

CHRIST IN US
Sermon on October 23, 2022
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As many of you know, I retired as a Pastor Associate over a year ago, but didn't go away, and here I am in the pulpit. One last time. We are taught in seminary to avoid autobiography, but I see this as an opportunity to share my experience and discoveries--in part because you could be wondering if she's retired why is she still here, and in part because I'm hoping what I say will resonate with you, or at least some of you.

The story has two parts: The experiential, which is Centering Prayer and Contemplative Awareness, and the Theoretical or the intellectual building blocks that make up how we see the world.

I confess it is a little worrying to me is that this experience is going to be such an offroad from the usual sermon, some of you will feel like you signed up for a class on the History of England and by mistake ended up in a class on the care and feeding of exotic fruit trees. Well, here we go... .

PART ONE

About six years ago I started a Centering Prayer Group here at First Pres. because I wanted the company and the comfort of shared silence. Centering prayer is rooted in the words of Psalm 46: "Be Still and Know that I Am God." But the knowing is not with the thinking mind. The purpose is to become intimately aware of the relationship between oneself and the Divine Indwelling; and to realize that we are not separate from God, that God is always with us, whether we know it or not. This

practice is called Contemplation, where we are cultivating an awareness of our oneness with the Mystery of God and in daily life.

In that silence we have more and more moments of releasing our normal preoccupations—plans, ideas, desires, fears, emotions— and to simply rest in God. In this spacious surrender of thoughts and feelings, God’s wisdom and love begins to penetrate our ordinary consciousness.

There are two crucial aspects of Centering Prayer—the growing experience of intimacy with the Divine, as well as an increasing awareness of personal obstacles that block that intimacy. Habits and assumptions of the False Self start to give way to the subtle whisperings of True Self. As the Centering Prayer manual states, *The fruits of the practice begin to manifest in your daily life. These gifts are not actions you do, but expressions of what you are becoming through transformation.*

We are promised that this Centering capacity and intimacy with God is available to all human beings We are promised that the Divine is already present within us waiting to reveal itself in us. But it’s not so simple!

MUFFIN BAGEL SLIDE

No wonder we laugh. Isn’t it true that genuine laughter often comes out of frustration and pain. We all feel like the bagel when we first sit down for 20 minutes to “Center.”

But God who has initiated the desire also keeps us coming back, until gradually, maybe very gradually, an inner sense of loving accompaniment starts to grow.

Nobody is a bagel!

PART TWO

WORLD VIEWS SLIDE

The World Views Chart on the screen is something I created as a teacher in the Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction for SFTS back in 2000. It was our effort to make students aware that our World View, or our often unconscious assumptions about what is Real, affects how we experience everything in life. It is the lens we use to perceive reality.

RATIONAL MATERIAL

In the Rational/Material mindset, Reality consists only of what the mind can understand. That is what you perceive with the senses—what you can see, hear, touch, taste, and what you can prove with reason and logic. Everything else is unreal, and actually doesn't exist. However, few people are dogmatic rationalists really, I think, because Mystery, Beauty, Surprise happen to everyone.

We used to say it's the world of Science versus Religion, but that's not true anymore since Physicists have run up against Mystery at the Quantum level.

What is life like for the person who lives in a world with no Spirit, no God?

It seems to me that most of us spend our high school and college years in this mind-set. I didn't think about God in high school and college at all. It isn't the right time. It's time to find our strengths, learn to socialize, discover what's going on in our corner of the world. Our time to do what Jesus did—"to increase in wisdom, in stature and in favor with God and man."

At some point, some of us find this is too hard, too confusing, too scary. We realize we can't do this life all alone. Or maybe something happens—our spouse wants to go to church (#2). Or maybe a crisis catapults you into seeking your soul in an Indian Ashram# (#3) or you join in a Centering Prayer Group (#3). Or more likely, you just have a feeling there's something missing, and you start to seek.

THE OUT THERE GOD.

This was the awareness of faithful churchgoers in the 40s, 50s, and on into this century. There's still the rational/material box, but with all the beautiful gifts of church -- music, sermons, Bible Study, communion and community. There is the promise God's love in Christ, and valuable ethical guidance from Jesus' teachings.

