

Preaching on Spirituality

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Spirituality is a word which makes preachers nervous these days. How can one word be the umbrella for phenomena as diverse as seeking guidance from the I Ching, intensive journaling, speaking in tongues, guided imagery, transpersonal psychology, and the contemplative prayer life of Thomas Merton? In its popular use "spirituality" is so elastic that it includes both religious and nonreligious expressions. Bette Midler said, on NBC's "Today Show," "I am not a religious person but I am deeply spiritual." She went on to say that, for her, the church actually frustrates the spiritual side of men and women. But spirituality is in the air.

People in churches and out seem more willing to talk about their spiritual experiences than they did twenty-five years ago. What is encouraging such openness? Shirley MacLaine discloses her own ecstatic experiences in a dramatic mini-series on TV. Her best-selling books describe her out-of-the-body trips, past lives, channeling, and the presence of spiritual guides. Church people are talking about their own spiritual journeys—sometimes with the pastor! But they are confused. They ask, "How can I understand these experiences from the perspective of my faith?" "Can the ethereal New Age music be a conduit of the Spirit of God even as the hymns of the church have been?" Such questions make preaching on spirituality imperative.

Clearly, in North American society, there is a deep hunger for the nourishing of the soul. The external forms of religion and worship are not enough to satisfy an interior search for meaning and wholeness, if they ever were. No longer do people stay in the church through heritage and inertia when they are not being fed. When society loses its community rootedness and common tradition, and is caught in swirling change, its people will hunger for a sense of transcendence which promises to give them contact with supersensible realities. They want to find an altered state of consciousness that goes deeper than the fast changing, illusory world. Some take the drug route, hoping, as one young man said, to "access the transcendent" and achieve a spiritual "high." Many try through promiscuous sexuality to find their bliss. Feeling isolated in the midst of countless others, men and women often embark on a series of genital encounters which leave them at the end much as they were before — isolated, encased in a cocoon of dead silence, pseudo-intimacy, and spiritual poverty.

Among highly educated people, especially students and members of the helping professions who are bored with the church, Eastern forms of thought and meditation—as interpreted through the Western mind—seem to offer promise through transcendental meditation, yoga groups, and Zen retreat centers. Many find a rekindling of their spirit through these means. But

"experience merchants," intent on financial gain, have crowded the field. A Tibetan Buddhist priest recently ridiculed many of the cheap imitations in California as "buddha babble."

Unsatisfied by the experience and concepts of prayer in many Protestant churches, many young people are drawn to Eastern practices. A 1980 Gallup Poll in the Dayton, Ohio area revealed that 31 percent of the young people polled—far more than older people—had been involved in quasi-Eastern meditative practices and thought even though 75 percent of them believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Interviews revealed that they had been drawn to these movements for three main reasons: they present a specific methodology for spiritual growth; they involve the body in their spirituality; and they minimize the guilt-salvation line of their inherited Christian faith.¹

Whatever the reasons for the heightened search for a viable spirituality, the longing is clearly there. Psychiatrist Gerald May is of the opinion that we are currently witnessing a release of the repression of the spiritual side of our natures.

We repress our longings when they hurt too much. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that we do the same with our deepest longings for God. God does not always come to us in the pleasant ways we might expect, and so we repress our desire for God. . . . But something that has been repressed does not really go away; it remains within us, skirting the edges of our consciousness. Every now and then it reminds us of its presence as if to say, "Remember me?" . . . We may repress our longing for God, but, like the hound of heaven that it is, it haunts us.²

As the preacher ponders this upsurge of spiritual longing in our culture, how can he or she communicate the meaning and resources of Christian spirituality? I define Christian spirituality as one's unique and personal response to the call of God through the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Let me spell out some of what I believe to be the crucial dimensions of this understanding, especially as it contrasts with the culture spirituality of today.

