

Dwelling in the Spirit

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

October 23, 2022, Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 84; Philippians 2:3-9a; Luke 18:9-14

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

Developmental psychologists call the highest level of faith the “universalizing” stage, where we become able to see as God sees and love as God loves. It’s also known as the unitive or nondual or integral stage, where we perceive the oneness of all people and all creation, God in all things and all things in God. Some people glimpse this in a mystical flash, but to attain it as a level of mature consciousness and as a consistent way of being takes practice as well as grace.

Meditation and mindfulness are two of the best practices to dwell in the presence of God and come to see all as one, but another is to do what 12 Step groups call “Fake It till You Make It,” or acting “as if.” After the service today we have the opportunity again to practice acting as if we already do see God in the people around us, and as if we already do see that every person here is truly one with us.

So please extend your care and support especially to those you do not know or do not know well, both in person and on Zoom. Humble, compassionate lovingkindness may be the most expeditious path to oneness with God that there is.

Call to Worship: At first glance, Buddhism and Christianity can seem to be very different spiritual paths, but if you look more closely you find that they have much in common.

Both are designed to lead people to freedom from suffering and death.

Both teach that the way to freedom requires letting go of the life of our selfish ego and learning to dwell in our innermost true self.

Both teach that when we dwell in that spiritual place, we gain a new way of seeing and knowing and being. We see the oneness and interconnectedness of all creation. We find compassion springing up within us. We find that our thoughts and actions become right, not through the old ego driven way of thinking and striving, but through the grace of intuition and spiritual knowing that rise from our deepest heart.

We will begin with a Psalm and hymn that are all about this dwelling place within us and the path that leads there. Let us look into our hearts and seek to dwell there as we worship together...

Children's Time: Once upon a time on a planet far, far away there lived a kind of people like our ancestors with one big exception—their eyes had not yet evolved to the point that they could see. All their other senses were extremely sharp, and they were able to live comfortably in their caves, but they had one big problem, and that was saber-tooth tigers. People could hear and smell them, but they couldn't find the best path of escape, so things did not go well.

Finally one day one person's eyes evolved and came into focus and she was able to see trouble coming and steer people to safety, but unfortunately, some did not believe her, and she could not be everywhere at once, so she was not able to save many.

Over time increasing numbers of eyes evolved to that more advanced stage, and the more seeing people there were, the clearer it was that they really had a useful gift that could be trusted, and also the more they were able to help others do eye exercises to develop the capacity to see. Finally there were enough with vision that they could save most people most of the time, and the tribe was able to flourish.

Something like this needs to happen on our planet, too. We need to see more clearly how to live the way Jesus and all the most advanced spiritual teachers have taught, because they could see that life will not be good for everyone or sustainable on earth until we follow the Golden Rule, doing to others what we would have them do to us, and loving our neighbor as our self.

All the spiritual traditions teach that humans are capable of evolving to be able to see the world in a new, truer way that can find solutions and ways forward that most people cannot yet see. Every spiritual path offers steps and practices that help our hearts and minds be more like Jesus' and help us live in a far better way.

New ways of seeing and living have happened in the past. People came to see that slaves were people and no one should be a slave, people came to see that the earth is our one home and we cannot let it be polluted.

Not quite enough people see these things to solve our problems, but more all the time understand our oneness and try to live by its truth. There is something we all can do to help us

see and live as Jesus did and find new solutions to today's problems...Pray—prayer that opens our heart and mind to the spirit.

Let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

Dwelling in the Spirit

“My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of God,” the 84th Psalm says. We long today for many of the same gifts the Psalm describes, the joy, the safe nest, the strength, the guidance, the renewal, the protection—all the good things that come from dwelling in what we give names like God or Spirit or higher power or sacred way.

Today we have had opened before us a path that leads to the spiritual place and gifts for which our souls long. The words in Philippians and the Psalm, the parable of Jesus and the quote from Cynthia Bourgeault in the bulletin about Centering Prayer all describe a path to a whole new way of seeing, knowing and being that can transform our lives and our world and help us solve the problems that threaten humanity and the earth today.

How can we get on this path to the transformation we long for and the gifts we need? The Psalm indicates that our longing itself may be the first step.

A young alcoholic I knew seemed content to watch his entire life be ruined by drinking until he was arrested for drunken driving in New York City. He spent that night in a gymnasium-size holding tank for people who had committed every crime imaginable. He was small, pale and preppy looking, and he was justifiably terrified.

A tough looking man approached him. He had been in that room more than once before and took pity on the younger man and told him that if he did not want to get hurt he should sit down with his back against a wall and not move or look at anyone or fall asleep the entire night. The experience awoke a longing in him that was strong enough to get him into rehab and Alcoholics Anonymous, and twenty years later he is still dwelling in the house of his higher power and still sober.

