

February 12th, 2023

Philippians 2:12-13 “The Art of Surrender”

The question we’ve been dealing with on and off ever since Epiphany has been, “What does one have to do in order to develop a deep Christian Spirituality?” Last week we learned that the work of spirituality begins with letting go - which isn’t as simple as it sounds – followed by an ongoing liberation of the heart, mind, and body. We also learned that we cannot accomplish this liberation through empty words or meaningless ritual. We do it through practice. That’s why we say that people *practice* religion. Now, here’s where I need to confess that I used to shy away from the word “religion” because I thought it meant the same thing as, “empty words and meaningless ritual.” My generation likes to say, “Oh, I’m not religious, I’m spiritual. Call me an SBNR.” Now SBNR is the label people gravitated to when Sven Erlandson wrote a book back in 2000 called *Spiritual But Not Religious*. Erlandson borrowed this label from SBNA which was a sociological category from the 1960s that stood for, “Spiritual But Not *Affiliated*.” Either way, it’s a quick, self-identifying way of saying, “I’m into God, I’m just not into church.” And that’s too bad because I think the church has a lot to offer when it comes to spiritual growth.

Last week I told you about Richard Rohr and how much I’m enjoying his book *Breathing Under Water*. I credited him as the one who said that the work of spirituality involves the

liberation of heart, mind, and body. This liberation starts with letting go. It starts with surrendering. What I didn't tell you is that Rohr also said, "Surrender will always feel like dying, and yet it is a necessary path to liberation." I guess we could say that surrender isn't *just* "giving up" or "letting go." According to Rohr, it's more like "giving to" a moment, or an event, or a person, or a situation which doesn't feel natural given our stubborn human nature. We resist giving ourselves to *anything*. We resist surrendering to God.

Whoa, wait a minute there preacher ... that's the point of being a Christian isn't it? We surrender to Christ. Yes. That is the point. But even when we make a conscious, deliberate decision to follow Christ, it's hard to surrender. Remember, I said that spirituality is *work*. Our stubborn, self-defeating willfulness has to be converted and handed over, and let me tell you it does not surrender easily! If you don't believe me, spend a few hours with a toddler. Yes, they are cute. They are fun. They are playful and adorable. Except when you have to tell them, "no." When you say, "no," you are telling them that they must surrender their will, and that does not come easily to toddlers. "No" often leads to a Chernobyl-level meltdown and suddenly they're not so fun and adorable anymore. But this kind of stubborn willfulness does not stop after the "terrible twos" (or threes, or fours, and so on.) Our willfulness just grows more sophisticated as we become adults. We find all sorts of creative ways to take and maintain control. And to complicate matters, our culture

rewards those who take control. In the business world, people who *don't* take control aren't even respected. They are seen as weak and ineffective.

When we perfect the art of taking control so that our will becomes reality, we gain a sense of power that becomes addictive. Gaining control, however, rarely result in true happiness. Okay, sure I get what you're saying preacher, but religious people don't get sucked up into this. We know better. And yet ... willfulness and the pursuit of power happens in all levels of religious life. Power struggles and shenanigans happen as much in the church as they do outside the church. Maybe this is why some people identify as "spiritual but not religious." But even among those so-called "spiritual" people who *think* they've divorced themselves from the church's shenanigans, how many of them have actually handed their will over to God, which is the very definition of surrender? Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to follow me, let him renounce himself" or "deny themselves" depending on what translation you're reading. And he says this in all four gospels. Surrender is handing your will over ... letting your will go and allowing God's will be done. Like I said last week, "Let go, let God."

