

Stanford Memorial Church
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SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS

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Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 34.29-35
Gospel Lesson: Luke 9.28-43a

At first glance these two stories, one immediately following the other, appear to belong to entirely different worlds. In the first narrative, Jesus and his disciples, Peter, John and James, experience a mountaintop encounter with the apparitions of two of the great figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. In the second narrative, the next morning at the bottom of the mountain, a desperate father pleads with Jesus to heal his son who is subject to extreme convulsions. The first scene—usually referred to as the transfiguration of Jesus—strikes us as so sublime, almost overwhelming in its brilliance and glory. The second episode, by contrast, has a more earthy and mundane quality, though certainly noteworthy by its miraculous healing.

In point of fact, these stories very much belong together. We may think of their interdependent nature as two sides of the same coin. Each enriches and enhances the other. If we considered them independently, as if each stood alone—as a story in and of itself and no more—we would miss much of the richness of their interrelatedness.

The first story occupies a treasured niche within church tradition. Anyone familiar with the Bible will almost invariably be struck by the similarities between this story and the one of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Moses' transforming experience of the divine seems to be replicated by Jesus and his disciples. Over the centuries countless artists have attempted to capture something of the ineffable glory of Jesus and his disciples in conversation with two of the great pillars of the faith, Moses and Elijah. The brilliant transfiguration underscores the intimate connection between Jesus and God.

Here we have an overwhelming illustration of spirituality. Spirituality is essentially ineffable, it defies description. When we sense an encounter with the divine, words simply prove to be inadequate. In all likelihood, Peter, James and John were dumbfounded when they found themselves with Jesus, Moses and Elijah in this divine milieu. They were experiencing the immediacy of spirituality—what Rudolf Otto, in his classic book, *The Idea of the Holy*, described as the *mysterium tremendum*.

Spirituality forever eludes our efforts to contain or define it. Webster's *New College Dictionary* defines faith as "unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence." In point of fact that sort of proof is not available, because spirituality cannot be measured or quantified. You cannot call an 800 number and order a box of spirituality. It cannot be objectified and analyzed, anymore than you could order a bushel of faith or a gallon of hope. You cannot even buy it on eBay. Yet, while it cannot be

measured, it can hardly be ignored. Helen Keller captured this pervasive sense of the spiritual when she wrote, “The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or touched. They must be felt with the heart.” It is almost impossible to avoid some sense of spirituality in our life, especially here in California—with our magnificent mountains, challenging desserts, fruitful valleys, and enticing beaches. I regularly feel blessed whenever I am able to get in my kayak and go out on the bay at 6:00 in the morning, whether in winter darkness or in the warmth of a summer sunrise.

The almost universal recognition of a spiritual dimension in life, and the propensity of many people to refer to themselves as “spiritual,” is in many ways a fairly recent phenomenon. For centuries people were more inclined to refer to themselves as “religious” rather than as “spiritual.” The reason for this avoidance of referring to oneself as spiritual had to do with the practice of equating spirituality with spiritualism and ghosts. People who were spiritual were into séances and extrasensory perception. Thus many believers were inclined to say, “I am religious,” rather than “I am spiritual.”

In recent years, however, the idea of being a spiritual person has enjoyed a surge in popularity. Indeed it has almost become fashionable to declare, “I am spiritual but not religious.” Or, when is the last time you heard someone say, “I am religious but not spiritual?” To be spiritual seems to convey sophistication and liberation from outmoded practices and rituals as well as all the errors and atrocities performed in the name of religion. Should you, for example, choose to write a book on the role of faith in healing, you will do much better to entitle it “Spirituality and Healing” rather than “Religion and Healing.” But this is something of a paradox since, by definition, spirituality is nonempirical; it cannot be quantified or measured. So if you write a book about Spirituality and Healing how can you demonstrate the validity of your argument without including objective, empirical data? The answer, of course, is that any book that portends to be about spirituality and healing will in all probability be about religion and healing.

This brings us to the question of what then is the relation between spirituality and religion? One attempt to answer this question is given to us—somewhat unintentionally, by the disciple Peter in the first story from the gospel lesson. At the end of the glorious moment of transfiguration, after the images of Moses and Elijah had disappeared and they were heading down the mountain, Peter recovered from his speechlessness and blurted out, in his typically impetuous fashion, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one of you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Luke 9.33b). And the passage continues by informing us that Peter did not know what he was saying. This statement has been understood by commentators to mean Peter’s suggestion of three equal shrines, while admirable, did not give sufficient recognition to the primacy of Jesus over the Old Testament figures. But in spite of this misunderstanding on Peter’s part, I think he was giving voice to something which is inevitable and intrinsic in the relationship between spirituality and religion.

