

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL SPIRITUALITY

Luke 24.44-53

Ascension Sunday, May 28, 2017

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Luke 24.44-53

⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And see, I am sending upon you what my Abba promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵²And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; ⁵³and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Musical response: “My God is so High” (African-American spiritual arranged by Uzee Brown)

Sermon

If there were to be a direction of this service, it would have to be “up.”
Eric and Katie sang, “God has gone up.”

Belle just sang this old spiritual, “My God is so High.”

In the text for today Jesus says to the disciples: “Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with *power from on high*.”

It’s Ascension Sunday. There’s a theme.

For some reason, as this service has been percolating, I have this old Sunday School song going over and over in my head:

I'm in right

Out right

Upright

Downright

Happy all the time.

I don't know about that "happy all the time" business. And I know this song's basic purpose is to burn off the excess energy of wiggly Sunday School students.

But I also think this silly song carries an important message. That is: The spiritual life is multi-directional. Or better, multi-dimensional.

It's "in right, outright, upright, downright."

In other words, if this way of living we call "faith" becomes one-dimensional, it can go flat. Spiritual life is meant to be full – to embrace and enhance and expand the many dimensions of our human experience. But if it settles comfortably in one dimension, it may become thin and empty.

So, according to the song, there's "in right;" the inner dimension.

Back in 1986, Dr. Rod Romney was watching the developments around space travel and discoveries about outer space. He was convinced that we humans would not be prepared for this expanding understanding of our universe without taking time to specifically focus on our inner life. So he wrote this book: *Journey to Inner Space*.

But Dr. Romney knew that one of the chronic criticisms of contemplative spirituality was that it could become one-dimensional if it became focused exclusively on that inner journey. He warns, at the beginning of his book:

If one does not come back from prayer, meditation, and contemplation to the daily routine of life with deeper insights, greater perception, and a refined affection and tenderness for everything, then the inner journey is not complete ... the point of [that] journey is not only to acquaint with God and with our own spirit, it is also to return us to our outer space ... as instruments of holy love.

There's "in right" and "outright," Dr. Romney is saying.

We have been hearing the call of the prophets to see the care for widows and orphans and the sick and the oppressed as the outward dimension of our spiritual lives. It's not just a political agenda. It's our spirituality at work.

Our new Affirmation of Values says that "we will go deeper in faith as we do justice, love mercy, work for peace, and walk humbly with God."

In other words, we are promising that we will be paying attention to this dynamic between the inner and the outer dimensions of our life together.

But I have to tell you, with the state of the world we live in right now, it's easy to become one-dimensional. It's easy to be obsessed with the outer world and the latest news -- to be consumed by anger or overwhelmed by all the things that demand our attention.

I know I am not alone in this because I have heard some of you say that you have to take a break from the news and Facebook and political conversations because there are such things as debilitating anger and "compassion fatigue."

One of the reasons it's important to me to be with you in worship on a Sunday morning is that it helps to remind me that my spiritual life is not one-dimensional. There are multi-dimensions.

There is "in right" and "outright" and "downright."

You may remember a couple weeks ago when Paul Raushenbush was here. He said he had a friend who had amended Michelle Obama's "when they go low, we go high." Her version was, "when they go low, we go high ... and then we go deep."

There is the dimension of depth that does not shy away from doubts and questions. That can push through the superficial. That can ground us and grow us into the fullness of life for which we have this deep longing.

But depth too can become one-dimensional. We can become so buried in questions, so wary of the superficial that we become cynical, so single-minded in our search for meaning that we suck the life out of everything.

That's why there is "in right, outright, *UP*right, "downright."

Now, honestly, it's this "upright" dimension that I find most complicated in my spiritual life. "In right" and "outright" and "downright" all make sense to me. But "upright" makes me nervous.

This is the dimension that is usually associated with the God who is out there. The God who is ruling the world and intervening in it on my behalf. This is the God who grants good parking spaces; gives athletes victories; and miraculously saves my life while hundreds of others die.

It can give rise, as my friend, Rebecca Ann Parker says, to "authoritarian and life-suppressing religious traditions" that "disempower human beings."

