

Sermon: Getting Down and Dirty**Scripture: Mark 10:17-23****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 7, 2018**

Many of us have a way of understanding our existence that is at odds with our biblical faith. It's become so much a part of how we understand spirituality though that it's hard to even notice it as a distinct philosophy instead of just the way things are. We assume it's a Christian understanding but in fact is derived more from Greek philosophy. It's been named perennial philosophy and has its roots in the Renaissance and put simply it posits a great chain of being, suggesting that reality consists of different grades or levels from the highest, most subtle layer where Divinity or God resides to the lowest, most dense and dark level at the other end of the spectrum associated with matter. As one source of this perspective, think of Plato's allegory of the cave and how the material things of this world are only a shadow of the real, which exists in a heavenly realm imperceptible to the human being.

One of the unfortunate results of Perennial philosophy is the association of matter with corruption and evil, trapping the soul so to speak while the Spirit is pure and good. And that notion has infected the Western mind and therefore the Western world ever since. In this line of thinking, the pathway towards human wholeness is by way of leaving the dense corruptible material world behind and climbing the great chain of being to the more subtle spiritual levels to God. So as a case in point about how we commonly accept this as basic religious teaching – when we think about death many of us accept that it's a process of

leaving our corrupt and corruptible body here and our spirit flies off to heaven - going off to a better place. However that dualistic separation of body and spirit, materiality and immateriality is more Greek than it is Judeo-Christian.*

The truly Christian teaching is that Jesus is God incarnate, Divinity enfleshed, and that the resurrection is transcendent material reality - not a ghost story or a light heavenly aura of spirit, but a body to be touched and that can eat fish on the beach, etc. It falls squarely in the realm of a mystery to be pondered in the heart more than something to be grasped with the rational mind. The most famous of Christian scriptures is “God so LOVED the world that he gave his only begotten son”, not that God saw the world as a trap for souls so he sent Jesus to rescue them and bring them to an ethereal kingdom of clouds and harps and pearly gates.

No. God descended – so to speak – and became fleshy, not diminished and corrupted by flesh but revealed in flesh. That’s the mystery; matter and spirit unified, made one, not matter as a lesser corrupted state of creation to be rid of. And as the modern mystic and writer Cynthia Bourgeault points out we have recently begun to realize through scientific means this Judeo-Christian take on reality – that spirit and matter are not so much opposites or fundamentally all that different but that matter is actually a more condensed form of energy and what we have traditionally called spirit would be a much more subtle, not so condensed form of energy. Still same reality, not opposing.

So most of us in the West have been formed by a spiritual philosophy that suggests our human form, the flesh, must be overcome in order for us to evolve spiritually and it has created for us a lot of

problems in terms of how we relate to the flesh. So for example in so far as the Catholic Church teaches celibacy as a denial of the bodily and its drives so that they can access some higher plane of spiritual perfection, it has been influenced more by Greek Philosophy than Christ himself and we've seen a severe and heavy price paid for this distortion.

Or in our own Protestant tradition, in so far as conservative Christians have made the faith journey about saving the soul for heaven, and dismissing the body and the earth, they are devoting themselves more to Plato than to Christ and our earth is pays the price. In the Hebrew creation myth of Genesis, human dominion over the natural world means stewardship and care for this blessed and divinely-breathed material existence, not ownership and domination of it! It requires a terrible convergence of perennial philosophical thinking and an industrial revolution to give humanity the kind of permission to rape and pillage God's beautiful earth as we've done for the last couple hundred years. We should not lay that at the feet of our religion as some people have done, but at the feet of opportunists who have abused the sacred texts for their purposes.

True Judeo-Christian teaching holds out for the holiness of materiality and proposes an opposite trajectory from an ascending chain of being; the way to holiness is not an ascent from the material world through higher planes of existence to the eternal realm of Spirit, but rather spiritual growth is descent into deeper materiality. God came down, so to speak, God took on flesh. So, for instance, it would not be a denial of sex and our bodily drives that makes one more holy or spiritual, but the immersing more fully into them so as to harness them for a gift of love-expression towards the other. It's not that the body is

dirty and sex must be avoided, it's that the body is infinitely precious and vulnerable and that it must be exquisitely attended to in order to more fully know and love God and one another.