Christian spirituality is incarnational, by which I mean it denies any basic dualism between spirit and matter or the division of life into two separate compartments. This division is what Robert McAfee Brown calls The Great Fallacy.³ Much contemporary spirituality, inside and outside of the church, is designed to separate us from the world and to enhance the power and willfulness of our individual, private lives. The world gets cognitively divided between the sacred and the secular, body and soul, church and world, prayer and action, and we resist bringing them together. Incarnation affirms, rather, the descending and irreversible entrance of God into the world, taking on the material, the "flesh," so that it becomes the permanent abode of God. Incarnational spirituality means that our knowledge of God in Christ, our communion with God, is never just a one-on-one experience. Our communion with the Divine is always a "mediated immediacy," to use the phrase from the late John Baillie. By this phrase he means that

No one of the four subjects of our knowledge—ourselves, our fellows, our corporeal world, and God—is ever presented except in conjunction with

all three of the others.⁴

When we enter a relationship with one, it always involves the other three subjects, even when we are in solitude; they are intertwined.

An incarnational spirituality is always larger than the individual's interior quest. Robert McAfee Brown asserts that

God's message is never: Turn away from the sinful world and find me somewhere else. God's message is always: Immerse yourself in this sinful world that so desperately needs words and acts of healing, and you will find you are not alone, for I am already there, summoning you to help me.⁵

This does not mean we always have to be in the thick of things. We need solitude and retreat, what Toynbee in *A Study of History* calls withdrawal-and-return in order to acquire a new vision and energy for new life. Until we can find a solitude where we are beyond the grip of the surface, egocentric self with all of its plans, desires, distractions, and frenetic activity, we will not be able to open our eyes to the action of God within ourselves and the world and get with it. In the words of Pope John XXIII, Christians are called to witness "the operative presence, here and now, of this fathomless love and concern that is at the heart of things, a presence which is already at work in the unconscious life of every part of the creation." A biblical-prophetic spirituality sees the extraordinary within the ordinary because we have witnessed the human life of God in Jesus Christ.

Christian spirituality requires an interplay between experience and interpretation. Interpretation based on doctrine without experience is deadly. The first epistle of John affirms "that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life . . . we proclaim also to you" (I John 1:1). This is the felt quality of the experience of the early church that many Christians are seeking to discover today. "Do we have to settle for hearsay religion?" people are asking more often now. Many are weary of the dull formalism and bloodless concepts that pass for preaching and worship. They are not willing to live with words about past numinous experiences without being able to authenticate those words in the present. A mere description of religious experience in some other age doesn't feed their soul any more than the words "filet mignon" satisfy their hunger. If we cannot know God in present experience how can we have any confidence that God either has been or will be present to us? To say (as many dispensationalists do) that God *was* known in past experience but *now* can be known only by report is to deny the reality of the Holy Spirit.

But experience alone is not enough. Interpretation is always a present element in experience. We bring assumptions to experience and try to make sense of it. Once in New Mexico I swerved to avoid a large boulder in the road; any native Southwesterner would have known immediately that it was just a tumbleweed but my experience and background made me try to avoid a "boulder." We need something more than experience to find truth. This is why theology and science are so necessary in this day of "spiritual gluttony," to use the

words of John of the Cross. It is interesting that New Age people seem to have antipathy for both disciplines.

Paul Tillich once preached a sermon in a college chapel on God's presence. A sophomore was deeply moved by the sermon and asked why she needed the church. Couldn't she experience the presence of God without it? With a quiet softness, Tillich gently led her from a consideration of her personal experience to the richness of corporate experience in the church. He explained that he could not have preached that sermon without himself having received the Word in the hymns, sacraments, theology, and fellowship of the church. Suppose, he suggested, that he were to come to her not in this chapel but in her dormitory room and talk with her. Would she have all the richness of the ages locked within her little heart? No matter how large her heart was, it was simply not big enough to contain the heritage of the faith through the ages.⁶

After the Pentecost experience described in Acts, we are told "all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" Some observers furnished a naturalistic interpretation, accusing the disciples of drunkenness. Peter rejects this and quotes from the prophet Joel: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour my spirit upon all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." Here is an interpretation that carries the authority of the Hebrew prophets and is used to account for an experience which was unsought and unexplained. Experience and interpretation are wedded in Christian spirituality and each has an effect on the other. From the interplay, a new perspective on life arises.

