

Becoming Ourselves

Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
Pullman, WA
March 20, 2022

Ancient Witness: Philippians 2:1-8

One of the most important things about preaching and leading worship, it seems to me, is that it doesn't come from a neediness or desire to be liked, drawing attention to oneself. Rather, it should be egoless. Preaching is always a ridiculously hard thing to do, not from a technical point of view but a spiritual one. I was taught in seminary not to use myself as an example in my sermons. And so only very rarely do I talk about my life when I preach. (Today is one of those times.) And if I do, it's usually more about my failures and doubt and not as a hero. But even then... it's dangerous territory.

This reminds me of one of my favorite stories. There was a bishop walking by himself in a huge cathedral. Suddenly he had this intense feeling that he wasn't alone and that he was being watched. Then he thought that he heard a voice. "Could that be God?" he thought. "Is God speaking to me?" And so he panics. He runs into the sanctuary and kneels before the altar. And he says, "I am nothing! I am nothing!" A priest sees him doing this, and so he joins the bishop at the altar. "I am nothing! I am nothing!" he says. And there's a janitor who happened to be sweeping the floor nearby, and he sees the bishop and the priest doing this. So he drops his broom and takes his place next to them on his knees at the altar. "I am nothing! I am nothing!" he says. The bishop looks over at the janitor, nudges the priest and says, "Look who thinks he's nothing."

It's not that we don't value competency and skill—of course we do. Or academic accomplishment and degrees conferred. Or intellect and knowledge—also good. Or successful results, good numbers, qualifications, accreditations, and the like.

But from a spiritual perspective, all that stuff doesn't matter one bit unless you have this ultimately essential thing: *nothingness*.

In fact, all that stuff can actually be a *hindrance*. It can drag you down. It will drag you down. It becomes a substitute for the real deal, which is *actual inner experience*.

And this is the *sine qua non*, the one essential thing, for a spiritual teacher, and indeed, for anyone who is serious about spiritual pursuit: to become empty, to become nothing, to be broken open to actual inner experience.

The apostle Paul experienced this nothingness, writing his letter to the community he started in Philippi from the depths of prison. And in another letter he talked about true power that was found in weakness. "If I need to brag," he wrote, "I'll brag about my limitations." Instead of listing accomplishments, the typical *curricula vitae*, Paul give a list of disasters and failures in which he was laid low. "I accept me limitations, insults, calamities, persecutions, difficulties. For when I accept my limitations, then I am empowered." (2 Cor. 12:9-10)

And while Paul never met Jesus, he is following the spiritual path of Jesus. And he writes that Jesus, “although he was born in the image of God (and all human beings are born in the image of God), did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied himself*, becoming nothing, taking the form of a servant.”

This word, “emptiness,” *kenosis*, in the Greek, refers to a mind that is emptied of self-reference, unencumbered with personal preference and rid of pretension. It is analogous to emptiness of “no-self” in Buddhism and to Zen’s “no-thought-ness.” That is, when we let go of the small self a large Self emerges. As Jesus taught, when we try to save and cling to this small self, we lose our Self. But when we lose and let go of the self, it is then that we can actually find one’s True Self. And so what is needed is a continual state of emptiness and openness to the Full Reality. On a regular basis.

I knew a guy who had a Christian/Buddhist retreat center in Massachusetts called “The Empty Bell.” And the title is all about this idea that when the bell is full it cannot ring, but only when it is completely empty can it beautifully resonate. Likewise, when we are empty of our preconceptions, thoughts and emotions, we can reverberate from a contact deep within us. Buddhism also refers to this as “beginner’s mind.” When we become “experts” and full of our “selves,” we lose our ability to ring. Jesus alluded to this when he taught that awareness of the Sacred Reality depended upon “becoming like little children,” becoming eternal beginners. Suzuki-roshi, a Zen master, said,

If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s mind there are few.

