

It Is No Longer I Who Live

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

June 26, 2022 Third Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 32; Galatians 2:15-3:5

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Third Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

The war in Ukraine, mass shootings, corporate greed driving more into poverty and destroying life on earth, violent racism and homophobia, and now the Supreme Court taking sovereignty over a woman's own body away from her as well as the right and freedom to make a profoundly difficult choice about her life—we carry all this and more as an overwhelming weight of grief, rage or fear.

It is easy to despair if we do not see anything we can do. But there *is* something we can do: we can always seek to change ourselves, and that is not nothing—if we are transformed so the Spirit flows more truly and freely through us, then everything we do will help transform the world.

Let this time together open you more to the heart and mind of Christ that is your deepest, truest self, and at the end of the service you will turn to those around you, whether in person or on Zoom, shining a light of love that will lift and encourage one another, and together we will shine that light into this world.

Call to Worship: Science is seeing more clearly the subatomic building blocks of all matter and energy, and it is changing the way we see ourselves and the world.

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor responds to quantum physics by saying, “Where is God in this picture? God is all over the place. God is up there, down here, inside my skin and out. God is the web, the energy, the space, the light—not captured in them, as if any of those concepts was more real than what unites them—but revealed in that singular, vast net of relationships that animates everything that is.”

Another Episcopal priest and author, Cynthia Bourgeault, responds by saying, “I am not a space that God does not occupy.”

The creative Spirit of the universe flows within every particle, person and planet. It sparks life and helps it evolve, it forms communities of love and cooperation between cells or families or

nations, it makes us one, and if we learn to let it be our core self, guiding and empowering our lives, it will flow through us and change the world.

Let us worship together the Spirit that will help us do this if we ask.

Children's Time: One of my favorite stories is told by the famous psychologist, Carl Jung, about a drought in China that was threatening everything. The people tried traditional magic, they asked the Christian missionaries to pray, but nothing worked.

Finally, they sent word to a distant province asking someone called the rainmaker to come. He was a shriveled up old man, and all he asked for was a quiet house. He went in and was not seen for three days, but on that last day a huge storm ended the drought and the rainmaker emerged.

A Christian missionary asked him how he made it rain and the little man said he did not do it, so the missionary said, then how do you explain the storm? The old man said, "Oh, I can explain that. I come from another country where things are in order. Here they are out of order; they are not as they should be by the ordinance of heaven. Therefore the whole country is not in the Tao, and I also am not in the natural order of things because I am in a disordered country. So I had to wait three days until I was back in the Tao and then naturally the rain came."

Jesus said we have to let go of all that keeps us from being in the flow of the Holy Spirit, or the Tao, the natural order. We have to lose the material life that separates us from God to have the comfort, wisdom and strength that comes from connecting to the Spirit.

We may not be able to make it rain, but with the Spirit in us we might be able to make light shine for a person who is lost in sadness or anger or fear, or we might help our family or friends or town feel more loving, or we might solve a problem that nobody else can find a way to change.

We can feel more love, joy and peace when we are connected to the Spirit, and they are even more infectious than Covid—people catch them from us and pass them along to others.

So the question is, what can we do to be in the Spirit, to be our deepest truest self? We all have different things that help us be in the Tao, but one helps us all, and that is prayer, of course, and especially centering prayer, a form of meditation. All prayer can help us live more mindfully and heartfully and focused on the Spirit, so let's say the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that came from the mind and heart of Jesus...

Sermon: *It Is No Longer I Who Live*

The scripture passages today both include that difficult word, “sin.” Most people think of sin in a legalistic context, where God, or more accurately, the church lays down the law and we break it. The whole point of the spiritual life is reduced to a question of how much selfishness we can get away with, or how good we have to be in order to get into heaven.

There is a stage of spiritual development where that kind of thinking makes sense. A young person who went through our Sunday School told me the other day that back then they thought the Golden Rule was a terrible idea. They told me that “an eye for an eye” made much more sense at that early stage of life.

The word sin changes in meaning as we mature and understand more clearly the spiritual path that Jesus taught and the Spirit that he embodied. Then theologian Paul Tillich’s definition of sin makes more sense to us: sin not as things we do wrong but as a condition of separation from God, from our neighbor and from our truest, deepest self. Wrongdoing can lead to that separation, but a person can obey laws perfectly and still be separated from God, neighbor or our true self.