In the history of the church, there have been many attempts to single out certain experiences (for example, speaking in tongues) as a normative sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. But it is pretty well agreed now, by those who have studied the subject, that tongue-speaking is associated with certain psychological characteristics⁷ and the prevailing norms of a group, and that it is misleading to limit the definition of spiritual experience to this dramatic expression of piety. It is not the expression of religious experience so much as the consequences in life that should concern us. Roger Hazelton asks

Do these claimed experiences of inspiration actually yield insight, encouragement and renewal for self and others? Are they creative and re-creative in their effects? Do they contribute to a more humane and liberating order of life?⁸

Christian spirituality involves a continual deepening of our understanding and practice of prayer. Prayer will always be a mystery to growing Christians. It is the preacher's privilege to explore new models and metaphors of prayer which encourage a deeper understanding and practice. Popular lay-theology often sees prayer as a begging ritual to a cosmic vending machine or to an arbitrary, distant God. Petition is the totality of prayer for most people and they have no understanding of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, or intercession. In Christian understanding, God knows our needs and does not have to be informed about what is going on with us. But we need to articulate what we *think* we need. These "needs" will change as we mature in Christian life as

John implied when he reports Jesus saying, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask what you will. . . ."

It is healthy for both preacher and people to acknowledge that what happens in prayer is a mystery to us and to say with Paul, "We do not know how to pray worthily. . . . But God's spirit within us is actually praying for us in those agonizing longings that never find words. He who knows the heart's secrets understands the Spirit's intention as he (she) prays for those who love God" (Romans 8: 26, 27 Phillips). What a change would be wrought in our congregations if we understood that God initiates all prayer and prays through us! Von Hugel's word is "it is God who wakes and God who slakes our thirst."

I see prayer as "paying loving attention to all of God that we know with all of ourselves that we know." The operative word is *attention* and it calls for discerning God's activity in solitude and daily life. Prayer is a relationship in which we *grow* as we open our eyes to the silent action of God in our world. Ben Campbell Johnson shows us how spiritual journeyers will listen for the word spoken in their everyday existence and suggests a format for that discovery at the end of each day:

Sit quietly. Pray for the illumination of the Spirit. Name the events of your day. Relive each event. Give thanks to God for it. Confess the sin or brokenness you discover. What was the flow of the day, the movement forward? What themes were repeated in your life? What new word did God seem to speak through the events? Symbolize the day. Look at it as a whole. Contemplate the God who came to you in the clothing of those events.⁹

Christian prayer does not seek for an experience of God but for the God of experience. Abraham Heschel has said, "What the prophet faces is not his own faith. He faces God. Such a sensation is a sensation of joy." But the true prayerer faces God in every circumstance of his or her life. A biblical spirituality embraces *all* seasons of life in praying the psalms, for example. Walter Brueggemann has grouped the psalms around three distinct seasons of life: times of secure orientation, painful disruption, and surprising reorientation.¹⁰ Some of the psalms, notably Psalm 30, represent all three seasons. Through the use of this psalm as a structure for prayer, congregations can identify when life has been like this for them and thus bring their honest experiences into their prayer. First, they note that human life consists of seasons of well-being, when we are able to delight in the stability of life. The psalm says, "As for me, I said in my prosperity, I shall never be moved. By Thy favor, O lord, Thou has established me as a strong mountain (Ps. 30: 6-7a)." And one's reaction is gratitude and peace.

But congregations will also recognize that life is peppered with seasons of disruption and suffering. And with the psalmist they are often able to participate in his song of lament: "Thou didst hide Thy face and I was dismayed. To Thee, O Lord, I cried. And to the Lord I made my supplication. What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise Thee? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me. O Lord, be Thou my helper (Ps. 30: 7b-10). The psalm becomes a vehicle for expressing

rage, resentment, and depression. The "dark night" is a reality for us.

Fortunately, life consists also of turns and surprises when we are overwhelmed with gratitude and amazement and when hope breaks through despair and new possibilities emerge. As I have said in another place, "Hope is imagining another way."¹¹ "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing. Thou hast loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness, that my soul might praise Thee and not be silent. O Lord my God I will give thanks to Thee for ever" (Ps. 30:11-12).

In Jewish and Christian spirituality, God goes through each season with us. When Elie Wiesel spoke recently at a university about the Holocaust, a student questioned him: "Ten years ago you said you hated God; now you are saying that you love God. Isn't that dishonest, or at least inconsistent?" To which Wiesel replied, "Ten years ago I hated God. Now I love God. But I was never *without* God."

