

CULTIVATING INNER SPACE

Sunday, September 10, 2023

Rev. Jimmie Scott

So when Richard called and said that he wasn't feeling well and asked if I'd be able to cover for him, I wanted to know, of course, what he was planning to talk about. And he said, "The Power of Your Smile." So I'm thinking about that, and I don't know! [Congregation laughs] I don't know how I can squeeze 20 minutes of ... [congregation laughs] ... talk about the power of a smile.

"Can you give me a little more meat?"

So I'm waiting on the text, and about a half an hour passed. An hour passed. And then finally I heard my little phone jingle. I picked it up and then there was another paragraph.

"That all you got?" [Congregation laughs]

Okay. I'm going to go in a different direction. Maybe not so different, but just a little bit of a different direction.

So anyway, my topic for this morning is, "Cultivating Inner Space." And I want to begin this morning with a few pieces of Scripture that I think are pertinent and that speak to the need for the cultivation of the inner spirit. And the first piece of Scripture comes from the first Gospel of Peter, where the writer talks about duty (D-U-T-Y). And in this particular setting, he's discussing husbands and wives who are caught up in outer adornments and customs. And the customs were things like wearing gold and the plaiting of their hair and the wearing of fancy clothing, and some other cultural norms of this particular time in history.

And he wasn't necessarily negating those things; instead, he was reminding them of the importance of first building up the inner spirit. So it comes from the first Book of Peter, Chapter 3, Verse 3. He said:

"Let it not be that outward adorning and/or plaiting the hair and of wearing gold, or even of putting on apparel. Let that not be your most important thing. Instead, let it be the hidden person of the heart: a meek and quiet spirit which, in the sight of God, is something of great price."

I.E., Let it be that spiritual part of our being. Put another way, this Scripture is talking about tying together all the essential aspects of our being to create a feeling of wholeness -- a wholeness of mind and spirit -- that come together automatically when we keep our hearts and our minds focused on what is most important in our lives. In our own personal lives. And then let be the foundation for how we show up in our everyday lives for everyone else.

So one question I have for you to ponder this morning is: How do you think you show up in your life? Are you confident? Are you friendly? Do you feel competent? Is your mind at peace? Even in the midst of turmoil and challenge?

And the question is posed this morning because I'm personally reminded how easy it is for any of us -- no matter how accomplished we think we are or may be -- to sort of lose sight of what matters most in our lives. Things like self-compassion. Self-compassion; yes, I said it! Self-compassion. Believe it or not, both psychological science and the world's wisdom traditions -- including the Bible -- point to self-compassion as an important source of mental calmness. As an important source of composure. As an important source of evenness of temperament. An important source of inner calmness.

And one writer goes so far as to call it *"the holy grail of calmness and grace."* The holy grail of calmness and grace. I like that!

Let me take you to the second epistle of Peter. This is Chapter 1, Verses 2-9. It says:

"Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God and Christ. Accordingly, his divine power has given unto us all things that pertain unto life ... through the knowledge of him that hat called us by his own glory and virtue. It is given unto us these great and precious promises that you may be partakers of the Divine Nature. For if these things be in you, you will not be barren, nor will you be unfruitful."

As I read that, I thought, you know I've sort of believed this all my life. But the challenge, of course, has also been my old-school teaching. Growing up in this thing called Christianity, we are taught not to focus too much on ourselves. And the irony of that is: The most important aspect of living life is to understand who you are and know who you are.

And when we release all those old-school beliefs and thinking, we can actually make quantum leaps in our lives. And, at the same time, add some gentleness to our harsh world. And there are times when our world is a harsh place. There are times when it's confrontational. There are times when it's judgmental. But whatever type of world you may be feeling like you're living in here today -- or in any moment of your life or any time, period -- those times when we don't feel or believe our connection to God is secure is when we have the most difficult times of our lives.

But when we are grounded in the great and precious promises of the Gospels; when we know the Universe is on our side, regardless of outer circumstances or conditions; and when we are living in our faith, our faith comes easier. Our self-confidence comes easier. We don't worry about challenges or problems as much. Instead, we start to get creative and we are much more open and receptive to Divine guidance. Instead, we can cultivate some inner space; we can deepen our faith, if you will. We can find or create options. These are important things if we want to be successful in today's world.

The first century stoic Seneca said:

"There are more things in life that are more likely to frighten us than are likely to crush us."

But we spend a lot of time worrying about what can crush us. And many times our suffering is more imagination than reality.

When I was about 11 or 12 years of age, my parents allowed me to plant a small garden out in front of the little shack that we lived in. The plot of ground was probably about 20 x 20 feet. And the ground was hard and it was dry. The only tools I had were a garden hoe and a spading fork, as it was called in those days. And to get the ground ready -- to cultivate it, in a generic sense -- you had to loosen the soil by digging into the ground with the fork. And then chop up what you had dug with the hoe. And then just keep turning it over and turning it over until the ground was ready to plant the seeds in it.

