7-11 with her one time and she had to stop in front of the soda dispenser to pray out loud that she would be delivered from the temptation to get a diet Coke. Now *some* people would say that because of this, she was a spiritual person. Again, we all have different ideas and images of what constitutes a “spiritual person.”

I read a book by Rob Bell called *Everything Is Spiritual* where he talks about his struggle with those who categorize things as “spiritual” or “unspiritual.” He said *everything* is spiritual and *everyone* is a spiritual being. We humans are the ones who want to make classifications. So, I’m not interested in classifying what is or is not spiritual today because I agree with Bell. It’s *all* spiritual. What I want to talk about is how we, as followers of Christ can develop a deeper, richer spirituality. And since we’re coming up on Lent here in a few weeks, I want to talk about what it means to “surrender” because I believe that the act of surrendering is the work of spirituality – and let me be clear, it *is* work. But it can lead us into what Richard Rohr calls “a great luminosity.” I’m reading his book *Breathing Under Water* by the way so you’re going to be hearing a lot of Richard Rohr quotes over the next few weeks. Jesus said in the gospel of John chapter 8 that he is the light of the world. But remember that in Matthew’s gospel, chapter 5 verse 14 Jesus said that *we* are also the light of the world. That means we were created to shine. We need to be luminous. But, as we noted last week, we get so bogged down in our empty, close-minded, dead-hearted, body-denying, fear-driven religiosity that it’s hard to be luminous. Richard Rohr has this theory that religion is probably one of the major causes of atheism in the world today which sounds awful until you think about it and realize how true that is. So ... how do we make that shift from being merely religious to cultivating spirituality? How do we become “luminous?”

You know how I'm not a fan of religious platitudes? There's one that I am a fan of, and I think it's because it's so all-encompassing. The first step in cultivating spirituality is letting go, or as some folks say, "Let go and let God." The reason I don't like religious platitudes is that they often make things seem too easy, like you can just snap your fingers and "poof" your troubles are over. But letting go doesn't happen at the snap of your fingers. It's an extended journey. It's like a trust walk. It's gradual. It involves unlearning and handing things over. One does not do it on the first or even second try. In fact, it takes quite a bit. Rohr believes that the first step we need to take in order to begin the process of surrendering or letting go is the willingness to allow three spaces to be opened up within us – The mind space, the heart space, and the body space. By doing this, we open ourselves up to being fully present to allow God to work in us.

So let's talk about the mind space. I think we Disciples get a little arrogant here because we hold on to this notion that we're a little more rational than the average Christian. At least that's what our founders believed. You might be thinking, "But didn't you say a few months ago that they were barking at trees in 1801 at the Cane Ridge revival?" Yes, there's that. But then Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander came along after Cane Ridge and joined the movement. They were scholars. They published journals and founded colleges and seminaries. Alexander Campbell loved to get into debates about matters of faith and he was very good at what he did. But that's not what I'm talking about when I say we need to open our mind space. Richard Rohr teaches that to keep the mind space open, we need to be more contemplative. Some might say, "Oh, contemplative faith. That's like memorizing and reciting prayers, right?" That may be a part of it, yes, but Rohr says that we've got to be careful here because we could easily fall into that fear-based religiosity I was talking about last week. "Oh, I've got to say these prayers just right or else I'm going to disappoint God or make God mad!" Then we start "othering" people who don't say these prayers right. When we go down that road it sounds like we're at Hogwarts trying to cast spells properly. And yes, I know that it's borderline

offensive to compare prayers to spells, but I've witnessed heated arguments over whether the Lord's prayer should start with "Our father *who* art in heaven" or "Our father *which* art in heaven." It's even worse when you get into whether it's "Forgive us our debts," "Forgive us our sins" or "Forgive us our trespasses." Uh-oh! You didn't say it right. God's not going to hear it. Or, "Uh-oh, you didn't say the right words of institution at the table so communion doesn't count!" Rohr says that "authentic spirituality is invariably a matter of *emptying* the mind and filling the heart at the same time." That's a good segue into what's involved in opening up our *heart space*.

What does it take to open up our heart space? Rohr says it involves healing from our carried hurts from the past. Sounds reasonable, right? Until you start talking about "original sin." Now there's a touchy subject considering how important original sin is to many Christians' understanding of salvation. The doctrine of original sin says that we can't avoid sin or make it go away. No one is without sin. Paul says, "For all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory." Original sin is something that we aren't personally guilty of, but it's something that was done to us and passed on to us from generation to generation. So really, there's no point in blaming anybody. But this original sin wounds *all* of us. How then can we be healed from all these carried hurts from the past? The Sunday school answer is, "Jesus," of course. But let's be honest, that's pretty vague. And if we're even more honest, we have to admit that our hearts can get awfully hard when they're carrying the weight of so many hurts.

That's hard on the body by the way. Forty-three percent of all adults suffer from adverse health effects from stress. Stress can lead to physical symptoms including headaches, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, chest pain, and problems sleeping. Research suggests that stress can also bring on or worsen certain symptoms or diseases. Add to that the negative effects of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs that so many people use to try to relieve their stress. The scripture Barbara read was Paul's letter to a group of Christians who were in distress. They were

feeling afflicted, crushed, and in need of rescue. Were they literally being crushed? No. This is how they *felt*. Those are classic stress-related symptoms right there. See how mind, heart and body are all tied together? That's why the road to deep Christian spirituality has to take all three of these things into consideration. Rohr says that the work of spirituality is the ongoing *liberation* of heart, mind, and body.

Jesus was in the business of healing. When you read the gospels it doesn't take long to see that Jesus spent the majority of his ministry healing others. But a lot of churches spend the majority of *their* ministries trying to get people to make a one-time "decision for Jesus" as if our relationship with Jesus was nothing more than an insurance policy. Again, the path to spirituality involves opening our mind space, our heart space and our body space. As I said earlier, we Disciples are pretty comfortable with opening our mind space, but we sort of scoff at the heart-space churches and say they're too emotional. The heart-space churches scoff at us and say we're overly rational. Neither one knows what the heck to do with the body though. We make a big deal out of God becoming "one of us" by taking on the form of a human body, but then we spend a ridiculous amount of time and effort either ignoring or denying *our* bodies! We're two weeks away from Lenten season which is when many Christians spend 40 days convincing ourselves that we should deny our bodies so that we can become more spiritual people! Does that make any sense to you? I mean, I get it ... we observe Lent because Jesus went on a 40-day fast in the wilderness, but why can't some of our Lenten practices involve the care and nurture of our bodies? If the first steps in developing a deeper spiritual life involves opening our mind-space, our heart-space, and our body-space, why can't a part of our Lenten journey involve practicing healthy body-affirming disciplines? Why can't we say, "For the next 40 days, I'm going to spend 40 minutes a day walking outside?" Or, "For the next 40 days, I'm going to try to get an extra 40 minutes of sleep a night?" Or, "For the next 40 days, I'm going to spend 40 minutes a day practicing yoga," which oddly enough is actually *designed* to open your mind, heart and body spaces. "Oh, I dunno preacher, yoga isn't Christian ... we're

supposed to pray, not meditate.” Okay, try this – when you breathe and stretch, what if you try reciting scripture? How about Psalm 1?

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who *meditates* on his law day and night.

These aren't empty words. This isn't meaningless ritual. It's practice, and practice is a good thing, because that's what we do in church and in other areas of our lives. We *practice* our faith. We practice out of our desire to represent God and do what God calls us to *do*. As we prepare ourselves for Lenten season, let's not forget that connection between spirit, mind, heart, and body. The path to deeper spirituality is in opening those three things, then letting go, and letting God.