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The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love.

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God has chosen to make it impossible for God to be God without you.

That's the entire talk for today in fourteen words. So, if you want to take a nap or text your way through this time, that's it.

God has chosen to make it impossible for God to be God without you.

This is not, likely, what you were taught growing up in church; if you had religious instruction.

It may not even be what you currently believe.

It is, however, what I have come to believe is the truth about us and our relationship to the Sacred and what I would like, as an objective of this time together today, to convince you is true.

God has chosen to make it impossible for God to be God without you.

It is important for us to embrace this for at least two reasons.

First, failing to do so robs us of true courage, fearlessness, joy and love.

Second, failing to do so is what is putting our world at peril.

Since I don't personally know anyone who would take the position that it is not a good thing to experience as much courage, fearlessness, joy and love as possible; and, that it is also a good thing that our future not be one of disaster and suffering; let's see if we can move in that direction.

I have commented to you before, actually "bragged" might be a more accurate word, that I have been so fortunate to have had the wonderful teachers I have had over the course of my lifetime. Indeed, in every way when I look back, my life has been blessed beyond measure. From the day I was born until now. Which is not to

say that there have not been periods as bleak as could be. There have been. But I have had and am having a life rich beyond measure. And, a life which, when I look back upon it from this perspective, has been full of the miraculous, the wondrous. The path leading from there to here is one that one of my teachers, Robert Johnson, referred to as being made up by “the golden threads that are the tapestry of your life.” Carl Jung referred to them as moments of synchronicity.

One example of my richly blessed life is my ability and freedom to be with you like this. Doing this teaching, and preparing to be here, enriches my life beyond measure. It energizes and excites me. Thank you.

One tiny example of what I am talking about would be that after I graduated from the university thinking at the time I was oh-so-smart but realizing now how truly ignorant, unknowing and unaware I was; I went off to graduate school and had teachers who introduced me to biblical, religious and spiritual scholars who continue to shape my thinking. Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and on and on are on this list.

One of those thinkers and scholars was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. One of the things that instantly attracted me to this French paleontologist was the fact that though he himself was a Jesuit, the Roman Catholic Church had banned his writings. (They later recanted.)

For as long as I can remember, I've always been on the side of the underdog and the one condemned or excluded, especially for reasons over which they had no control. I think that is one of the things that made me aware, even as a small child, of the shameful wrongness of the racist culture in which I had been born and was raised.

By the way, I was able to quote these thinkers and scholars years before I really knew the deeper meaning of what they were saying. de Chardin is a good example of this.

I found, or perhaps it is better so say that I was found by, a saying of his when I was in graduate school that resonated with me so deeply I have quoted it frequently

across these many years. He was the one who wrote: “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

I've used these lines for years. Sometimes even as if they were original with me!

It was not, however, until last year when we went and heard Ilia Delio, who is a world recognized authority of de Chardin, that I really took another developmental step further out and deeper in in understanding what these words mean.

Dr. Delio has written several books and numerous articles. Two of her books are: “From Teilhard to Omega: Co-Creating an Unfinished Universe” and “The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love.” I know that in some places it is not permissible to mention the words “God” and “Evolution” in the same sentence, but here we are.

Teilhard, as he is usually referred to, was a French philosopher and Jesuit priest who trained as a paleontologist and geologist. He took part in the discovery of Peking Man. He conceived the idea of what he called Omega Point - a maximum level of complexity and consciousness towards which he believed the universe was evolving.

Many of Teilhard's writings were censored by the Catholic Church during his lifetime because of his views on original sin. Original sin is defined many ways. One would be contained in the philosophy contained in the first of Teilhard's sentences: We are human beings striving to be spiritual.

Consequently, over the centuries, long before Christianity but certainly a position taken up and embraced by nearly all of Christianity from the fourth century on, people have been taught that there was something inherently flawed about them.

As I said, Teilhard's writings were eventually, after his death, embraced by the Roman Church. In fact, in the recent encyclical of Pope Francis, the one on climate change and the environment I mentioned last week, Teilhard is noted for his enormous and valuable contributions to theology.

