SPIRITUALITY AS TREASURE

A Sermon by the Rev. Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life
Stanford Memorial Church, University Public Worship
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This is the last of my four-part sermon series this summer on "Personal Spirituality." I've taken you on subsequent Sundays through warning signs of cult involvement, a theory of stages of spiritual development from childhood through adolescence and adulthood, and my suggestions on how to become spiritually open if you have intellectual and emotional reservations. This morning I'd like to talk about getting off the armchair or couch and actively engaging in some kind of spiritual discipline.

The gospel reading this morning[1] speaks of the kingdom of heaven being like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone finds; in his joy, the finder goes out and sells all he has in order to buy the field and claim the treasure as his own. Or the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great value which a merchant finds; the merchant then sells all that he has in order to buy this one precious pearl. I wrote a book several years ago entitled Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning.[2] I was trying to speak to people who have

left the faith of their childhood, or who never had one in the first place, and are trying to find a new spiritual path or to reconnect to the tradition they once knew, but now through adult eyes and ears and senses. After gently encouraging readers to open themselves up -- to begin thinking in a mature way about religion -- and to allow themselves to experience the religious impulse afresh, primarily through noticing what's happening around them in nature, I challenge readers to pick a spiritual path and start walking. Even if it turns out not to be the right way for you later on, you won't get anywhere spiritually without starting. Spiritual life of necessity requires exertion and effort. It withers on the couch and in the armchair, and perhaps in the pew. Treasure is out there to be found, and it can bring the greatest of joy, but one needs to start plowing fields and actively looking for it.

I understand how frightening and difficult it is for many people to commit themselves spiritually before they think they've gathered enough experience and knowledge about what they're getting into. Yet, I see this as a process, not a final decision.

I know a lot of people who are spiritually paralyzed inside of their heads. They think, and read, and talk about religion and spirituality; they might even come to church. Yet, they're

incapable of acting and feeling spiritually. Their heart has not been touched. They're afraid of taking risks. "There are always two sides, or many sides, to any question," they opine. "It's hard to choose. It's hard to know where to start." Well, start anywhere that looks interesting, I respond, but start. Act. Do. Make some mistakes and get knocked down. Pull yourself up and start again. Real learning requires an interplay between action and reflection, between heart and head.

I should make it clear, if it isn't already, that from my perspective there are many paths up the spiritual mountain which can ultimately reach the top, regardless of whether a particular path is rocky or smooth, arduous or easy, beautiful or pedestrian. I'm personally a committed Christian, as were the founders of this university, Leland and Jane Stanford, but they, like I am, were thoroughly convinced that no particular religious tradition or spiritual discipline has any lock on "salvation," insight, community, or meaning. That's particularly true when we survey the wide paths of the major world religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, which in a great variety of manifestations have been around for millennia and attracted billions of followers. In that vein, there's an inscription over in the east transept of this church explaining

that "Whichever form of religion furnishes [an individual] the greatest comfort, the greatest solace, it is the form which should be adopted, be its name what it will."

In my book I write about a woman to whom I refer by the pseudonym of Vivian Cooper. Vivian's father committed suicide when she was three, leaving her mother, Suzanne, a widow in Charleston, South Carolina, at the age of 24. Although she remarried three years later, Suzanne was embittered for life. She became a virulent alcoholic and chain-smoker. Vivian remembers her mother as a mean and angry person -- emotionally unavailable and to be avoided if at all possible. As a result, Vivian spent little time at home, instead visiting friends, walking the dog, or going to the local library.

Besides two years in a Southern Baptist private school, she had little religious involvement during her childhood. Sometimes she went fishing with her stepfather on Sundays. He called it his religion. He'd say, "I'd rather be out here enjoying the beauty of the world God has given us than sitting in a stuffy room with a bunch of people in suits." Her stormy home life caused her to wonder about God and religion, however, and to look for answers to the questions of why she had to lose her own father, why she did not have a loving mother, and why there was so little joy in their

family life.

Two clues emerged in her high school World Literature class. There she became best friends with a classmate who was the son of a reform rabbi; she began to spend a lot of time at his house, enjoying long talks with the rabbi about the meaning of life. She also read several works of European existentialists, including The Plague by Albert Camus. The doctor who has the miserable task of treating dying plague victims says he does so because there is honor in "the daily round" of his patients. He keeps at it because he can, and feels he should, rather than giving up in despair. She remembers sitting at the rabbi's kitchen table discussing this book, the existentialists, and God. Her father's suicide was his choice, for whatever reasons, but it was not a choice she wanted to make. As the rabbi told her, "You have so many gifts and so much to do."