We need to understand prayer in new ways and Scripture can help us. Walter Brueggemann says, referring to the psalms:

The work of prayer is to bring these two realities together—the boldness of the Psalms and the extremity of our experience—to let them interact, play with each other, tease each other, illuminate each other . . . All this is to submit to the Holy One in order that we may be addressed by a Word which outdistances all our speech.¹²

Christian spirituality finds its nourishment in a Christian community. Harvey Cox wrote his book *Turning East* after documenting the increasing impact of Eastern religions on American life, and especially student life. At the end of his book, he concludes that the strength of Christianity lies in the congregation, the Koinonia. He confesses,

To grow spiritually, one must apprentice himself to a struggling little church in my neighborhood, a place where I must contend with younger and older people some of whose views I appreciate and others whose ideas I find intolerable. The music is often stirring, sometimes off key. The preaching is uneven. There is never enough money for the oil, despite numerous pot-luck suppers. How often have I been tempted to jettison this all-too-human freckle on the Body of Christ and stay home Sunday with better music (on the stereo) and better theology (on the bookshelf). But I do not. A voice within me keeps reminding me that I need these fallible human confreres, whose petty complaints never quite overshadow the love and concern underneath . . . This precious little local church . . . is where the Word becomes flesh. . . I do not believe any modern Christian . . . can survive without some such grounding in a local congregation.¹³

Luther once called the congregation "a fellowship of conversation and consolation." It is where people can share their faith-journeys and heal each other. They are companions in Christ as they bear one another's burdens. But this relief of private burdens is to set the person free to assume more important and universal ones in a hurting world. In Christian spirituality, how do we

strike a balance between being fruitful in the congregation and being fruitful beyond its four walls? The answer requires a new perspective on the church.

I believe every Christian is asked three questions in various ways by his or her nonchurch friends. They can be answered differently in institutional terms and in the framework of a New Testament spirituality.

Do you go to church? Yes, usually every other week, except for the Womens' Association, which I attend monthly.

Where is your church? Fifth and Main Streets, a tall brick structure. I'm sure you've seen it on your way to Macy's.

What does your church do? Let me show you our church calendar. That will best answer your question: Sunday School, youth groups, senior citizens' lunch, hunger task force, volleyball teams. Look at the list! If we should try to answer these questions from a New Testament understanding of the church, the response might be somewhat different.

Do you go to church? Well, I'm part of the church. But the church does meet together, if that's what you're asking. We meet in a variety of places, with quite a mix of people.

Where is your church? Let's see, about this time of the morning most of it is at work, except for those who are sick. Some are in this office, or that school or kitchen. Some of us are in a grief counseling service downtown. A couple of our members are building houses with Habitat for Humanity. O yes, two of our young people are in Central America with Witness for Peace. One of our members was a hostage in Lebanon and was released two years ago. Others are preparing to teach in Zimbabwe and do special medical work in Nigeria. Our church is all over the world, right now.

What does your church do? I've already told you. It is spread through this town and world involved in all sorts of work, doing that work in such a way and talking in such a way as to let others know that our work is love. Energized by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we let people know that He is the Lord of life who will finally overcome the craziness of the world we live in. This is our church's work. And then one day a week, perhaps more, we rest from our church work and gather again to hear our Lord speaking to us through our worship and our fellowship, that we may go back, freed from fear, to the task he has set before us. Our life in the church is really quite simple. We gather the folks, we break the bread, we tell the story and we try to live it out. And there is a deep joy among us because we are not alone.

NOTES

¹ George Gallup, Jr., and David Poling, *The Search for America's Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), pp. 25-33.

² Gerald G. May, M.D., *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), pp. 2, 3.

³ Robert McAfee Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988).

⁴ John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (New York: Chas. Scribners, 1939), p. 178.

⁵ Brown, p. 64.

⁶ James B. Ashbrook, *Paul Tillich in Conversation* (Bristol, Ind.: Wyndham Hall Press, 1988), p. 24.

⁷ John P. Kildahl, *The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 40, 50, 54, and chapter 7.

⁸ Roger Hazelton, *Ascending Flame, Descending Dove* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 58.

⁹ Ben Campbell Johnson, *To Pray God's Will* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), p. 119.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), p. 19.

¹¹ Roy W. Fairchild, *Finding Hope Again: A Guide to Counseling the Depressed* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary's Press, 1982), p. 27.

¹³ Harvey Cox, *Turning East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), p. 173-4.