Let's begin, or continue, by looking at the first part of Teilhard's affirmation.

We are not human's seeking to become spiritual.

I heard Michael Dowd say in a TED talk recently that 1000 young people are day are leaving the church. I don't know where he gets those statistics. I do know that among the far right demographic of those who identify as conservative to fundamentalist Christians in this country there is an almost out-of-control and growing percentage of racism, poverty, teenage pregnancy, homo-phobia and obesity than in the rest of the population. There is something way wrong with that picture.

Since 9/11 there has also been a growing number of people, including very articulate spokespeople, who identify themselves as atheists. These people see believers in religion as those who hold nonnegotiable ethical views and who, in the name of metaphysical absurdities, are willing not only to die but, more importantly, to kill others and to send others to be killed.

What makes these criticisms valid is how far the living religions of this world have drifted from their roots. Though I think it is true of all fundamentalist movements, I'll confine my remarks to Christianity.

A gauge of the distance one has strayed from what Jesus had in mind is the extent to which belief in the Bible has become so central. This is a historically new emphasis not to be found the early church. The Bible is a witness to faith not an object of faith.

Let's take our search for theological clarification further.

Perhaps I should have called this talk "The Unbearable BEAUTIFUL Wholeness of Being." Our spiritual practices and religious rituals are to remind us who we are and why we are here. We have such a tendency to forget who we are, where we came from and where we are going. The great rituals of living religions call us to remember - which is the opposite of dismember.

Paul Tillich defined love, the love of God, the power of the Holy Spirit - however you want to language it - as the power which desires to reunite the separated. Love

remembers, puts back together. The way I would say it is that love desires us to live in awe of and live with the unbearable wholeness of being.

What do you think is the guiding myth of Western culture?

It is the myth of Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden. This story shapes and reflects the deep psyche of the West. It is the message of "original sin." We have a flawed nature and because of that we need to be saved. We need to prove ourselves over and over because deep down we have come to believe that there is something not quite right with us.

We have a multitude of ways to distract us from our feelings of inadequacy and to make us feel worthy.

One of the things we do is embark on one self-improvement program after another. Rather than relaxing and enjoying who we are and what we're doing in the moment we are, if we are not careful, constantly comparing ourselves with some ideal and trying to make up the difference. That is one thing we do. This is one of the curses of FaceBook.

Another thing some of us do is hold back from life. We play it safe because we don't want to risk what we call failure. It is the myth of our gone-wrongness that causes us to have such a difficult time being present.

And, of course, we keep busy. That phenomenon is growing in our culture.

We are taught to be our worst critics rather than our loving supporters. Sometimes when I listen to someone I'm sitting with for spiritual direction or counseling express hopelessness about a situation or when I hear someone being severely self-critical, I'll ask them: "If you had a best friend who was in exactly the same circumstance you are, what advice would you give them?" Almost immediately we can come up with the most encouraging and helpful things to say. We just find it difficult to say those things to ourselves.

Perhaps one of the most unwise and useless things we do is focus on other people's faults. We are judgmental and critical without assuming that the person in question

is, like us, doing the best they can with the current level of energy and awareness they have.

So that what we have in our culture and world now are divisions and divisive groups made up of people who think they are right.

The group that leads in this, of course, is organized religion. So much of the movement that calls itself Christian has been focused on being right, winning and being powerful. This is counterfeit religion. Growing spiritually - that is, growing in genuine freedom and true love - is growing in our willingness to love and be loved. In following Jesus there is no payoff for the ego in these regards: winning, being right or powerful.

I believe, and this is where we are heading today, that following the teachings of the radical mystic Jesus is not a container in which we hold our “precious correctness” but, rather, that which hold us safely through the entire journey of life.

Jesus overturned the entire system of honor and shame, who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong of his day. He was clear that one’s identity was not dependent on what you have done, what you possess or what other people thought of you. Further, he was clear that not only every person but also every part of creation was worthy of respect because everything and everyone contain and reflect a part of the image of God who made them.

Yet, look at Christian history. So much of it, then and now, has been an expenditure of energy on who is not worthy, who does not belong.