"Upright" religion, if it is left to itself, can hollow out the inner heart of the spiritual life so that it becomes something rote and empty.

It can ignore and excuse injustice because it must be that God wanted those poor people to suffer. I see we are back again to religious folks calling AIDS God's punishment on gay people and that poverty is a "state of mind." That's when I know I have to turn off the news.

“Upright” religion can rob spirituality of its depth because faith becomes simply regurgitating the same old answers and controlling the questions.

There is a downside to the “upright” dimension of spiritual life.

But it is also true that without it, we might be missing something.

Rebecca Ann Parker, says that she has had to face the reality of what she calls our liberal “will-centered religion” – a faith that claims we are not pawns of fate but we are creators of our destiny.

That faith, while it can be liberating, has to wrestle with the fact that after all the years of work for social justice, here we are. “Sometimes,” she says ...

we can't even get our own churches to be places where people are civil to one another. We come up against the limits of our faith. We may find ourselves asking, “Is there any source of help beyond my own strength? Is there anything I can trust beyond our power to make it right? Or must I hope just in this: that if we work hard enough, maybe things will be okay?”

I can tell you that making spiritual life mostly about working harder to fix all the things that are wrong with the world will leave you exhausted and in despair.

And if I do have trouble with the “upright” dimension of spiritual life, I’m beginning to think it may be a function of my privilege; that I am overestimating the power I think I have and the control I think I *should* have.

There’s a reason why people in recovery talk about the dynamics of hitting bottom and learning to trust their higher power.

There’s a reason why African-American spirituals call on God to do something; why they imagine heaven; or why Dr. King would say:

When slumbering giants of injustice emerge on the earth, we need to know that there is a God of power who can cut them down like the grass and leave them withering like the green herb ... When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment ... we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance.

There's a reason why Jesus would say to his disciples on that first Ascension Day that they shouldn't just run off to save the world. They should wait for that "power from on high."

Without the upright dimension of spiritual life – the dimension that, as our friend Anne Lamott says, is imagining and acting on the idea that there is a power greater than yourself – without that, our lives can become empty and flat.

My spiritual life does not depend on a God who always shows up to fix things. But it does depend on being open to that power already at work in us to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine. It depends on surprising demonstrations of power and glimpses of wonder and unmanufactured moments of grace.

Bryan Stevenson, the author of *Just Mercy* tells the story of his first meeting with a prisoner on death row. He was still in law school at the time and he spent the first part of what was supposed to be an hour, apologizing for not being a "real lawyer." The only thing he really had to say was that there would be no execution date anytime in the next year.

The prisoner asked if that was true. "Yes," Stevenson said. *Thank you, man, the prisoner said, I mean, really, thank you! I've been talking to my wife on the phone, but I haven't wanted her to come and visit me or bring the kids because I was afraid they'd show up and I'd have an execution date. Now I'm going to tell them they can come and visit. Thank you!"*

Stevenson was shocked. This was good news?

And then they started talking – talking about family and law school and music and prison.

Three hours later they were interrupted by the guard returning to take the prisoner back to his cell.

Stevenson tried to apologize again and then the prisoner did something unexpected. He closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and began to sing:
*Lord, lift me up and let me stand,
By faith on heaven's tableland;
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

“I had no right to expect anything from a condemned man on death row,” Stevenson says, but after 30 years of defending prisoners on death row I can still hear him singing.

There is a voice that can lift a man up out of his prison and call a young lawyer to devote the next 30 years of his life defending those on death row.

And, in the multi-dimensions of the spiritual life, if you hear that voice – the one that call you up to higher ground – well, friends, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Rodney R. Romney, *Journey to Inner Space* (Riverrun Press, 1986), p.17. Rebecca Ann Parker, *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now* (Skinner House Books, 2006), p.107. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press, 1963), p.20. Anne Lamott, *Help Thanks Wow* (Riverhead Books, 2012), p.26. The article by Bryan Stevenson, “The High Road,” is from lives@nytimes.com.