In her junior year in high school she decided to get off the couch and start walking, figuratively speaking. She began the long process of converting to Judaism. She'll always remember her stepfather's reaction when she told her parents about her plans: "Jews have gotten a bad rap throughout history. Is that really a group you want to be part of? Don't forget about Hitler." As a result, she read every book on her rabbi's shelf and in the public

library about Hitler's Holocaust. The courage and fortitude of so many Jews in the face of that level of suffering made her even more certain that this was the faith for her. Given her own extended childhood suffering at home, she was profoundly respectful of a religion that affirmed life so strongly in the midst of death and destruction.

She continued to participate in synagogue life throughout her college years and beyond. What was most compelling and transformative for her was the sense of community which lay at the heart of Judaism. As best-selling author Rabbi Harold Kushner has inquired, "Does any other people celebrate the special moments of life, the births and birthdays and weddings, with as much food, as much laughter and as many tears, as Jews do?"[3]

Vivian remembers reading Kushner's book When Bad Things Happen To Good People[4] the first year it came out. Spurred by the death of his fourteen year old son from a rare aging condition, he wrote "a book that would affirm life." He explained: "It would have to say that no one ever promised us a life free from pain and disappointment. The most anyone promised us was that we would not be alone in our pain, and that we would be able to draw upon a source outside ourselves for the strength and courage we would need to survive life's tragedies and life's unfairness." Founded

in the story of a people liberated from slavery in ancient Egypt and brought through the wilderness to a promised land, Judaism has always been a communal religion. Acts, including regular rituals at home with family, and deeds of steadfast love and peacemaking within the larger community, have always been more important than beliefs. As Kushner puts it, "doing Jewish" as "something that happens between you and other people" is more important than "being Jewish" as "a state of mind."[5]

Hermann Hesse's 1922 book, Siddhartha, still has enormous resonance for students these days I've found, as I've used it in classes with undergraduates at Tufts University and with business students at Harvard before I came to Stanford last year. I'll be trying it out with Stanford business students this next academic year. The main character grows up very comfortably in a affluent Hindu home. In his teenage years, however, he becomes ill at ease with his wealth and privilege. He experiences a deep spiritual longing for something that will give true meaning and purpose to his life.

So he begins walking, literally, by leaving his home and joining a group of penniless wandering ascetics called Samanas. They teach him a lot of spiritual exercises like yoga and meditation, fasting and ritual service to others. After three

years of this he meets the historical Buddha, Gotama of the Sakyas, from whom he learns a middle way between asceticism and affluence. Siddhartha in effect becomes a Buddhist, but only by taking seriously the Buddha's own teaching that enlightenment must be arrived at by seeking one's own spiritual way, wherever it may lead.

Siddhartha works hard for the rest of his life at overcoming Self, at ridding himself of ego, including during years of employment as a businessman and romantic involvement with a beautiful courtesan. He has setbacks, though: for a while becoming trapped by property and possessions and then failing at love. Ultimately, though, he finds an enlightened teacher who is a ferryman, and joining him in work, Siddhartha learns deeply from him, the river and his passengers as he ferries them back and forth. In the end Siddhartha becomes enlightened himself and radiates compassion, the supreme form of love in Buddhism.

Now, I'm not counseling switching religions, necessarily, and I recognize that many of you are devoted Christians, as I am. Yet, that's not to say that engaging in Buddhist meditation, for example, can't help deepen or open up Christian prayer life in a new way. For example, I explained in my sermon two weeks ago that Donna Radley had that experience, with Buddhist meditation helping

her to access Christianity in a very different form than she'd known as a child. Of course, within the Christian tradition itself, there's a very wide range of opportunities for spiritual exercise, from many different kinds of prayer life, disciplines like walking the labyrinth, rituals like communion, chanting as we do here in Taize and Compline services weekly during the academic year, purification experiences like fasting, organized social service and action, sacred dance, and directed Bible study.

Let me conclude with the story of a social worker I also wrote about in Finding Your Religion. I call her Janice Brown. She left her Methodist Christian roots behind in high school, not believing in God anymore, and then in her thirties deeply re-connected with the religion of her childhood through Ignatian prayer. A university contact referred her to an Institute for Spiritual Development when she felt as if she were in an existential crisis of meaningless in her life. With a spiritual director there who met with her for an hour a week, and subsequently through a number of retreats, she was taught the prayer method of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuits in the sixteenth century. Here's what Francis, her spiritual director, first told her about the method: "Find a quiet space and make yourself comfortable. Think briefly about what you most

desire. That is, what do you really want, or what are you looking for? Then slowly read a short biblical passage to yourself. As you do, stay with any imagery that catches you. Try not to think about it intellectually or figure it out. Instead just let it 'pray you' -- flow over you and through you. Pause and savor whatever draws you or moves you."

She started off reading Psalm 25. The line that struck her most powerfully was "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love." Yet, there were passages that disturbed her too. They didn't ring right or true. For example, one line said that "the friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him," and another asked God to "pardon my guilt, for it is great." Fear and guilt! This was exactly what she didn't want to hear. This was why she had stayed away from churches as an adult. Besides, she was very uncomfortable with all of this "Lord this" and "God that" language anyway. She reported this to Francis in her second spiritual direction meeting. He gently asked her to let everything go which repulsed her: "Just stay with the words that touch you and comfort you. Enter into them. Contemplate them. Don't worry. Just listen quietly. Just be."