Living life as people who are aware that they are created in the image of God and not out of the deficiency of believing that there is something fundamentally wrong with us is our task.

So, how did this evolve?

I don’t have conversations with Fundamentalist anymore. Actually, you can’t have a conversation with a Fundamentalist. It is difficult to have a conversation with people whose driving desire is to conserve what they think has always been.

I have a T-shirt I sometimes wear that has a picture of Stonehenge on it and the caption, "Give Me That Old Time Religion."

How old is religion?

Let's begin with the fact that for 13.8 billion years the same laws of physics have been at work. Same then. Same now. No change. Everything is as it was. Everything is as it should be.

You might remember my quoting - by the way, let me say this: my spiritual teacher would say, "Repetition is not redundant. We never master this material. Rather, we allow it to master us." - Ilija Delio as saying that what has been true for the past 13,8 billion years is that what we know of what we know that we call the cosmos has been, is and will continue to be - expanding, creative, evolving and entangled.

Although some evidence exists for human-like creatures 2.5 million years ago, the first people we might recognize as humans did not appear until around 200,000 years ago. Archeological evidence shows that from the beginning these beings had what we might call "religious behaviors." It is easy to look back and call them primitive or superstitious. Likely centuries from now people might look back on us the same way.

The Peking Man and those who followed learned to communicate and then to speak. Their primary drive was to stay alive. They gathered in groups or tribes to do that. They developed beliefs about how their world worked and how they might interact with forces they could not see. What they believed about these things and what they passed on to their children about these things was their religion.

The next step for religion was to collect these teachings. The oldest known religious texts that we have go back to 2400 BC. The oldest known religious text that is still in use comes from the Hindu tradition and it dates back to somewhere between 1700 and 1100 BC. The very earliest writings that we call Hebrew Scriptures dates back to 900 BC and the creation stories did not come into existence until around 500 BC.

What we call the Old Testament was not firmly in place, if even then, until about 300 BC.

So, out of the enormous human journey, we in the Judeo-Christian tradition have had what is referred to as authoritative Scripture less than 3,000 years. There is another authority that we have had longer than that and that is simply the authority of “what is.”

The central truth of and for spiritual practice is “paying attention” and developing the resources to be present to “what is.”

Central to this spiritual practice is growing in the capacity to be non-judgmental.

Somebody asked me after one of these times together some time ago, “What does that mean - ‘what is.’” “What is” is what remains which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.

So in the beginning what was considered true was what we were taught by others, by the tribe. The same laws of physics that work now worked then. They were just understood differently. Then, this wisdom over a period of time was written down and collected and called “sacred.” We’ve learned a lot about how that process worked. The magical and superstitious things many people believe about both that process and their “sacred texts” simply don’t, as they say, hold water. This is not to say that they don’t contain wisdom. It is to say that over the centuries people have been guilty of idolatry in relationship to them, have misunderstood them and misused them.

Most religion wants to look back. Which is fine. If the looking back is true to “what is.”

You are going to see a lot of examples of this in the rhetoric from the right about the Confederate Flag, same sex marriage and even, perhaps, in the Affordable Care Act. Just watch.



I'll give you a tiny example. Everybody knows the phrase "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Right. The misuse of this phrase is one example of the misuse of the Bible for the backwardness of religion.

We usually hear this quoted when someone is talking about revenge. You hit me and I'll hit you. They bomb us, we'll bomb them. It is a phrase people use when they want to justify the right to get even, to settle the score.

This verse in the book of Leviticus is about how to deal with personal injury and loss of property. It is there because of this human tendency: Revenge always escalates.

I encourage you to read this part of the book of Leviticus sometime. It is incredibly detailed and seems to cover every eventuality. You read it and think, "That is a long time ago and doesn't have much to do with us."

Until you turn on the television set and see what's on the news. Most of it is about cameras following police as they try to break up fights and settle property disputes. Or, watch how many "Judge Judy" type shows there are on during daytime television.