The Psalm gives another hint of how to get on the path besides longing. It says, “Happy are those in whose heart are the highways to Zion.” The path we are looking for is a highway that passes through our heart. If we want to get on it, the heart is where we need to start.

Samuel Longfellow was the younger brother of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He studied at Harvard in the mid-1800s and became a Unitarian minister. He was a gay man in a time when that was not accepted, and he felt it was his duty as a pastor to keep it hidden. Out of his struggles and transcendental philosophy he wrote some great hymns. One says,

I look to thee in every need,
And never look in vain;
I feel thy strong and tender love,
And all is well again....
Discouraged in the work of life,
Disheartened by its load,
Shamed by its failures or its fears
I sink beside the road;
But let me only think of thee
And then new heart springs up in me.

The highway to the Spirit passes through the heart and that is our point of entrance. Jesus' parable symbolizes this. The proud Pharisee is looking up and boasting to God that he is not like other people, but the tax collector is looking down, inwardly focused, and beating his breast.

This is another hint about how to get on the longed-for path. The highway is a low way. Jesus says, those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Those who learn to self-empty and let go of their ego are on the right road.

Once we get on that lowly highway that we long for, how can we stay on it? The Psalm and hymn both talk of the strength we find in the Spirit. The Psalm ends, "Happy is everyone who trusts in God." To stay on the path we need to trust in the Spirit's strength, not our own. The hymn verse that begins "I look to thee in every need," ends:

The thought of thee is mightier far
Than sin and pain and sorrow are.

We learn to trust in that truth as we train our mind to dwell in the Spirit, and it helps us continue on the path.

The Psalm says "Happy are those who live in your house." This has two meanings. To live in God's house means to dwell in the presence of the Spirit in our hearts.

But God's house also means the temple or synagogue or church. It means a community of practice where we learn the skills and techniques that can help us stay on the path, and where others who are on the same path can encourage our self-discipline.

As we go along this highway, what do we find? Members of 12 Step groups find freedom from addiction. Members of this congregation find comfort and healing, strength and peace. The Psalm says, “A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.” What we find is that even if all we experience are fleeting moments of grace, just those moments make the journey worthwhile.

Longfellow’s hymn shares much of the Psalm’s description of what dwelling in the Spirit brings into our lives, but adds this:

Thy hand in all things I behold,
And all things in thy hand.

If we stay on the sacred way we may eventually reach this highest level of universalizing faith where we see the true oneness of God in all things and all things in God. People who have this vision find compassion welling up within them, and out of that compassion comes a desire and a power to change the world. The Psalm says, “As they go through the valley of tears, they make of it a place of springs.”

Dwelling in the Spirit brings us spiritual gifts, but these are not meant for us alone. We are meant to be springs of living water in hurting places, tapping into wellsprings of spiritual creativity within us and bringing forth works of lovingkindness or art or social transformation.

Not only do we see the world differently when we dwell in the Spirit, but our process of seeing and knowing changes. In our ego mode, if we have a need, we look to our rational, problem-solving mind to fulfill it. But the hymn alludes to another way of seeing and knowing. Cynthia Bourgeault puts it this way:

“Centering Prayer is not about developing concentration, attaining clear mind, conscious presence, a strong witnessing ‘I,’ some desired state. In Centering Prayer you merely practice and practice the core kenotic motion: ‘let go, make space, unclench’—thought by thought by thought.... Slowly, steadily, Centering Prayer patterns into its practitioners what I would call the quintessential Jesus response: the meeting of any and all life situations by the complete, free giving of oneself.... the touchstone throughout all his teaching: Let go! Don’t cling! Don’t hoard! Don’t assert your importance! Don’t fret.... In time this...will gradually establish that ‘mind of Christ’ within you as your own authentic self.” (*a series of quotes cobbled together out of order from ‘Lesson Seven’ in The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice—apologies! that entire short chapter is worth reading and quoting!*)

Bourgeault calls it a whole new operating system, a whole new way of perceiving reality as Jesus did.

Disciplines like mindfulness and Centering Prayer are designed to help our hearts and minds evolve. Through the practice of spiritual disciplines we can train ourselves to return to the Spirit's presence and vision whenever we catch ourselves straying and to live from that place of oneness and insight.

This church exists to support our efforts to dwell in the Spirit and gain a new way of seeing and knowing and being. That is what we are all here to help each other do. This is a church full of wise teachers and supportive friends. If you bring your longing here, you will find company and help for your journey wherever it may lead.

Let us pray in silence, dwelling for a moment in that gratitude and joy...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

A flurry of chickadees
and titmice asking for seed
from my hand.