

Sit! Stay! Heal!

One of the major challenges facing religions today, and certainly the various forms of Christianity, is whether religion can adapt to the new realities that we are being confronted with. Can we honor the mysteries of the universe and develop the courage to let go of the requirement of maintaining allegiance to claims and beliefs from two thousand or more years ago?

If these words sounds familiar, it is because I used them in the talk I offered here last week.

To use a phrase from the writings of both the prophet Isaiah and theologian Paul Tillich, the foundations are really being shaken in the Christian tradition for anyone who is paying attention to and taking seriously what is happening today in the various worlds of science.

What gets attention today are things that are happening in the fields of science and technology - like the image of the black hole we've talked about the last two times in here. What doesn't get attention are the new insights and information are happening in the fields of biblical and religious studies. I am trying to keep all of these arenas in mind, at least those I am aware of, as I study for and prepare these talk in here.

I want to ask you to do a little experiment. It is a word/image association test. I'm going to say a word and I want you to notice the very first image that comes to your mind. Okay?

Banana. Hamburger. Airplane. Jesus. God. Church.

(Pictures were then show of these and other things.)

My point is that we have been acculturated to think about religious and spiritual matters in much the same way we think about bananas, hamburgers, airplanes and the like. If we had grown up in another culture, our images of religious and spiritual matters would be very different.

By the way, church looks like you. Not a building. The original meaning of the word "church" is that of a group of people who are called out from or separated from the world. The world doesn't mean what we think of when we use that word, it isn't the globe. The world in this original context meant the Roman Empire which was a world of systemic domination. We'll return to this notion before we are done dealing with the question of Jesus we undertake today.

The new information that is coming to us now about the nature of the cosmos - its origin, age and behavior is causing us to rethink everything. Or, it ought to. How, in the cosmos as we are coming to understand it at the moment, are we to understand things like "God," "worship," "believing in Jesus as your

personal savior” or “that Jesus died to save you from your sins” and other things that are matter-of-fact staples of most Christian theology - whether liberal or conservative? (I dislike either of those labels.) Of course, this is just using lingo from the Christian vocabulary. Other organized religions have their own tasks.

What does it mean to be a person of faith in this particular time?

What, in this particular time, does it mean to be a person of faith?

I think these are two different questions. One emphasizes the matter of faith, tradition, vision. The other time and place.

Last week I talked a bit about a technique that we can use to bring what James Hollis calls “enlarged being” into the world, into our lives and into the lives of others. I called it “the gift of the luminous pause.” Something stimulates us and we have a chance, before we react, of bringing into the moment qualities of compassion and justice - or not.

If we can't transform the moment we are given, we can't hope to transform our own lives or the world. Whether we like this truth or not, we either add to the darkness of indifference and out-and-out evil which surrounds us or we light a candle to see by. We first remove the log from our own eye.

I promise you that any of the three major things I've mentioned so far - being a person of faith, living in this time, being non-judgmental - we could spend many, many hours talking about. However, I am trying to work my way through our current cultural and ecclesiastical chaos by taking guidance from questions asked by Jesus - at least as far as the narrative we have present them. And, the question we are up to involves a matter that I get asked about almost more than any other single thing - at least when I'm talking about what is called "the new cosmology."

The moment someone hears from me or from some other source that, because of what we are learning over the past fifty plus years from science, that there is no "out-there, up-there theistic interventionist God," the first question is, "Well, what about prayer? Do you believe in prayer?"

I want to read to you two versions of sayings from the Jesus narrative. This is from the one we know as Matthew's Gospel. I'll read it in two different translations. If you have been to church three times, you have likely heard this and it has probably caused you consternation of one kind or another.

Here from a more familiar translation:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks

receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Here is the same passage as translated by Eugene Peterson:

Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This isn't a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in. If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust?

If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing. You're at least decent to your own children. So don't you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better?

Now, here is the good news or the bad news about this passage, depending on your point of view. The Jesus scholars say that this is about as Jesus as you can get. This teaching is found in the Gospel of Thomas - three times!, in Matthew, in Luke and because of this it is likely in that very early source of Jesus teaching, a collection that we don't have.

The bread mentioned here is much like pita bread, so it could be confused for a stone. And the fish in question was probably eel-like so that it might be confused with a serpent.

A misunderstanding of this teaching has caused at least two things:

It has caused a multitude of people to give up on any need or desire to explore their identity in terms of Sacred Mystery or Divine Presence. They asked and didn't get. They sought and didn't find. They knocked and experienced no opening.