Back then it meant that if someone killed your cow, depending on the circumstance of whether it was intentional or not, you were allowed to kill one of his cows. Not two cows. Certainly not the entire herd. If you dug a hole and his donkey fell into it and was injured, you owed him the proper compensation for that donkey. No more. No less. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was a way of saying, "the punishment must fit the crime. It was a law given to lessen violence. Not to justify it or justify more of it.

Revenge always escalates. If someone does something to us that hurts, we usually want to hurt them back - but more.

By the time of Jesus that verse, a verse intended to be used to lesson violence, to create a fair and just legal system, was being used to justify violence and revenge.

At the time of Jesus, very religious people who were looking back only and misperceiving what they were seeing, people who were very committed to the scriptures, were quoting Scripture in such a way as to actually be working against the purposes of God in this world.

Do we have any of that in our world at this time?

When the church, or any individual for that matter, looks back or embraces the notion that we are humans who seek or ought to be commanded or coerced into being spiritual - which usually means being “religious” by my definition of the term, the church becomes the “thought police” and not a place of radical hospitality.

What is the purpose of God in the world? To be experienced as that which is expanding, evolving, creative and entangled.

The same laws of physics have been, are, will be.

You can call the energy behind this whatever you want to. I call it Sacred Mystery. I believe that there is good news in a commitment to be in right relationship with “what is.” I think that this “what is” - the expanding, creative, evolving, entangled reality - is what God is saying to us and that to ignore what God is saying to us has tragic consequences.

My clue for this and the path I have chosen to follow is the radical Jewish mystic Jesus. You will have to choose your own. No one gets the option of not choosing some path.

I want to honor the past. Indeed, as ironic as it sounds, it was the teachings I received in a Southern Baptist Church that have eventually led me to be able to stand within the Christian tradition in the way that I do and both love it, be ashamed of it and criticize it.

When I read the teaching from the Gospel of Thomas we are up to for today was when I thought of the saying I’ve used from Teilhard for decades: We are spiritual beings having the experience of being human.

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Yeshua says,

If flesh came into existence  
for the sake of spirit,  
it is a wonder,  
but if spirit exists for the sake of flesh,  
it is a wonder of wonders.  
I am truly astonished  
at how such richness  
came to dwell in such poverty.

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This is the unbearable wholeness of being. We, like “what is,” are called into growing, evolving, creating a better world and being entangled with each other. Not in order to get something but because we already have it. We express our true identity.

Jesus did this by not hesitating, ever, to associate with the unacceptable.

Yes, I want to be faithful to the past. Even more, I want to be faithful to the future. That does not mean keeping things as they are.

Carlyle Marney, a teacher, colleague and friend of mine, once said to me as we were working together in the Civil Rights movement, “Isn’t it sad that the church, like a disobedient little boy, has to stand with hat in hand before the world and be led into the truth, rather than being the loving prophetic voice and way-shower the church could be.” Jim Bankston said that regarding the matter of homosexuality and the church that the church had absolutely lost its opportunity to be prophetic. Now, the challenge would be whether the church could become relevant.”

As I was thinking about this wonderful, mystical teaching from the Gospel of Thomas and the lines I got from Teilhard, I had this thought: Moving from the

belief that we are humans trying to become spiritual to the lifestyle of living that we are spiritual beings trying to create a human and humane world, is a great definition of resurrection.

There is nothing wrong with you.

There is nothing wrong with anybody else either.

Yes, many of us and them spend sometimes a lot of time in the land of unknowing and unawareness.

After the shootings in Charleston, I got asked, as clergy frequently do: Where was God in this? Why did this happen?

I have a lot of responses for this. Among them: God is everywhere - desiring to be expansive, creative, evolving, entangled.

There is no “why?”

Trying to answer “why?” or finding an answer that is satisfying is like trying to put the ocean in a thimble.

Sometimes I’ll let my dog outside and he’ll just run like crazy. That’s his nature.

I go into our yard and see a flower Sherry has planted blooming. Flowers just do it. It’s their nature.

They are just being who they are.

Though at times it may seem unbearable to be and be, this is our calling too; to embrace the unbearable wholeness of being.

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