God might enter our lives on occasions like birth, death, marriage, times of personal crisis, but there was no awareness of God's ongoing residence in our souls.

And we Presbyterians at least, were not aware of The EXPERIENCE of spirituality. The head was informed but heart was not awakened. I had never heard of contemplation, of the indwelling Christ, even spirituality, in my church in East Tennessee. It was more about what a person should and should not do to be OK with God. You could feel anxious and alone, trying to find a resting place in an ambiguous world—part loving, part indifferent and cruel.

THE WORLD VIEWS: MODELS OF REALITY SLIDE

When I created this drawing 22 years ago, I liked the idea of an eternally present and universal God and believed it to be true, but actually had no felt experience of it. The notion that Divine Mystery inhabits and enfolds the entire universe was more an abstraction than a lived experience. It

wasn't until I recently spent several years reading and working with my teachers of Eastern non-duality, that a shift in my world view began to penetrate. Not a shift really, but a slow-rolling Earthquake. Intense reading and listening to video teachings opened me to the possibility that I am not just me but really am defined by something much bigger than me. The East calls that "something" Universal Wisdom or Infinite Love. And they say because this Wisdom and Love is Universal, we are all—every one of us—in this together. There really is no separation. Both of those convictions were sweet music to me—I loved to know that all humanity, really all of life is connected by this Universal Presence of Wisdom and Love.

It's important to note that our idea of "God" is different in each one of these World Views: In the first one, it's some version of a negative—God is a judge, and old man, a tyrant. In the second, God is a benevolent creator, over-seer, distant beloved. In the third, part of the earthquake is the realization that God is more immense, more in love with us, more wise, more creative, more Present. In contrast to the Out There God, this is God in All of us. All living beings. All of nature—Everything.

Back to my retirement:

At this point, I was already nearly 20 years beyond retirement age, and it felt like time. I wanted to devote myself to investigating to this new World View and my own personal experience. I had stepped away from reading scripture and by that time was sure that God was the Source and Aliveness of everyone and everything. But-- Jesus and Christ....not sure.

I had been, like a lot of liberal Protestants, fickle in my relationship with Jesus. The Evangelical Jesus was an embarrassment to me, to many of us. You know, the "get right with Jesus" stuff, "the Jesus saves" signs. Among friends, our custom was to talk about Spirit, but not about Christ or Jesus.

Without getting too far into the weeds, I can say that there came a time when I felt alone and bereft. There was no sense of personal connection with this Universal Consciousness. It was too abstract. I was missing the relationship, the warmth, the exchange of love. I knew I had to return to my Christian roots. But differently.

And the key was discovering Christ IS that Universal Consciousness and Infinite Love but in the form of the Risen Jesus. Still unfathomable, but also personal. I'm still very much a work in progress and always will be, but this reconnection seems like pure Grace.

Rather than separating us out from the great world religions, we understand that the Eternal, Cosmic Christ is our Christian name for what my Eastern teachers called Universal Consciousness, or the Hindus, Atman, the Buddhists Buddha nature , the Jews Shekhinah.

One of the turning points for me was when my friend, Ruah Bull, called from Mercy Center saying "You've got to read Vince Pizzuto's new book. He says we are all "other Christs." He writes:

"We are other Christs. . .The incarnation does not end with the death of Jesus. Having taken upon himself human nature and exchanged with us his own divine nature, Christ continues to be embodied in us now even now as risen Lord." He adds, "What good is an intellectual abstraction, if I do not realize that I myself embody Christ in the world."

It was that relationship that I—a cradle Christian—had been missing!

It is this Christ who is speaking to us in John's gospel. He says, In John, chapter 15,

“I am the vine and my father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”

Abide in me as I abide in you.

And from The Message: “Live in me. Make your home in me, just as I do in you.”

John 15 has always been my favorite gospel passage. And yet I had to spend time in a Hindu/Buddhist world to really hear it. Abide doesn't mean “read about me.”

It means Live in me, find your life in me.

I'll close with a quote that Lorna sent me from Richard Rohr.

“Indeed, contemplation, is a very dangerous activity. It not only brings us face to face with God; it brings us, as well, face to face with the world, and then it brings us face to face with the self; and then, of course, something must be done . . . because nothing stays the same once we have found the God within. “