I tell you something that we humans are really good at. We're good at coming up with substitutions for things that we don't like or don't agree with. We know that the path to developing a deep and healthy spiritual life involves surrender. So we come up with something that *seems* like

surrender but really isn't. Our favorite substitute for surrender is "heroic sacrifice." Richard Rohr calls heroic sacrifice the, "universal substitute for renouncing our will." Heroic sacrifice is almost a religion unto itself. It's the most common way of renouncing the self without really renouncing the self at all. Heroic sacrifice gives the illusion of being loving and generous. And sometimes sacrifice is loving and generous. But most of the time it's about us. What it gives us – and remember, the biggest reason we do *anything* is because we get something out of it – it gives us a sense of superiority, definition, admiration, and ... control. "Look at that person! What great sacrifices they make so that they can be so successful!" Who can argue with that, right? But it's not the gospel. Not even close. But it's the most common substitute.

Rohr believes there are two types of love. One that sincerely seeks the spiritual good of others, and another that seeks superiority, admiration, and control for itself by doing good and noble things and making heroic sacrifices. To put it in perspective, suicide bombers are sacrificial. Most resentful people are sacrificial at some level. The manipulative parent is sacrificial. All codependents are sacrificial. Having a martyr complex reveals a false side of love. This is true even for some of the martyrs of the church! There have been monks throughout history who've died horrible deaths because they deliberately did everything they could to get others to hate them and kill them so that they could be listed among the martyrs of the church. This kind of sacrificial

religiosity was the biggest critique Jesus had of the scribes and Pharisees in the gospels. They were making all these sacrifices in order to look heroic and to gain moral high ground for themselves. But in Mark 12:38 and Luke 20:45 Jesus said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” In Matthew 23:23 Jesus said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” And in saying these things, Jesus was just drawing from the prophetic traditions of Hosea, Joel, Amos, and Micah. In Hosea 6:6 the prophet proclaimed, “For I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” And we’ve already covered Micah who wrote about how God doesn’t care about “1,000 rams and 10,000 rivers of oil.” God requires that we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly. Rohr wrote that “False sacrifice is an actual avoidance of any real ‘renouncing’ of the self while looking generous or dedicated.”

Being “religious” is no substitute for developing and nurturing spirituality. God refuses to bless or reward any kind of “moral worthiness game.” Jesus handed down some of his harshest criticism to those who insisted that it *was* a

moral worthiness contest. Jesus didn't even hang out with those folks. He didn't have time for their games. Jesus hung out with prostitutes, tax collectors, drunkards and other "sinners." Jesus overturned the tables in the temple where vendors *sold* animals for sacrifice. He was angry that animal sacrifice had just become another "buying and selling of God" scheme to avoid doing the real work of surrendering. Jesus mocked those who put a lot of money in the temple treasury but then he lifted up a poor widow who "only" gave a little coin. But that's all she had. And that's why Jesus lifted her up as the example of the one who had given the most. Philosopher Rene Girard argued that Jesus came to proclaim the death of sacrificial religion and ended it, "once and for all by offering himself" as the writer of Hebrews proclaimed in Hebrews 10:9. But it didn't take long for the church to fall back into that sacrificial pattern because the old ego always prefers an economy of merit and sacrifice over any economy of grace and unearned love where we have no control. To put it another way, we somehow always fall back on thinking that the spiritual journey is a moral achievement contest where none of us are worthy.

There is a better way. There is a path to deep spirituality that transcends all this nonsense that we've cooked up simply because we can't stand the notion that someone can receive something that they didn't "earn." And really, when you think about it, that's what it often boils down to. We hate it when someone receives something good that they didn't earn. It's downright offensive to some folks. And honestly,

that's okay if it is. Shoot, it offends me sometimes. But don't tell me that you're a "good Christian" if you can't accept getting something for nothing because that's the foundation of the gospel message. That's the good news! God's grace and love is ... get ready because I'm going to use that offensive "f" word ... God's grace and love is *free*

! It is freely given. "Yeah, but you just said it offends you sometimes too!" Yes. And overcoming that feeling of being offended is the work I have to do in order to develop a deeper Christian spirituality. It's the work that all of us who decide to follow Jesus have to do. Richard Rohr says, "We have been graced for a truly sweet surrender if we can radically accept being radically accepted for nothing." The path to deep spirituality isn't about duty, obligation, requirement, or heroic anything. It's about learning to surrender.