The other misunderstanding is that some people think that it is God's job, if they play the game right, to make them rich. They have seen these mega-church preachers get wealthy and the thinking is, "If it can happen to them, it can happen to me."

What in the world was Jesus thinking of when he said this? He must have been out of his mind. Well, he was. He was out of a dualistic mind and into a mystical mind.

A lot of people, given our understandings from what is called "the new cosmology" by some, hear a teaching like this and say, "Well, that's nonsense. If there is no 'sky god,' what good is prayer?"

I mentioned to you a few weeks ago a book that came out when I was teaching in seminary. The book was “Honest to God” by John A. T. Robinson. The year was 1963. The book was a bombshell in the Christian religious world. On the cover of the book were the words, “probably the most talked about theological work of the twentieth century.” Why? Because Robinson proposed that we stop using the word “god.” I think a few people tried to take him seriously but it didn’t happen. I think it is a good idea and one I would encourage you to attempt. I think that rather reflexively when we hear or use the word “god” we think of something out there. And, often, not a very friendly something. The “god” who has been given to most people is a being to be feared and not someone to fall in love with or to be close to.

In a similar manner and for similar reasons I think we need to rethink the use of words like “prayer” and “worship” as well.

Keep in mind that the words of Jesus we are looking at today were written down long after his death. It was a most horrible death. Yet, in his life, in his death, in the mystical experiences they had after his death, his followers - at least some of them - said, “In this man we experienced the presence, love and healing power of God.” They remembered his words, teachings, parables and deeds in this light. They clearly heard him say, “Ask, seek, knock.”

Sometimes in my studies about Jesus and of his teachings I come close to seeing him as a standup comedian. He will say, “Being in the realm of reality I’m calling the empire of God, in contrast to the empire of Rome, is incredibly difficult and complex task.” Then, he would wink at his audience and say, “Any child can do it.”

It is in that vein that I want to tell you everything that I currently know about prayer. Ready?

Sit down and shut up.

I learned this from Jim Finley. He said it was just another way of saying the line from the Hebrew Psalms, “Be still and know that I am God.”

All prayer begins in and with our ability to be still, to get the ego out of the way and be patient enough and courageous enough simply to be with the moment. It involves paying attention to what is happening. What is happening? Who is experiencing what is happening? It is a sobering thought to realize that it is possible to live your whole life and never meet and know the person who is living your life.

There are two ways to think about or to undertake walking a religious path or having a spiritual practice.

One is what I call the transactional path. In transactional religion a person secures salvation or security by behaving according to the rules and regulations of the system, by belonging to the right group, by holding to the right beliefs, by practicing the right rituals.

In transactional religion you don't have a relationship with Sacred Mystery. You just have to stay in line and pay your dues one way or another. You don't have to fall in love with God. Or, worse, allow God to love you just exactly the way you are - and by implication to allow God to love other people through you exactly the way they are.

Transactional religion is not a religion of nurture.

This is the argument I have with the Methodists' decision at General Conference about full inclusion of all people at all levels of the church. It isn't a nurturing stance. It is a punitive stance.

The other way to understand embracing a spiritual path is what I will call "relational spirituality."

Actually, I began talking about this last week when I talked about training ourselves to stay present. Something stimulates us and before we react we stay with it.

If I made that sound easy, try it. It is not easy.

Over twenty-five years ago, following the example of my beautiful bride, I chose to go off and take a training in meditation. The training lasted ten days. After we were assigned our places in the meditation hall where the training was to take place, except for appropriate breaks for one and a half meals a day, sleep and potty breaks, we sat in meditation seventeen hours a day. One of the restrictions was that we could not speak a word during this entire ten day period of time. Actually, the restriction was that we were to speak no untruth. You know how easy it is to put a spin on something. It was just easier just to say nothing.

A bell would be rung at the beginning of the meditation period - the longest sit was for two hours. Then, when the time was up, the bell would be sounded. Between these two bell ringings we were to simply pay attention to our breath and be present. I was a horrible failure at this. For days, the only time I was present was when the bell rang. What I got good at was coming back to the moment.

Long before doing this retreat I had encountered Jack Kornfield, a Buddhist teacher and psychologist. He said that training the mind is like training a puppy. Over and over you gently say to the dog: Sit. Stay.

