

Matthew 5: 13-14; 6:5, 19-21, 25-29

Spirit-Filled Living

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The Congregational Church of Needham

Susan

Throughout this month our worship theme has been wholeness. As we have talked about abundant living our topics have included- Integrity, Sabbath, Gratitude and today -Spirituality. Throughout this series we keep checking in with the wisdom of Jesus as we look to him as the prime example of someone who was whole – who figured out to live well. Jesus mastered the game of life.

He shared his wisdom about how to be whole in the famous Sermon on the Mount. He says, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life?

And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

You cannot fake spirituality; that only pushes it further from your grasp. When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Your spirituality is at the core of you. Now in gyms everywhere everyone is strengthening their core. People taking yoga are encouraged to build up their core. We get special exercises to build up the core. Who knew your core get weak or flabby? Who knew that the core was the key to fitness? Today, trainers all tell you that you need a strong core and then everything else will follow. Your abdomen may be your core physically your soul is the core of your being, and the key to wholeness.

Today we will talk about how to focus and strengthen your spirit. We will have three different perspectives on what it means to live full of the spirit. We have tried to offer a variety of expressions of spirituality. I hope that this conversation about spirit-filled living will nurture you on your journey of faith.

Elizabeth

Theoretical physicist Lawrence M. Krauss says:

“Every atom in your body came from a star that exploded. And the atoms in your left hand probably came from a different star than your right hand. It really is the most poetic thing I know about physics: you are all stardust”

You are all stardust.

Sparkling and radiant.

Blessed.

Can you see the stardust in each other?

Can you see it in yourself?

Can you see it all around you?

Learning to see the sacred in ourselves, each other and the world around us is the aim of spiritual practices from every world religion.

We strive to open our eyes to see that everything is a miracle.

That there are ordinary miracles happening each moment.

That God surrounds us, working beauty and wonder right in front of our eyes.

This search to see through a spiritual lens has been called by many names by sages and wise teachers throughout history and around the world.

“Both Christians and Plato named it the ‘eye of the soul.’

For Sufis it is ‘the eye of the heart,’ and for Taoists the ‘eye of Tao’ or the ‘inner eye.’”

It takes practice to open these eyes.

It takes honing our awareness and intention.

And it’s easy to forget when lost in our everyday chores and work and obligations.

It’s much easier to take the sun rising each day for granted.

And easier to miss all of the divinity in each person you pass on the road.

Especially the ones that cut you off in traffic.

Or that sit with a cup and a cardboard sign, hunched over and almost invisible from years of being ignored.

But the spiritual quest is to see that everyone is sacred.

Every being, every life is a miracle.

Every one of us is a child of God.

A sibling with one another.

A potential teacher of some great lesson that we must learn.

A gift if we will open ourselves to each other.

Isn’t it magical how we can create life?

Incredible how some of us can grow it inside us and deliver it into the world.

Astonishing that our cells regenerate, healing our wounds, attacking unfriendly foreign bodies.

As we discover more and more about how our bodies and brains function, I develop more of a sense of wonder at how complex and intricate our systems are.

Growing scientific knowledge helps me to see God in all of creation.

And every time I have the honor of being present with someone at the end of their life, when their presence leaves their physical form, I cannot help but be awe struck by this existence, by the mysteries beyond our comprehension.

How can I not be filled with the spirit?

Shout alleluia

Singing and rejoicing

For this incredible place and this gift of life

This breath that I am taking this moment

The way it fills me

The way community fills me

The way I can feel so embraced by my faith, by my family even when they are far away, by an all surrounding, uplifting Grace

I am awed by the resilience of the human spirit

By the joyful discomfort of growth

By the way that life stretches us, breaks up open and rearranges us into something more beautiful if we allow it

What fills you with the spirit?

When do you find yourself, mouth open with corners slightly creeping up, astonished and blissful, involuntarily overflowing with the spirit of God?

And if you do not approach the world with such reverence, such awe, what is keeping your inner eyes from opening?

How might you open them more fully?

The more you open them, the more you approach your life ready to see God in yourself and others and the world, the more wonder you will find everywhere.

They will become more and more accustomed to being open, to reveling in life's beauty and richness, and they will uncover more and more treasures as they close less and less.

With practice and with intention, by opening your eyes to God, you can begin to see the glorious miraculous nature of everything.

And all life becomes joyful worship.

Bowing to that great mystery that is this breath, and those flowers, the majestic mountains and the deepest canyons.

Always opening our eyes wider so that we can cherish one another and ourselves more fully.

Allowing silence and stillness to transform us.

Can you see it?

How can I not rejoice in the wonder that I have found?

And Revel in the great mystery and majesty of this world

Open your inner eye

See how everyone around you sparkles

How they are made of stardust

And how you, too, shine like the sun

May it be so. Amen.

