

## *Open and Relational*

One of the ways people in this church poke fun at me is because of my insistence that everyone should have “a daily spiritual practice.”

I admit: the poke is well-deserved.

I have said the phrase so often and in so many contexts that now, when I am teaching, people will hear that I am about to say the phrase and they will complete it for me. It is as if they are saying, “Yeah, yeah, we know - everyone should have a daily spiritual practice.”

You might as well join the others who tease me about this. So, let’s practice. I will say, “It is important that everyone have . . .” and you will complete the sentence by saying, “have a daily spiritual practice.”

Ready?

It is important that every have - “a daily spiritual practice.”

Fair warning: I will not relent on this.

There is no way to move to higher levels of spiritual, psychological, cognitive, or moral development without having - a daily spiritual practice. No one who aspires, for example, to become a concert pianist would expect to gain that goal by merely attending a lesson once a week.

Some of you are aware, and the rest of you are about to find out, that I am a magician. I got admitted to the International Brotherhood of Magicians when I was a senior in the university and have maintained my membership in that organization ever since. I paid for much of my seminary education by putting on magic shows.

Recently I purchased a new magic effect.

When I got the instructions I saw the moves required and quickly learned that I couldn't do them. The manipulation and misdirection required were not within my grasp.

So, I got a full time professional magician buddy of mine who lives here in Houston to give me a lesson. What looked so clumsy in my hands, when he did it, looked like he was flicking a piece of lint off of his clothing. He showed me what I was doing wrong and patiently taught me the moves. After about ten tries, the moves clicked together. He made me do the same moves about fifteen or twenty times. Before he left he said, "Bill, this is a really good card effect. You can do it. I think you will enjoy performing it and people will enjoy seeing it. If you practice this one move a hour a day for the next two or three weeks, you'll probably have it down. Just remember, don't look at your hands while you do it."

An hour a day for two or three weeks for one card effect. And, make it look effortless.

How much more practice does it take on a daily basis to do what Jesus asks in the Gospel reading for today - that we abide in him?

It is important that we have - a daily spiritual practice.

After first being convinced of this myself decades ago, there didn't seem to be much available at the time focused on Christian meditation. Thomas Merton was yet to arrive on the scene as were people like Richard Rohr and James Finley. A spiritual director suggested I read *The Cloud of Unknowing* but he might as well have handed me a book in Swahili.

After about two decades of feeling my own way along in this, I turned to Buddhism. They know about spiritual practice. I took a training in a particular form of meditation from Jack Kornfield. Kornfield is both a clinical psychologist and a highly regarded, widely published Buddhist teacher. You can Google him and buy his books.

At the end of the course his advice to each of us was that we commit to have a meditation practice of an hour a day. Well, you can imagine the pushback he got about that! We said aloud to him some version of what each of you is thinking right now:

“I don’t have time for that.” And, it was true. We were all young professionals with young families. No time.

He stopped what he was teaching and asked one of the students, “What time do you have?” The student looked at his watch and told Kornfield. He looked at his own watch and replied, “Huh, that’s exactly the same time I have.” His implication was that we all had the same twenty-four hours to spend as we chose.

When this also got complaints, he said, “Okay. I know a way that almost all of you can add an additional hour to your day.” Notebooks and pens came out. We were going to write this down. Who wouldn’t want an extra hour or so a day? He said, “Unplug your television sets.”

This, by the way, was way before there was e-mail, iPhones, and Facebook. My mother’s response to that would have been that he had gone from preaching to meddling.

I’ll sometimes ask people, “How is your daily spiritual practice going?” Answers are varied, of course, but often it is, “Well, I tried it for a while but didn’t get anything out of it so I quit?”

Think an aspiring pianist would quit after four or five days? And still expect to be a concert pianist. Think I can learn that card effect just by knowing about the importance of practicing

it? My point is that none of us can abide in Jesus, not really, unless we have - a daily spiritual practice.

Jesus said, “Abide with me.”

He didn't say, “Thanks for believing in me. You go and have a nice life now, okay? If you need anything, reach out and let me know. If I'm not too busy helping a sports team make a winning score or helping someone find a parking space because they are late to work, I'll see what I can do.”

He didn't say that or anything like that - ever. What he said was, “Abide in me and let me abide in you and let this abiding change you and then you change the world.”

When we do this we discover that we are involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and a power that we cannot control. It controls us.

One of the ways to abide in Jesus is by having - a daily spiritual practice.

I have adapted and adopted for my own daily use what is known as the St. Patrick's Prayer:

Jesus with me, Jesus within me.

Jesus behind me, Jesus before me.

Jesus beside me, Jesus to win me.

Jesus to comfort and restore me.

Jesus beneath me, Jesus above me.

Jesus in quiet, Jesus in danger.

Jesus in the hearts of all who love me.

Jesus in the mouth of friend and stranger.

That's a poetic-prayerful way of abiding in Jesus.

Now, suppose one day you decide to have a daily practice and that on this particular day it consists of entering a time of silence with the desire simply to abide in the Mystery from which Jesus derived his identity. And further suppose that during this time you are gifted with sight so that when you opened your eyes you would see as Jesus saw. Such seeing was what he seemed to want so much from people who followed him. He complained about us, "You have eyes but you don't see." So, if we saw as Jesus saw, what would you see? If we abided in Jesus in such a way that Jesus abided in us in such a way that we would come to see as Jesus saw, what would we see?

If we saw as Jesus saw, when we opened our eyes, we would see God.

Jesus saw God in everything.

Jesus saw God in every one.