This started working for her. During the next few days she took twenty minutes each morning before her day began. She sat on

her feet in a sunny chair in the living room. The Bible lay open on her knee. She read until she found a phrase that touched her. Then she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and let it percolate down from her head to her toes. This was such a different kind of prayer than she used to imagine she was "supposed to do." There was no need to think about some man somewhere to whom she should be speaking. She was not sending off petitions which she hoped would be answered.

Over the next few months, Francis taught Janice more about Ignatian prayer, helping her see how concrete and full of faces it really is. As she has described it to me: "You make free use of your imagination to put yourself right in the midst of the Bible passage upon which you're concentrating. For example, as you read the Gospel story of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:1-42, you might use all your senses to imagine the noonday sun burning your skin, the sound of Jesus' voice breaking the silence, the sight of sweat-stained clothes and dusty sandals, the smells of sheep and goats in the vicinity, and the taste of cool water from the well."

Recounting the story to me, Janice continued: "You could also imagine how the Samaritan woman progressively comes to see the face of God in Jesus. First he's just an exhausted foreigner

passing through her land. Then he's a man talking to her -- inappropriately to a woman in public and to a non-Jew in asking her to share water with him. He begins to speak of the living water he brings which is different from the well water. The woman takes his words literally and sees him as a purveyor of easily accessible and totally thirst-quenching water. She asks him for some so she won't have to keep coming back to the well every day to draw water.

This particular Bible story had a lot of power for Janice, as she entered into the words and let them "pray her" during several weeks of early mornings in her living room chair. It was the image of "living water" that provided the greatest comfort. As Jesus said, "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty." Francis also encouraged her to enter into her own imaginative conversation each morning with Jesus inside the story. She remembers asking Him, "What am I going to do with my own emptiness?" She then visualized Jesus turning to her with deep brown eyes and a voice like a bell. "There is no emptiness," he said. She had expected him to say, "I'll fill your emptiness with my living water." What could Jesus' response mean? Well, why not ask him? So she stayed within her imaginative dialogue and did. He responded: "There's nothing inherently wrong with

you. You're okay. You're not empty."

She described all this to Francis in their next meeting. Janice ended by saying: "It was so strange! Of course, this was all in my imagination. But then the make-believe conversation got beyond me. An answer came back that I didn't anticipate, and worse yet didn't understand. But I stayed with it and asked another question. I know I couldn't have made up that answer myself, so it was like a revelation." Janice wondered if her imagination was more powerful than she thought. Maybe she was just accessing some of her unconscious. Francis' response was: "Stay with that. Pray with that. Ask God's help in discerning what's His voice and what isn't."

Janice went on: "The darnedest part of it is that this actually felt like what I think prayer is supposed to be. I felt like I was having a real conversation with Jesus, and he was answering." Of course our imaginations can be powerful when we begin to give them free rein. On the other hand, the Christian claim is that it's possible, and desirable, to reach beyond ourselves and our own minds to have real dialogue with God in the person of Jesus. Part of what's so valuable in working with scripture in prayer, according to Janice, and then having personal spiritual direction with someone like Francis, is to sort out

what's just one's ego and what's coming from beyond or from deep within one's own soul.

By now Janice has worked with three different spiritual directors over the years. She's still a Protestant Christian, and now she goes to church regularly. In her prayer life, she has clearly found a "God speak" that's not her. She recounts the "amazing process of talking to God" since her first days with Francis: "There hasn't been one time when God wasn't present to me in the critical times in my life -- thinking about suicide, grief over my mother's death, fear of teenage clients with guns and knives, the joy of getting this job I have now."

Clearly, Janice has found spiritual treasure through this method of Christian prayer. I have no doubt that she'd have been willing to sell all she possessed in order to bring this treasure into her life. Siddhartha likewise gave up all he possessed in order to find spiritual treasure within a Buddhist context. Ultimately he found enlightenment and radiated compassion to others. And Vivian Cooper left a stormy home life, in her case, to find her treasure in an active Judaism which affirmed life through family rituals and community-oriented service to alleviate suffering. As the reading from Isaiah[6] this morning put it, "Do not fear or be afraid," for God is ultimately our rock and our

redeemer, the first and the last. Our job is to get up off the couch where we've been mere observers, to start walking, and to work actively on finding that one pearl of great value.

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1. Matthew 13: 44-52.

2. Scotty McLennan, Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999).

3. Harold S. Kushner, To Life! A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking (New York: Warner Books, 1993).

4. Harold S. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (New York: Schocken Books, 1981). The quotations in this paragraph come from page 133.

5. Kushner, To Life!, p. 301.

6. Isaiah 44: 6-8