And then, once you did that, you planted the seeds and you covered them over. And you watched the space; put some water on it. Waited for an eternal time. And the growth starts and it continues to grow if you continue to feed it until the point of cultivation.

And cultivation didn't stop; you still had to chop out weeds. You had to be mindful of what you had planted. You had to worry about the bugs that would eat up whatever growth was coming out of the ground. And so it was a continual process of working and fertilizing and cultivating until, finally, there was a time of harvest.

But come harvest time, all the kids in the neighborhood who had mocked my little garden, and all the adult doubters, were silenced as I began to pick green beans and a few heads of cabbage, and so on and so forth. Until all of a sudden, not only were we having a good time chomping on green beans and cabbage, everybody in the neighborhood was participating. [Congregation laughs]

And so I learned a few lifelong habits -- and also a "hard truth," as the Scriptures would call it -- about cultivation and about work. And how you can not only do that externally, but you can do it internally. And that's the process I've been on since childhood -- is that internal cultivation. That requires some self-compassion. And I've had to learn that for myself. And I would suspect that most of us have. And these are traits that most of us have not been taught to pursue. And we are definitely not culturally trained to do.

But -- and it's a big but. No pun intended! [Congregation laughs] God, I couldn't let that go. [Laughs with congregation] Oh, boy. Some days, this brain! Wow. Jimmie, did you just do that?

But we may be spiritually wired to do these things. But it's just hard for us to be mindful of that reality. I want you to listen to these words from the prophet, Jeremiah, one of my favorite Biblical characters. He said:

"The Lord appeared to me from ages past, saying 'I have loved you with an everlasting love. And therefore, with loving kindness, I have drawn you; I have created you and continued my faithfulness in you and to you. Everlasting love I have given to you.'"

And the point of that Scripture is: Everlasting love is an eternal principle. It's also a universal principle. It's as broad and as deep as you can get. However, it is our individual responsibility to cultivate that love. We've got immense talents and gifts, we human beings, but it's our responsibility to cultivate them. To keep them alive. And to enable them to flourish in us and to scatter the seeds in this garden of life that we live and exist in. And to reap the harvest in such a way that keeps abundance flowing, not only in our lives, but in the lives of everyone that we interact with.

That keeps life exciting and productive. And it also keeps the body temple strong and resilient and active. And it keeps us motivated and productive. And those are things that we need to be constantly aware of living in this journey. And there are only but a few years of it. No matter how we may become, they pale in comparison to the depth of what life can be. And I'm learning to appreciate that so much more at the tender, young age of 81. [Congregation laughs. One congregant applauds] I've got a few friends. [Congregation laughs]

Life is a journey. And few great journeys are completed without some detours. So it's inevitable when we get to a point where we feel like we are off-track; to feel as if we are losing our way or have lost our way. And that happens to us. It comes to us or through us under the guise of illness. Or it comes to us under the guise of confusion. It comes to us under the guise of age. It comes to us under many different guises. And our challenge is always to rise to the occasion. To know that we are worthy of God's love and God's grace and God's abundance.

There's an art to learning how to live with life's challenges and hardships. And there's an art to learning how to heal ourselves and, by virtue of healing ourselves, heal the world around us. There's an art to discovering light amidst all the darkness that we see in our lives and in our world sometimes. And like any other art, the art of living in peace calls for some great love and discipline. Great self-love. Great universal love and discipline. And we must be willing not to turn away from it, nor to shun the shadows in our lives, but to turn towards them and to face them. And with courage and love and forgiveness, move through them. And that takes a kind of fearlessness that is not ordinary.

There's an ancient saying by Saint John of the Cross that seems appropriate for this moment. He said:

"If you want to be sure of the road you tread, close your eyes and walk in the darkness."

If you want to be sure of the road you tread, close your eyes and walk in the darkness.

And smile! [Congregation laughs]

By nature, I'm a stoic. Having said that, it by no means suggests that I don't have feelings or emotion. Quite the contrary. I feel deeply and I have incredible emotions. I have a smile in my heart all the time.

Let me leave you with this story.

A great rabbi spent years in solitude; years meditating on the mystery of the divine in all things. And when he finally returned to society, his eyes shone with the beauty of what he discovered. And many seekers came to him to ask for his truth, yet he was always reluctant to answer them, to put it into words.

And finally, after years of pressure, he finally relented. And the seekers took those words with them everywhere they went. And then they spoke them, and they wrote them down, and they created sacred texts about them. And they created religious societies. And they were formed by those who repeated them over and over, until no one remembered that the words were really about an experience.

And so, as his words spread, the rabbi became disheartened. And he mused to himself, *"I had hoped to help, but perhaps I should have just kept quiet."*

And that's what I'm going to do. Shut up and sit down! [Congregation laughs]

God bless!

[Congregants applauds]

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