To put it another way, neither man (nor woman) can live by spirituality alone. If spirituality is to have any meaning it has to be implemented by religion. Religion is the embodiment or incarnation of spirituality. Religion attempts to domesticate the spiritual, to make it relevant to everyday life, which can be an asset—as well as, unfortunately, a

liability, especially if religion occupies a place of power. When we look at the history of religious abuse over the centuries it seems to occur almost invariably when religion attains a position of power. The spiritual base becomes perverted by religion, in order to maintain its place of prominence and destroy any threats to its power. I suspect this has much to do with why many people today have chosen to describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” They are all for experiencing a sense of the divine in their lives, but they do not want to be associated with such things as the crusades, the Inquisition, the burning witches—and so forth. Moreover, one may enjoy the spirituality status without having to deal with the messy religious issues of responsibility and accountability.

Nevertheless, in spite of his misunderstanding, Peter was giving voice to a basic religious impulse which attempts to incarnate the spiritual dimension of life: namely, the building of shrines, temples, altars, churches and cathedrals. Whenever there has been a spiritual encounter in history—from Abraham to the present day Shrine at Lourdes—the common practice has been to build some kind of memorial or religious structure. It may begin with just a few stones; but it usually expands over the centuries and often becomes a highly regarded, lovely, and inspiring center of worship. Indeed, we might say building religious structures and practicing religious rituals is one of the three components of religion, if we accept the definition of religion given by the prophet Micah when he wrote, “and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6.8).

Constructing religious buildings is part of walking “humbly with our God.” It is a recognition and affirmation that God calls us in love and grace, and we respond individually and as a community of faith with gratitude—through the use of such things as services of worship with prayers for ourselves and others, hymns, special music, reading and interpreting scripture, and the sacraments of baptism and communion. And when studies are published on the role of faith in healing, they almost consistently find that individuals who are part of a faith community, who pray for others and know they are prayed for, and who worship regularly consistently tend, on a statistical basis, to live healthier and longer lives.

In addition to “walking humbly with God” religion has a second component which has to do with justice. In biblical times justice focused on a concern for the poor, those with illnesses, orphans, and widows. Today the issues of justice continue and in many ways seem more complex. Perhaps widows have fared better on the whole, as some studies indicate they control a significant part of the wealth in the U.S; and orphans may not be quite as destitute. But evil still seems alive and well as we find ourselves facing a host of justice issues: 40 million people in our country without health care coverage . . . our responsibility to maintain our environment, complicated by global warming . . . what does it mean to conduct a just war? . . . maintaining a strong educational system . . . responding to issues of deprivation and starvation around the world. Our modern resources of instant communication have made these justice issues more timely and omnipresent than ever.

Then we come to the third component of religion, after walking humbly with our God and practicing justice, and that is to “love mercy.” This brings us back to our second story in the gospel lesson, a frightened and despairing father comes to Jesus with his son, pleading, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child” (Luke 9.38b). For centuries infant mortality was the rule not the exception; couples usually had as many children as they could, knowing only a few would survive. For this father, his child was the whole world, the only thing that mattered. And Jesus reached out in mercy, and healed him. In the last hundred years or so we have been blessed that infant mortality no longer decimates families, even as we are learning that gifts can also bring challenges—such as the challenge of over-population. Of course healing remains an ever-present human need. Illness, diseases, accidents and violence are woven into the fabric of our life, which at one time or another will cause us as individuals and families to seek healing. The hospitals we enjoy today, temples of healing, are essentially products of the religious concern for healing by religious orders and denominations. One of the rewards of visiting in the hospital as a chaplain is to encounter the many ways in which patients and families often experience God’s caring and healing presence as a part of their journey through a dark valley of illness.

This interaction of the religious concern to provide healing and the patient’s experience of God’s care and presence bring us back to, and illumine, our gospel lesson. On the Mount of Transfiguration Jesus and the disciples were overwhelmed with the spiritual reality of God’s presence. But it did not end there. Jesus was not content with Peter’s suggestion to build a little temple on the spot. Rather the spiritual renewal they experienced was expressed in the religious act of extending care to a distraught father and healing to a son racked by convulsions. In the process of healing, the father and son sensed God’s presence and care. This is the way it works: spirituality finds expression in religion, and our religion should deepen and enhance our spirituality. Sometimes they get out of focus. Spirituality can become self-indulgent ecstasy, an end in itself, with a temptation towards feelings of superiority. Or, as a counter example, religion can become proprietary, convinced their particular branch is the only truth; they have God in their box, a monopoly which can become violent in asserting its claims and demands. These are aberrations which remind us of the importance of our needing to be spiritual and religious, each enriching and reinforcing the other. So may you go into the season of Lent, which begins this week with Ash Wednesday with a spiritual sense of God’s love and care, which encourages religious expression through the worship of walking humbly with your God, practicing justice, and extending mercy. Do so in the assurance that these expressions of religion well, in turn, enrich your spirit. Amen.

