***What We Might Mean When We Say, I’m Spiritual But Not Religious #2***

*a sermon**delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on March 16, 2025*

*based on Deuteronomy 24:17-22*

Let me begin with a question. You know who Rick Steves is, right? What do you think Ricks’ favorite place to travel is?

In a blog post, Steves says his all-time favorite country to visit is … India. He promises that he isn't saying “India” for the shock value. He calls it "fragrant, mystifying, and challenging" and claims that "India wallops anyone's self-assuredness. India rearranged my cultural furniture." He said, the country humbled him and made him a better person.

Well, here’s a window on India that I guarantee will open your eyes on how it can make us all better people. Asad Bin Saif is a scholar of India’s slums. He has seen humanity at its lowest ebb.  He was once asked if he felt pessimistic about the human race.

“Not at all,” he replied. “Look at the hands from the [Indian] trains.” If you are late for work in Mumbai and reach the station just as the train is leaving the platform, you can run up to the packed compartments and find many hands stretching out to pull you on board, unfolding outward from the train like petals.  As you run alongside you will be picked up, and a tiny space will be made for your feet on the edge of the open doorway.  The rest is up to you.  You will probably have to hang on to the door frame with your fingertips, being careful not to lean out too far lest you get decapitated by a pole placed close to the tracks.  But consider what has happened; Your fellow passengers, already packed tighter than cattle, their shirts drenched with sweat in the badly ventilated compartment, retain an empathy for you – knowing that your boss might yell at you, or cut your pay if you miss this train – and so they make space where none exists.  And at the moment of contact, they do not know if the hand that is reaching for theirs belongs to a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian or a Brahmin or an untouchable or whether you’re from Mumbai or New York.  All they know is that you’re trying to get to Mumbai, the city of gold, and that’s enough.  Come on board, they say. We’ll adjust.” (From “Holding on in Bombay” by Suketu Mehta)

I share this partly, of course, because of the oligarchs who are now calling the shots from the top tier of our country, busy as they are making no room, closing all the doors, walling us all off.

To be fair, not quite all of the super-rich are doing this. Bill Gates former wife, Melinda, remember, convinced Bill to use his billions to eradicate polio and benefit poor children around the globe. What a legacy they have made.

Why the other multi-billionaires in this country wouldn’t want to use their vast wealth to do similar good is beyond my understanding.

Why don’t they at least want to use a tiny bit of their wealth to get homeless veterans off our streets? It’s beyond me.

Well, some of them just don’t think people who suffer deserve any better. My guess is they don’t understand how much of an advantage they were born with and how much their opportunities differ from those born without their privilege.

Dr. G. Mark Gilbert was an American psychologist who spent many days with the Nazi defendants at the Nuremberg trials following World War II. He got to know Herman Goering, Rudolph Hess, and others in Hitler’s inner circle intimately.

“I was searching for the nature of evil,” he confided. “I think I’ve come close to defining it: It’s a lack of empathy. It’s the one characteristic that connects all the defendants. A genuine incapacity to feel with their fellow man. Evil, I think, is the absence of empathy.”

You know, one privilege I’ve had in being a minister for 45 years has been the invitation to come alongside a few people when they find their lives and their sense of themselves being challenged by one thing or another.

For example, sometimes a person will get a diagnosis of cancer and their first thought will be, “Why me?” For many of them, not all, but many, cancer will be a voyage on a leaky boat to a place where they come to rethink that initial reaction enough to say, “Huh? Why not me?”

“Why me” is the ego’s question. It focuses entirely on the self. But then, if they are lucky, they may find themselves in rooms where other people are receiving chemotherapy at the same time. They join a club they would never have wanted membership in, but it becomes the place that opens on to the whole world.

It opens up so far that it offers them an escape from their essential loneliness.

I mean, look, you sit in a room with an IV in your arm next to an 8 year old who is getting the same thing, that will change you, unless you’re a total narcissist.

One of my first teachers about this was a woman in his 70s named Marion. She was about to get some surgery that we hoped would be of help to her, but no one was sure. And Marion saw the pain in my face as she described her situation. She paused, and then she said, “It’s all in a lifetime.”

She gotten beyond “why me?” and also beyond “Why not me?” She just knew that if we are lucky to live long enough, we all will realize the same suffering and uncertainty. Just like we all will share experiences of joy and triumph. “It’s all in a lifetime.” That’s the creator’s design.

But it takes some work to get there. Most of us get to our teens and we forget where we came from. We forget we are all just walking each other home.

Here’s one idea of our genesis and evolution: when we were born we knew how connected we were with everyone else, but we drank the water of forgetting just before our birth. Like in the Greek myth. And the journey of life is meant to lead us to remembering the bliss of that connection, and our original littleness.

Last week I said the Bible has two implicit messages for us. Wake up and Grow up.

Those are clearly of major importance. But there is also a third. It is the call to Remember.

It comes third because to really remember you have to have woken up and grown up, too.

Here is how it is stated in today’s text. “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 24). This, of course, is not a personal remembering – it is a corporate one.

“Remember that you were slaves in Egypt.”

