

One New Book for the Preacher

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Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009.

“I don’t have any spiritual practices,” I told my acupuncturist a couple weeks ago, “I’m a Presbyterian.” “What do you do then to center yourself?” she asked as she stuck a needle dangerously close to my eyeball. I thought about it, which was hard considering the needle, and responded, “I don’t know, read books I guess.”

Judging by the volume of books I’ve read over the past few months, I’ve really been feeling de-centered. I’ve read about how the Church could change to engage young people in the coming decade and how clergy should be responding to that change. I’ve read about how I should be preaching, what I should be seeing in the Bible, and how, if I really wanted to, I could be reaching out to generations of people who have slipped out the back door of our denomination.

But none of these books have been especially “centering.” In fact, while I am grateful to many of them, and while I’m thankful to be challenged to think about how I can minister better, there is a real temperament of inadequacy that I’ve gained from reading about how I can do things better, as what is assumed is that I’m not doing enough right now. However, the signs of the times make taking satisfaction in current realities impossible. Books, seminars, and articles on doing ministry better seem natural and necessary considering all the anxiety over slipping mainline dominance. My favorite scholars have parodied mainline decline as a kind of exile – our country, as President Obama has alluded to with no little controversy, cannot be called a Christian nation. And while I tend to side with the likes of Leonard Pitts, an editorialist who recently wondered whether we really ever were (Leonard Pitts, “Stand on torture a very unchristian response,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 6, 2009), what is certainly true is that the perception of Christianity’s weakening dominance is provoking concern, even outrage, throughout our country, prompting some to withdrawal, attempting their own microcosms of Christendom.

A notable example is in Immokalee, Florida. Presbyterians might associate this town with migrant labor abuse, but Immokalee’s newfound notoriety is due to Ave Maria University and the intentional community that has sprouted up out of tomato fields. The intentional community of 25,000 radiates from a church on Annunciation Circle, has attempted to prohibit stores from selling contraceptives and pornography, and has requested that cable TV providers refrain from any adult programming (Mitch Stacy, “Billionaire Makes College, Town Grow,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 09, 2009).

Maybe tired of engaging a secularized society, maybe attracted by the idea of living in community with likeminded idealists, but obviously driven out of their majority culture into a kind of self-alienation, Immokalee certainly seems like a last ditch effort at John Winthrop’s “city on a hill.”

I have thought of spirituality as a means to that same end – a retreat from where

God is not perceived to be, in order to encounter the divine in purer surroundings—and while there is certainly emphasis on such retreat in Barbara Brown Taylor's newest book, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, what I gained is that whereas feelings of alienation may be more likely now than ever before among North American Christians, preaching is not about shielding from a vulgar society and starting out anew.

Preaching must be guidance in the art of “The Practice of Waking Up to God” right where you are:

To learn to look with compassion on everything that is; to see past the terrifying demons outside to the bawling hearts within; to make the first move toward the other, however many times it takes to get close; to open your arms to what is instead of waiting until it is what it should be; to surrender the justice of your own cause for mercy; to surrender the priority of your own safety for love – this is to land at God's breast. [206]

Considering the gated communities many of our members live in or the locked doors of our sanctuaries, I don't think that the importance of this call to preachers can be understated. Many preachers have witnessed, participated in, or encouraged the tendency to withdrawal in judgment of the world, a move towards self-righteous finger pointing fueled by anxiety and fear, but Taylor offers language to say something else that seems so much more faithful. As though it were a 209 page interpretation of Peter's dream in Acts, Taylor expounds in brilliant prose around the principle of “What God has made clean you must not call profane;” or maybe more around the story of Jacob, who in exile from the familiar is amazed to find God away from home: “The first time I read Jacob's story in the Bible, I knew it was true whether it ever happened or not [2].”

Just as Jacob found God at Bethel after estrangement from the familiar, Taylor offers preachers language for our faith that is not new as much as it is re-centering. The world is full of God, and we may all know God just as intimately as Francis of Assisi: “He read the world as reverently as he read the Bible. For him, a leper was as kissable as a bishop's ring, a single bird as much a messenger of God as a cloud full of angels” [9].