About day four or five I thought of Kornfield's teaching and, with my twisted mind, thought, "Good grief! What am I doing here? My karma has run over my dogma."

I have a dog - or, it has me. Depending on one's point of view. In the transaction of getting this dog from the breeder into my life, the vet I took the dog to for a wellness checkup said, "If you get this dog, I suggest that you hire a trainer to help you get started on the right foot together." She had found out that I hadn't had a dog since childhood. So, I engaged a trainer - actually a husband and wife team. They taught me how to get Jett to sit and to stay.

One of the most important things they taught me was not to ever punish the dog for negative behavior. They said, "Any interaction you have with the dog is reinforcement. Ignore what you don't like. Reward the daylights out of what you do."

"In time the dog will actually come to understand words. While he is doing that he will first of all understand feelings, emotions, moods." Those of you who have dogs know: it is uncanny what they pick up.

Apply that to yourself. When you invite yourself to sit, to stay; notice how you say it. Sternly? Angrily? Or, with compassion? With gentleness?

So what I learned at the ten-day meditation training was not about bring present. At least not at first. What I learned was about returning to be present over and over and over. One of the things you learn is that we are almost never present.

You don't take up this practice with the goal of being good at it. You take it up to learn how to be present to whatever is there. Calmness. Agitation. Happiness. Anger. Joy. Sadness. Whatever. And, to be able to look at it and say, "No big deal." We are training in being open. Receptive.

I promise you, the key to a fuller and happier life is training to come back again and again and again and again to be. To be here. To be here now. Isn't that what we are asking for? Isn't that what we are seeking? Isn't that what we are trying to find an opening into? So - sit, stay, heal.

Jesus did not teach or practice a transactional religion. He was all about relationship. First, with one's Self. "Get the log out of your own eye."

This is what begins to prepare us to be open to touching and being touched by the Mystery.

I think that one of the solid things we can say that we know about the historical Jesus is that he had a spiritual practice. He prayed. Actually, he did more than that. He was part of a Jewish mystical movement that began with Elijah and continued

through John the Immerser. He took his life and lifted it, or placed it, into Divine Presence. “Abba, into your hands I commit myself.”

This business of non-duality is not just difficult to talk about, to communicate. It is impossible. Non-dual mind, according to Jim Finley, communicates itself. We can just present a context in which that can happen.

Our spiritual practices don't make things happen. Yet, our behaviors reveal what our true beliefs are.

I have a cartoon showing a bunch of native people performing a “rain dance.” Only one of them is carrying an umbrella. It says tons.

Do we, by our beliefs, make it rain? Our beliefs lead to our behaviors and our behaviors have consequences. Many respected voices are saying that human behavior is having an effect on the climate conditions on this globe. If this is true we do, in a sense by the behaviors that grow out of our beliefs, make it rain. We don't have to think of it globally. We can think of it personally. Here is a true story:

Max owned a thriving sandwich shop in a Chicago neighborhood. There were almost always people waiting in line to eat at his little shop. He gave away free pickles, free potato

chips, sometimes a free soft drink, and his sandwiches were famous for being overstuffed.

One day his son, who lived in another city, came to visit to Chicago to visit his dad. They had a good visit, but as the son was leaving, he told his father, “Since I’ve been here, I’ve been observing how you run the sandwich shop, and I have to tell you for your own good that you’re making a big mistake giving away all those extras. The country’s economy is in bad shape. People are out of work, and they have less money to spend. If you don’t cut back on the free items and on your portion sizes, you’ll be in a bad way before long too.” His father was amazed and thanked his son, and told him he would consider his advice.

After his son left, Max followed his son’s advice. He stopped giving away free items and he cut back on the generous portions of food in his sandwiches. Before long, after many of his disappointed customers had stopped coming, he wrote to his son: “You were right! The country’s economy is in bad shape, and I’m experiencing the results of it right here in my sandwich shop.”

The poor economy that the Max’s son saw all around him was real. Despite the poor economy, though, the father had been running a successful sandwich shop. He didn’t realize that times were hard, that many people were out of work, and that money was scarce. He was treating everyone with great generosity and he was reaping the rewards that such actions always bring: a

positive, generous outpouring of good things. But after his son told him about the “bad shape” of the country was in, he began to act as if it were so, bringing about the only possible result - a negative, fearful, ungenerous experience of life, an experience that he believed was “out there.” Was it “out there”?

The answers aren't out there. They are in us. We must keep this in mind when we Ask. Seek. Knock.