Abiding in Jesus is not the result of simply believing in some fundamentalist formula. It is also not some privileged position that serves only to get us to heaven after we are done here. It is simply what is required if we want to claim that we are followers of his. The proof that we are abiding in Jesus is the fruit that we produce. That is, in how we behave. What Jesus saw and what we are to produce is a world where diverse and divided people are brought together.

God knows that this country - yes, the world, too, but this country right now for sure - needs people who, because they abide in Jesus share this vision and commitment.

The central conflict right now in this country is whether human beings from different races, nations, classes, and gender orientations can live together peaceably and share equal power in a democratic American future. The answer is either “yes” or “no” to that and each of us must make a choice.

The strategy of white Christian nationalism is to prevent our changing demography from changing our democracy. It is contrary in every way to the values of Jesus. Jesus taught and lived an open and relational spiritual path. I love and quote frequently theologian Sara Grant’s beautiful lines: “It isn’t the way because Jesus walked it. Jesus walked it because it is the way.”

I remember when Bill Clinton had his illicit relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Evangelical Christians were up in arms. Now many of them embrace a thrice-divorced, serial-lying, multiple-indicted person saying that they are doing so in order to conserve their religion.

The best way to conserve the religion of Jesus is not to be that kind of conservative. Christian nationalism is a distorted view of Christianity that sanctifies hatred and fear. Christian nationalism has given us a political situation that has us as a nation on a trajectory of fear, leading to hate, which results in violence. God deserves better than that. And, while I'm at it: a real Christian billionaire would give Bibles away. Not sell them for \$60 bucks. God deserves better.

Jesus has fallen into the wrong hands.

In a democracy, citizens agree and disagree, collaborate and compete, but we must still be neighbors and not enemies. Jesus' core teaching was: Love God. Love your neighbor. Abide in me.

I love a phrase I stole years ago from a true evangelical, Jim Wallace. He said, "Don't go right. Don't go left. Go deep." In order to do that, you have to have - a daily spiritual practice.

You might ask, "Exactly what is 'a spiritual practice?'"



A spiritual practice is that which we habitually enter into with our whole heart in which we assume the inner stance that offers the least resistance to our being overtaken by the experience of Sacred Mystery which we are powerless by our own efforts to obtain.

That sounds complicated but it isn't.

For example, two people in love cannot force the loving encounter to happen between them but they can create the circumstances or container that provides the least resistance to that experience happening.

The poet cannot force a poem to come but she or he can put herself or himself in the place that provides the least resistance for the poetic experience to happen.

A spiritual practice is that which keeps you from going right or left but takes you deep.

Someone one said after one of my talks, "Your teachings are radical." Thank you for the compliment. Radical means root. It is the word we get the word "radish" from. I am not trying to create a new religion. I'm pleading that we probe the depth dimension of the religion we have - God knows we already have enough religions on the planet.

I hope I am following the model of Jesus. He didn't want to start a new religion but for people to plumb the depth of the Jewish religion they had. If you dig deep enough right where you are and in your self, you will find a religious core.

A spiritual practice is work, sometimes even arduous, but it isn't a burden because of the joy and satisfaction you get from being intimately, and with awareness, connected to the Source of your true identity.

A spiritual practice in action looks like the first reading you heard from the book of Acts.

In the church of my youth this story about Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch - what a eunuch was was never explained to us - was used to teach that we were to persuade anyone we encountered to accept Jesus as their personal savior and get baptized so that our status as soul-winners, that is what it was called, could be enhanced and another person could avoid the perils of hell.

What an abuse and misuse of one of the great stories of our tradition.

The story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch is not a "news-at-ten" story. It is a mytho-poetic story about two very different sorts of people. The eunuch is in charge of the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He has traveled all

the way to Jerusalem to worship in a temple he cannot enter. According to Jewish law one who lacks all the necessary male parts cannot enter the assembly of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 23:1)

On the other hand Philip is an apostle, a Jew, and a Middle Easterner. He has no access to the sort of money the eunuch has. Both social custom and Jewish law dictated Philip should have no contact with such.

Philip is practicing what this sermon wants to be about: an open and relational theology. Philip gets into the same vehicle with him. Here you have two men - one Ethiopian, one Middle Eastern, one poor, one rich, one Gentile, one Jew, one a male, one neither male nor female and they dive together into the water which in scripture is, among other things, a symbol for God.

What a picture of what church is to be. We are not merely to admire Jesus or believe in him, we are to abide in him. When we abide in Jesus we don't have to be told what to do or who we are, any more than a leaf needs to be told to belong to its branch. Love flows from the one to the other and back without a thought.

Yet, two thousand years later, some are arguing about whether people who don't fit gender binaries are welcome in the church. Too many churches fail to reflect the rich diversity found in the church in Acts with "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and

residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs” together (Acts 2:9-11). That is from the passage we will hear on Pentecost Sunday in a few weeks. Are they beliefs we behave? Or, are they merely words we mouth?

Jesus says, “Abide in me. Love one another.”

It doesn't take much imagination to speculate what this Jesus would say to and about the people who claim to be marching under his banner today. Our own denomination's clumsiness in dealing with racism and homophobia has been SO harmful to so many. How ironic that an institution that is supposed to reflect the love of God has been so harmful to so many.

Here is what I think Jesus is teaching, promising, offering in this business of abiding in him - which, in my humble opinion, we can only really do by having a daily spiritual practice.

If we abide in him we will recover what was never lost, we will acquire what we already possess, we will remember what we already know, we will become who we already are.

Who could want more?

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