Stephen Mitchell sees a connection between the character of Jesus and the teachings of other great spiritual leaders such as Lao-tzu, who wrote:

*Human beings are born soft and supple;
dead, they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant;
dead, they are brittle and dry.*

*Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible
is a disciple of death.
Whoever is soft and yielding
is a disciple of life. (The Gospel According to Jesus, Stephen Mitchell, p. 208)*

I think that this is what Paul was talking about in the next line of his letter, that not only did Jesus belong to humankind, but he “humbled himself.” He assumed an openness, a beginner’s mind. One translation says, “he recognized his true status.”

But the ego is so tricky. It sneaks in. And this emptiness can be viewed as just another attainment. We become proud of our humility! We say, “Look who thinks they are nothing!” And so it’s not a linear, sequential thing; it’s a continual process.

Medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote, “If a heart is to be ready for [God], it must be emptied out to nothingness.” This path of Jesus of emptiness is a radical thing, as we empty ourselves of all personal opinions, preferences and judgments so that we can be fully open to God’s presence. Even our thoughts and ideas about God can lead us away from God, leading Eckhart to say that sometimes we must “let go of God, for God’s sake.”

“God is not found in the soul by adding anything,” Eckhart famously said, “but by a process of subtraction.” By shedding the layers of the self—the small self—by stripping away the ego. When everything is gone, stripped away. When there is nothingness and emptiness, what is left at the core and soul of things, is Sacred Presence or “big mind,” as the Buddhists say. Out of the stillness and silence there is a voice speaking to the heart of all things.

Sometimes this happens intentionally. This is basically what meditation or contemplation is: this subtraction and stripping away, this emptying oneself. And sometimes, perhaps more often and more profoundly, this happens against our will, when precious things and even our identity—who we think we are—are painfully stripped away from us.

So this path of emptiness and nothingness that leads to wisdom and enlightenment often is facilitated by suffering. One of my favorite spiritual teachers, Richard Rohr, has said, “Religion is what we do with our suffering.” It can open us up, empty us; or we can become rigid and brittle. He also has said, “All grace comes to us as a humiliation.” This certainly has been my experience.

About 24 years ago I was talking with a search committee from a church in Cincinnati. It was a very liberal Presbyterian church that was on the forefront of gay and lesbian rights within its denomination and the community. So the entire committee flew up to visit me in Minnesota. They knew me because I was a friend of their former Senior Minister. And I remember one of the committee members said, “Steve, we want you here. Come play in the traffic with us.”

You see, they knew that they were on a collision course with the denomination, that it was risky business. There were 14 “non-complying and dissenting” churches, and Mt. Auburn was one of these, perhaps the flagship. It’s not just that they were opposed to discriminatory laws of the denomination; they said publicly that they weren’t going to obey them. And so I said, “Yes.”

So we went about ordaining gay and lesbian members as elders and deacons, taking their voluntary statements from them, recording the statements in our minutes and sharing them with the presbytery, the regional body. We conducted same-sex marriages and let the world know about them. In the tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr., we knew that we had a “moral obligation to disobey unjust laws.” And we also knew that whenever we do this, it must be done “openly, lovingly and with a willingness to accept the penalty.” We didn’t do this with a sense of superiority, as some accused us. We just knew that this was a matter of conscience for us all. We also knew that social change needs those who are willing to bring the matter to the surface, to raise the consciousness of the public. Like Frederick Douglas, we knew that “power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and never will.”

And for me, it was more than a social issue. It had to do with being authentic and acting in a way that was consistent with my faith. It had to do with being and becoming myself.

It wasn't long before charges were filed against me, as the minister, for following the policies of my congregation. Newspaper columnists and T.V. reporters became my friends. People continued to flock to the church. The issue became unavoidable in the P.C. (USA) and in Cincinnati. The trial was a big deal. My new friends, Mel White and Jimmy Creech brought members of their organization, Soulforce, to stand vigil. The Sunday before the trial, members at my church silently showed their support by each coming forward and placing a rose on the communion table in front of me. After they were done, there was a huge pile, and I was a mess.