This is crucial because if we don’t remember where we came from spiritually, as a part of those people – the oppressed (the little people), then we will become Pharaoh – we will identify with the big people, the ego maniacs who want to own everything, who want to oppress everyone they see as their undeserving inferior.

It’s just a fact. If we don’t call them out, we will be their co-conspirators; their enablers.

Pharaoh appeals to our ego, to the part of us that wants to hold onto everything forever.

But look, here’s the thing. The oppressed, the little ones -- they have a secret. They know they have nothing to lose. That’s why pictures of children in villages around the world, you know, in India or Africa, who have nothing -- you look at those photos and videos and if they aren’t sick or starving, they are so happy.

They are not encumbered by stuff. They can live totally whole and honest lives.

Let me tell you something else. To “re-member” something is basically to make it whole again. Just as remembering someone is to make them whole in some way, too.

Re-membering is putting back together that which has been torn asunder.

On communion Sundays I usually put the torn bread together again when I repeat the formula where Jesus says, “… When you do this, re-member me.”

Now, let me also invite you to remember (there’s that word again) remember the man who was crucified alongside Jesus who said, “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.”

The gospel writer put that in knowing we all who read those words and hear that story long for the same thing.

“Remember you were slaves in Egypt” is a call from God to us to identify with the oppressed and not Pharoah. Now, this is central to understanding where Christian Spirituality comes from --

it came out of the 4th Century Desert Tradition ---

The truly spiritual branch of Christianity (as opposed to the organized religious one) did not arise from nowhere – it came out of a reaction against the new pharaoh, Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the state religion.

In the 4th century, the Roman Emperor, Constantine, declared Christianity to be a state sponsored religion. That’s how the orthodox brand of Christianity (a brand of Christianity certified to be “correct”) was founded on the Nicene Creed and a standardized set of “beliefs” that common Christian souls adhered to and which the early precursor of the Catholic Church held up as the norm for Christians everywhere within the empire.

Now, most Christians applauded this. They were glad that persecution of Christians under earlier Roman emperors was abandoned. They were so grateful that they just accepted the Roman version of the faith.

But there were others who were much less pleased with the Romanization of Christianity.

These were men and women who said to themselves and one another, “These Romans were killing us for our faith just months ago. Why should we believe that they are the keepers of the true faith of Jesus? I mean, look, they crucified him.”

So, instead of continuing to attend Roman churches, they went out into the deserts of Palestine, Egypt, and Syria and established a very simple form of Christianity based on prayer, silence, simple life, simple work, the repetition of the psalms and weekly communal worship.

Monastic Christianity is linked directly to this branch of spiritual Christianity. Monks and nuns do not usually want to become bishops and cardinals. They don’t want people to look at them. They just want to worship God and feel God’s love 24/7. This is what the first monks and nuns had in mind. They had little if any ego.

Speaking of them, the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968) said, “The simple men\* [and women] who lived their lives out to a good old age among the rocks and sands only did so because they had come into the desert to be themselves, their *ordinary* selves, and to forget a world that divided them from themselves.”

A world that fed their egos, that fed their counterfeit selves.

Here’s the backstory. The first monk became known as St. Anthony of the Desert.

He began life as a rich young man of privilege who heard the call of Jesus to sell everything and follow him and he decided to give his considerable wealth away and pulled away from society. He went out into the Egyptian desert and made a life there all alone.

But before long, dozens and then hundreds and then thousands of men and women followed and a fledgling monastic system began.

Anthony saw what the emperor had done, making Christianity a state religion, announcing that there should be no division between church and state, and he saw through it. He knew that the message of Jesus, favoring the poor, would be compromised by the power and will of the state.

Well, Emperor Constantine was told of this charismatic monk who was horning in on his project to control this Christian enterprise and he wrote him a letter and it was delivered to Anthony who was illiterate. And Anthony would not even have it read to him.

Anthony saw through the emperor.

Buddhism understands this monastic impulse completely. Its principle teachings say that only 3 things matter in a life (I used this a couple of years ago during stewardship season).

Our life amounts to the following …

*How much you loved*

*How gently you lived. (how small a footprint you occupy in life)*

*How gracefully you were able to let go of things not meant for you.*

The older we get, the more we should be able to identify those things that are not meant for us.

In the course of a lifetime we are called upon to give up more and more until we give up the last thing.

The Hindu conception of that amounts to this: You let the body drop.

So, how then do we live, knowing this trajectory of life as it is meant to be lived?

Another quote from Ram Dass is helpful, the spiritual teacher I quoted last week who said, “We are all just walking each other home.”

He is probably best remembered to have said, “Be here now.” Wherever you are on your journey, remember that all you have is the present moment. But know this about it – it is full to bursting with God.

Hear the opening words of Trappist monk, Thomas Merton’s book, *New Seeds of Contemplation.*

“Every event and every moment of a person’s life plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds a wills of people. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because people are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity, and love.”

This life we live is a master class – every day holds new lessons. Why not take the curriculum?

Amen

“Life is a good teacher and a good friend …. Nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know.” Pema Chodrin *When Things Fall Apart*