The Apostle Paul understood this and desperately wanted us to end that separation. It is what he was getting at in the passage today.

Galatians makes much more sense if we know the context for Paul’s letter. The earliest church was not called Christianity, it was called The Way, and it was a spiritual path within Judaism.

The Pharisees and other leaders of the synagogue were not happy about this, they felt the followers of The Way were dangerous to the Jewish community, and Saul, a fanatical, fundamentalist Pharisee, joined the effort to persecute Christians. Saul had a vision of Jesus that changed his life, and he became the Apostle Paul, serving the spiritual path he had tried to destroy. The specific calling he received from the Spirit was to travel around the Mediterranean teaching and organizing Gentile churches. Galatia was one of those areas, in what is today Central Turkey.

Paul did not teach congregations to be faithful Jews and obey the law of Moses, he taught them to believe that Jesus was full of the Spirit of God and to open their hearts and minds to that

Spirit. Paul knew that if they were full of the love and Spirit of Christ, they would naturally fulfill all laws—whereas the reverse was not true. They could obey all six-hundred-plus laws in the book of Leviticus and still not necessarily be full of love and the Spirit.

Paul saw that the fixation on the law actually got in the way of the free flow of the Spirit. So he was extremely upset when other followers of The Way came to Galatia after Paul left and told the churches that they had to convert to Judaism and conform to the Jewish law and tradition in order to be true followers of Christ.

Paul was trying with all his might to win the debate when he scolded in today's passage, "The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with material things...?"

Paul says this all-important line in his passionate outburst: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

The reason why this concept is so important is that it makes clear that maturing and transforming our consciousness to align more closely with the Spirit is the path we are called to take, and the ability to fulfill our individual callings and use our gifts to serve other people and the earth flows from that Spirit-filled self.

The reason why the results of this life-long path of inner transformation are most important can be seen in the lives that undergo it. I am sure you can think of examples you have seen. It led Paul to grow beyond the violent hate of his Jewish fundamentalism and understand the oneness of all people in the Spirit, and create egalitarian communities where there was neither "Jew nor Greek...male nor female," and where following the guidance of the Spirit and acting with love were all that ultimately mattered.

Transformed people transform people and the world around them. A divided and destructive society needs more people who have the heart and mind of love and Spirit that Jesus had.

Paul lived in a materialistic, destructive and oppressive society, too, and he saw that how we live moment to moment makes a difference. He really didn't care whether people ate kosher or were circumcised—that was their choice. What he cared about was that nothing would stand ahead of our self-emptying, letting our old self go and allowing the Spirit to fill up that space.

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Paul felt it was urgent for us to know that this is the heart of the spiritual path that Jesus taught, this is everyone’s true calling and true self—so we will follow the laws of love that the Spirit within us leads us naturally to fulfill.

So when our culture lays down the law that we need to be rich or beautiful or self-concerned or live by any conventional standard, or when our inner voices tell us we need to be perfect or to act or appear a certain way or attain some inherited version of success, we need to crucify the self that is committed to obeying those laws and free ourselves to follow the counter-cultural path of self-emptying and humble love and Spirit-led life.

This is a life-long journey of growing and evolving until it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us. It takes practice, it takes daily habits and disciplines. It requires unlearning much that is ingrained in us, like trusting in our own rational problem-solving ability without opening to the Spirit’s guidance, or believing that we are now as enlightened as we can be.

We have problems in our lives and in our nation and world that can be solved only by an evolution of consciousness to a level that can see as the Spirit sees and find solutions we cannot now imagine.

Self-emptying meditation or centering prayer can help us get there, or a prayer or mantra that we repeat to ourselves as a reminder to shift to the Spirit many times a day. Something like Paul’s line, in our own words, would work well to keep us on the path, saying many times a day, “For I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” Or, “I am letting go of my old self in this moment. It is no longer I who live, but the Spirit that was in Jesus that is living and moving through me.”

Let us practice praying something like that now in silence, with all our heart...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

The warbling Wren.

Something that beautiful

must be a song to praise God.