Many fellow Presbyterians were annoyed and wished that we would just go away. So they found me guilty and issued the lightest penalty. They publicly rebuked me and hoped that would be it. But I told them that I would continue to follow the policy of my congregation. Then I did some more weddings.

Now the presbytery was angry. They were embarrassed. So they decided to just skip the courts and handle it administratively, by a simple vote of the presbytery. It was another media event. There were over 50 people lined up out the door to speak on my behalf. Most of them gay or lesbian couples. They took a vote and removed me as Minister of Word and Sacrament.

Meanwhile, back at my congregation, people were getting nervous. And the so-called liberals in the denomination were putting enormous pressure on our session to retract its policies and to adopt their "don't ask, don't tell" strategy. They whipped up fear, saying that the presbytery would seize our building and assets, which was a technical possibility but highly unlikely. Slowly, they gained a majority on the session, so when the vote came down from the presbytery to remove me, I was told to vacate my office immediately by my own session. Just a few months earlier, the congregation unanimously voted to stand by me no matter what happened. But a majority on the session had drawn an alliance with the presbytery, and most in the congregation didn't even know about it. The leadership never openly changed the policies. Had they done that, even more people would have left. Instead, they just quietly didn't implement them anymore.

So I was out of a job. My career was toast. My credentials removed. Two kids ready for college. But my deepest wound was a sense of betrayal. What followed were some very, very dark days. Initially, about 75 to 100 of us met in homes and back yards, but it soon dwindled down to half that. We began thinking of ourselves as a church and held Sunday services. They passed the hat to keep me afloat. We limped along and found some space which we renovated ourselves in the inner city. They could afford to pay me less than half of my previous salary, and I got health benefits through my wife's job.

But my marriage was disintegrating, and it soon ended. I remembering moving some things out to the home, and everything seemed to have an electrical charge. Each item I touched brought a rush of emotion and memories. Every job I applied for was a dead end. I was over-qualified, lacked credentials—you name it. And our radical little church didn't seem to be going anywhere. I was, indeed, nothing.

But looking back, these were some of the most amazing experiences of my life. Erna, an immensely talented part of our group, started a meditation group. (She studied with a Tibetan Buddhist teacher in the bay area while she was getting two Ph.D.'s at Stanford.) We started

reading and practicing, and my spiritual life opened up in ways I could never imagine. And I realized that to become who I am, my truest self, emptiness is the place to start.

There's a great poem by May Sarton that has meant a lot to me through the years. It begins:

*Now I become myself.
It's taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces.*

The journey toward one's true self can take "time, many years and places." So much of our lives we wear masks, "other people's faces." We lose track of who we are, and many of us spend the rest of our lives trying to discover our true identity, our true self.

I think that this is the essential religious task—to *become ourselves*. Yet how difficult this can be! It often means being "dissolved and shaken" and requires sometimes painful stripping away the layers of ego and false identity. And taking the perilous journey toward one's true self and true calling requires courage and passion.

Thomas Merton, the great spiritual writer, wrote about the primary spiritual task as *becoming who we truly are*. "Every one of us is shadowed by... a false self," he wrote. And so the primary spiritual task is to become aware of this false self and to let it go—to drop one's masks, other people's faces—and discover one's true self. Merton wrote that when we find our true self we find God, and when we find God we find our true self.

Yet, how difficult this is to do. As Yeats wrote: "It takes more courage to examine the dark corners of your soul than it does for a soldier to fight on the battlefield." "The first step toward finding God," he wrote, "is to discover the truth about myself." So to discover God means first to drop our defenses, our illusory self, with true openness and humility. This is why Abraham Heschel, that great Jewish theologian, would say, "The ultimate sin is the refusal of humans to *become who we are*."

And so may we empty ourselves
to uncover our True Selves.
Over and over
may we become nothing to become ourselves.
Let us trust that this is true
for all of us, for all people.
With courage and humility
may we discover the divine
within ourselves
and within others.

Amen.