You can use another word for it if you want, another word than “prayer” I mean: meditation, contemplation, centering prayer. I'm suggesting that whatever word you use for it, prayer is one of the mystical rituals we can use that can contribute to our healing, to the healing of the human condition. If, of course, we don't know what the human condition is and where it comes from, we are going to have a skewed notion of prayer. We will either discount it entirely or misuse it in an effort to deal with some magical hope or fear. We will talk more about the human condition next week in a talk I'm calling “Healing the Division - Within and Without.”

Over these past years I have come to believe that most of all the problems in the world, especially those caused by religion, are the result of our getting two things wrong:

First, the belief that humans are flawed. There is nothing wrong with you. You are just fine just the way you are. Are you willing to allow that to be true?

Second, God isn't "out there." We are in God, or Sacred Mystery, and Sacred Mystery is in us. Are you willing for that to be true?

Whatever else it is, prayer is an expression of the relationship we have with Divine Presence. We can't relate to something out there or something we are afraid of. And, we can't have a reciprocal relationship with anyone if we feel unworthy.

Create a space in your life where you can sit, stay, heal. Then, report back to me in ninety days how it is going.

Dag Hammarskjöld in his wonderful collection of brief writings called "Markings," wrote: "God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason."

This practice has to be, of course, informed by decent theology. That is what I am attempting to contribute to in these talks.

What do you get when you squeeze an orange?

Orange juice.

Nothing is going to come out of that orange that isn't already there.

Life is going to squeeze you. Give you a bear hug of love or break your back.

Right now is the time to think about and deal with what is inside.

I sometimes have a very ambivalent feeling about these talks I offer here. I want them to be useful to you - and memorable. Something you can both hang on to and find useful. That's true.

On the other hand, I don't want them to be so memorable that I can't get away with repeating things from time to time.

I am a great lover of Zen teaching stories. Here is one that so fits this topic of prayer that I just wanted to tell it to you even though I've told it before. But that was seven years ago. Most people can't remember what they had for breakfast seven days ago.

A group of devotees invited a master of meditation to the house of one of them to give them instructions. He told them that they must strive to acquire freedom from strong reactions to the events of daily life, an attitude of habitual reverence, and the regular practice of a method of meditation which he explained in

detail. The object was to realize the one divine life pervading all things.

He said to them, “In the end you must come to this realization not only in the meditation period, but in daily life. The whole process is like filling a sieve with water.”

He bowed and left.

The little group saw him off, and then one of them turned to the others, fuming. “That’s as good as telling us that we’ll never be able to do it. Filling a sieve with water, I ask you! That’s what happens now, isn’t it? At least, it does with me. I go to hear a sermon, or I pray, or I read one of the holy books, or I help the neighbors with their children and offer the merit to God, or something like that, and I feel uplifted. My character does improve for a bit – I don’t get so impatient, and I don’t gossip so much. But it soon drops off, and I’m just like I was before. It is like water in a sieve, he’s right there. But now he is telling us this is all we shall ever be able to do.”

They pondered on the image of the sieve without getting any solution that satisfied them all. Some thought he was telling them that people like them could expect only a temporary periods of being uplifted. Some thought he was just laughing at them. Some thought he was telling them there was something fundamentally wrong with their ideas. Others thought he might be referring to something in the classics that he had expected

them to know. They looked for references to a sieve in their sacred books without success.

In the end the whole thing dropped away from all of them except one woman, who made up her mind to see the master.

He gave her a sieve and a cup, and they went to the nearby seashore, where they stood on a rock with waves breaking around them.

“Show me how you fill the sieve with water,” he said.

She bent down, held the sieve in one hand, and scooped the water into it with the cup. It barely appeared at the bottom of the sieve and then was gone.

“It’s just like that with spiritual practice too,” he said, “while one stands on the rock of I-ness and tries to ladle the divine realization into it. That’s not the way to fill the sieve with water or the self with divine life.”

“How do you do it then?” she asked.

He took the sieve from her hand and threw it far out into the sea, where it floated momentarily and then sank.

“Now it’s full of water,” he said, “and it will remain so. That is the way to fill it with water, and it’s the way to do spiritual

practice. It's not ladling little cupfuls of divine life into yourself, but throwing yourself far out into the sea of divine life."

I think that's where I'll leave the matter of prayer. Leave it right here in the face of the mystery. After all, life is complicated enough as it is.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.