Peggy

Good morning. I bring you greetings from the Hingham Congregational Church. They were gracious enough to allow me the time to come and worship with all of you and my family and you were generous in allowing Heike to go and fill in for me in Hingham. I want to thank you for that.

When I was an undergraduate, I learned in Psych 101 that chickens are born with an imprint of what the shadow of a chicken hawk looks like. If you take newly hatched chicks and project the shadow of a hawk on the ground they will run in fear. Their mothers do not have to teach them this...they just know it.

We learned this as we were trying to understand what, if anything, human infants are born with. Do we come equipped with “inborn” knowledge was our question. The answer is no. We understand human babies as blank slates...no a priori knowledge. They are sort of like blank CD discs, empty but ready to accept all sorts of data.

So, we are born blank slates...this is what I learned. Then several years ago I read a story in Christian Century that challenged what I had been taught. A young couple had one child, who was about 4 when her mother got pregnant again. The little girl was very excited about getting a new sibling and was thrilled the day that her parents brought her new sister home. After looking at the baby and holding, all under the watchful eyes of her parents the now 5 year old said she wanted some “alone time” with her sister. Her parents were surprised and a bit apprehensive. Why did she want to be alone with her new sister? Could she be feeling jealous? Then they remembered they had a baby monitor so they said ok. They put the baby in her crib, left the room and huddled together over the monitor so that they could respond if needed. They heard their 5 year old daughter walk across the room and then they heard her whispering, in a loud 5 year old way, to her sister... “Lucy...I forgot what God looks like. Tell me what God looks like!”

It is a cute story isn't it? It is adorable. It also got me thinking. Maybe we aren't born as a blank slate. Maybe we do have some pre-programmed information. Perhaps that is what the soul is...maybe it is a maker's mark...like the imprint that potters put on their creations that indicates 'so and so' made this. Maybe we are born with knowledge of the connection between ourselves and our Creator.

I believe that this is true...and that over time we forget that connection. As we gain in “knowledge” we lose the understanding of our Maker. As we fill our heads with all sorts of useful and important facts, we put aside the fact of our creation and our connection to our creator.

Then, in adulthood, we begin to recognize that something is missing. I don't know about you but I spent a good number of years wondering what the nagging, aching, sense of loss was. Perhaps this did not happen to you, but I tried to fill that space with stuff...cars, a house, pets, friends, vacations, you name it. But nothing ever truly fit. Before long the ache would return. And that is when I began a spiritual journey.

We think of the spiritual disciplines and practices as prayer, meditation, and contemplation and I tried them all. And wonder of wonder they made a difference in my life. I felt a connection with God that lessened the ache. Interestingly, my growing connection to and with God affected my relationships with friends and family. It seemed to help me be more open and generous and compassionate. And as I increased in these areas I realized that these changes were fueling a deepening in my relationship with God because my ability to be open, honest, and humble with God was growing.

It seems that prayer, meditation, and contemplation are not the only spiritual practices. To this list I now add, compassion, generosity, and encouragement for when I practice these, my spiritual life is enriched.

Now I understand that living a spiritual life is a dance. It is about building relationships. Jesus said, “love the Lord with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.” It involves dancing with God and dancing with you. When I dance with God I learn how to better dance with you and when I dance with you I learn how to better dance with God. It is a never ending loop...like one of those Mobius bracelets that is a never ending single sided circle. Each dance nourishes and strengthens the next dance and after a while the dances merge into one and it becomes impossible to say who I am dancing with for you and God blend and become one.

For me, this is living a spiritual life.

Nancy

A great teacher once wrote words of mystic praise to the holy when he said:

In the circle of my soul

is a little postern gate,

whereat, when I enter,

I am in the presence of God.

In a moment, in the turning of a thought,

I am where God is...

The world of men is made of jangling noises,

but with God it is a great silence.

But that silence is a melody,

sweet as the contentment of love,

thrilling as a touch of flame....

When I enter into God

all life has a meaning

Without asking I know,

my desires are even now fulfilled

The fever is gone

In the great quiet of God

My troubles are but pebbles in the road

my joys are like the everlasting hills

so it is when I step through the gate of prayer

from time into eternity

Big things become small and small things become great.

The near becomes far and the future is near.

The lowly and despised is shot through with glory...

Because I went to seminary, like so many of us in our family, I've studied the great mystics of the Christian tradition, and you would think, wouldn't you, that such words of rapture at the deep spiritual presence of the divine would come from the pen of a sage, perhaps from within the quiet confines of some ancient monastery. But the touch me and challenge me precisely because they do not. In fact, those words were written by Walter Rauschenbusch - I know, it's not like that's some rock star whose name you all recognize, but in minister circles he's the coolest. Rauschenbusch was the great protestant theologian, rabble rouser and founder of the radical 19th century movement toward congregationally based social justice that came to be known as the Social Gospel. The reason social justice or social concerns committees exist in mainline protestant congregations exist is because this guy said they should.