All this sets us up, I'm hoping, if you've followed me thus far, for hearing the scripture today in the way it should be heard, for children are the quintessential embodied, physical, active, loud, uncouth at times, smelly, snotty and sniffing little human creatures who have not quite been quaffed and contained and domesticated and controlled by societies mores. At young ages, we've not quite gotten our clutches into them enough to show them the way they are supposed to be in order to be good and upright and appropriate little people. And that's why the disciples were trying to keep them away from Jesus – “you don't belong here, your disrupting things, get out of here, this is for important adults here who know how to be and how to behave who can glean the spiritual wisdom from this man, not you all who want to jump on his back and sit on his knee and throw the ball with him, and look how dirty your hands and messy your clothes! We're talking about spiritual things here!” But Jesus doesn't stand for it, does he? He tells the disciples to – in no way - hinder the children from coming unto him “for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. The Kingdom belongs to them!! What are you doing?!”

Once again, while the disciples would be right in line with Perennial philosophical thinking that basically the way to the kingdom is a hierarchical ascent to God by growing up and receiving the right knowledge and transcending the things of this world, Jesus says, “NO! Idiot disciples! How long must I be with you for you to get this? One must descend to get there - You must become a servant, you give over

your very life, you humble yourself, you become last, you become like a child, down and dirty romping around in this beautiful dirt that God so loves! When Jesus wants to talk about God and the Kingdom of heaven where does he go? Not into this ethereal metaphysical talk about angels and beings of light and esoteric mind altering states. He NEVER does. He talks about dirty shepherds and sheep. He talks about warm yeasty bread. He tells stories of digging into the earth for buried treasure and squawking birds nesting in trees. He gets down and dirty and as earthy as he possibly could get! The way is not upwards to ethereal light but downwards towards the dirty messy earth!

Don't we know this in our own day to day lives as well. The way through the heaviness and struggle of grief, for example, over the loss of someone we love or the breaking of relationship is not to rise above it, master our emotions, and have people tell us how well we seem to be doing, but it's right down into it, full immersion into the dark dank depths of grief in order to come out on the other side and we are often materially transformed through that refiners fire, aren't we?

Ok enough prose, let's try parable. Let me end by telling a story that Cynthia Bourgeault tells to get this spirituality of descent clarified.

Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway land, there was a kingdom of acorns – a myriad of acorns nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree.

Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, and fully Westernised acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called "Getting All You Can out of Your Shell." There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were

retreats and spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, who apparently dropped “out of the blue” by a passing bird. He was odd: capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a strange and wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, he spoke to all that would listen to him, and said, “We...are...that!”

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded.

But, one or two of them continued to engage him in conversation: “So tell us, how would we become that tree?” “Well,” said he, pointing downward, “it has something to do with going into the ground...and cracking open the shell.” “Insane,” they responded. “Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn’t be acorns anymore!”

There is transformation and a passing through pearly gates that happens in and through these blessed bodies and this blessed earth, at any moment. The way there is not by rising above our humanness but getting down and dirty and sinking more fully into it. Christ is not our space shuttle pilot flying us away from this life to some heavenly realm, but our guide for spelunking more deeply into it! Hail, Jesus Christ, True Body with pierced side from whom all mercy flows, Amen!

*From Cynthia Bourgeault’s “The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three: Discovering the Radical Truth at the Heart of Christianity”, Boulder: Shambala, 2103.

INVITATION TO COMMUNION

Our central sacrament and ritual in our church is not an act that gives us some out-of-body, spiritual experience, it's not a ritual that mesmerizes and floats us off into the ether it is an act that puts us right into our bodies where we ingest the very earth into ourselves and become one with it through bread and fruit of the vine. It's an in-your-body spiritual experience cause how else are we to know God except fully embodied? So the only people allowed at this table are those with a body. You cannot get into some mental psychic state and telepathically receive the body and blood of Christ. No you've got to use your body, open your body, receive the body and remember that's the path to God. Everyone is welcome here and if you can't get your body here we'll bring or bodies out there to serve you. Receive the body and the blood of Christ into your body and your blood and know that at your core you and God are in loving union with one another, and since God is in loving union with all the earth you too are drawn into that loving union as well. So come for all things are ready!