Those words of deep spiritual faith and solace were written by the man who said that our congregations exist so that we might bring to pass the kingdom of God right here on earth. Our churches, the church more globally, exists so that right here in our own communities, among the brokenhearted and the weary, the hungry and the lost, the kingdom of God on earth might be made real.

Otherworldly concerns, to him, were totally secondary. He said that this world demands a deeper justice, and thus spirituality simply for self-fulfillment or the assurance of a happy afterlife wasn't the point. You can't preach to the deep peace of the soul on Sunday morning and then walk back out blindly to a broken world on Sunday night and think you've done your job, he said.

And yet when, near the end of his life, when he came to write of his faith, what emerged was not a protest anthem, but a love poem to God. And I think what is magical in this is the fact that social justice, the bringing of the kingdom of God on earth, it doesn't have to be utterly separate from our spirituality. The guy who invented congregational social justice in the modern age prayed with devotion and humility and grace. Which means that we might aspire to do the same - pray and do, protest and sing hymns of praise. In truth, it is our spirituality, our belief that what we do is held in the arms of the one who loves us, that guides us and grounds in our work as kingdom-builders. You can't pull one apart from another, can't do church without doing justice, can't love God without challenging hate.

In my ministry, I don't think I've ever done anything more spiritual than the kind of social justice work that brings congregations and people together. The synergy of impassioned and faithful people both praying and working toward one goal is like nothing I've ever known. And that doesn't just mean my church working together or the congregational church of Needham working together, but whole communities working together across theological and cultural boundaries to make a way forward as a whole.

This kind of social justice fills the soul and it feeds the world. Both, not either, but both, inextricably interwoven. The county where I served until this fall, in the Northern Virginia Suburbs of Washington DC, was one of the regions in this nation hardest hit by the foreclosure crisis and the collapse of the housing market. In

one largely minority neighborhood a half mile from my church, almost 40% of the homes went into foreclosure from the span of 2007-2010 alone, leaving homeownership rates plummeting and nearly every single home underwater. We were bleeding wealth from our community and our people were crying out to do something, anything, together.

And we fought back, not in some condescending upper middle class way for the underprivileged, but together, led by those people of faith among us whose homes were at stake. 47 congregations coalesced around the issue and said that our faith called us to witness. And we sat down in rooms of power with CEOs and bank executives and senators and mucky mucks of every stripe. And over persistent years of labor and failure and love and exhaustion and prayer, we won millions of dollars from three of this nation's largest banks in order to rebuild homeownership in our community.

Because our little corner of the kingdom of God needed us, and we needed each other, our prayers grew arms and legs and walked and moved, people have homes today because of that spirit and my soul is filled with love of God and love of my neighbor. I have never worked so hard or been so blessed by this work of ministry and I'll always be grateful for it.

Spirituality isn't safe. It isn't contained in the walls of the church. And picket lines, well I've found that without prayers they just don't last. Without the gifts of the spirit social justice grows shallow and blows away. Then our efforts are not only empty, they're ineffective. Conversely – without the imperative to turn our prayers into action, spirituality is so much navel gazing.

This is the world that has been given to us, this God whose calm soul pulls us toward her blesses it and blesses us, each and every one, and the life of the spirit calls us inward even as it pulls us out, into the waiting world.

Conclusion –

You are the light of the world. Your light, your essence, your soul is at the heart of who you are.

You were born with God's imprint an instinct for the divine, the spiritual side of life.

Jesus says you no one can have it all. That is an illusion. So, each day when you awaken and God stoops to blow on the tinder of your soul and bring the flame in you to life you have another chance to let your light shine. Be wise about what you seek each day. Strive first for the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness, and then everything else will follow.

Prayer

Holy One, we thank you for traditions that give life rhythm and structure – for family meals, holiday preparations, for trips together and birthday cakes, and anniversaries of milestones in our lives. We praise you for all those times when we have been surprised by grace as we discovered a tradition long forgotten, and renewed it. We thank you for those times when we found a tradition that satisfied us in ways we could not explain or explain away.

We praise you too for this land of ours – so new to us, still searching for our traditions even as we are surprised and enriched by the stream of immigrants who bring new holidays and habits with them. Into this stream of life where we swim and make our way, we ask you to help us to nurture some strong rituals that will remind us that we are grounded.

We thank you O God for the church- that spiritual haven which bring us home to our best values, our highest aspirations, our deepest needs. We thank you that here where we find human community and the opportunity to build a place of wholeness – where integrity is our standard, Sabbath is our discipline, gratitude is daily practice.

We pray for the world. For the people of Israel and Gaza. For the men and women of Syria,,, for refugees in Jordan and the West Bank. Words are not enough so we won't pretend.