

The Spirit Inside

John 7:37-44

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First Central Congregational UCC
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Friday night the confirmation class took a retreat. We went to Elizabeth Wearin's farm in Red Oak, Iowa to learn about God, creation, and God's covenant with us to help care for the earth. Unfortunately, it was cold and windy while we were there, limiting the amount of time we could be outside enjoying nature.

But I did have a lovely moment on Saturday morning. Only Elizabeth and I were awake and up. We were having our first cup of coffee. Standing in Elizabeth's kitchen pouring the coffee, I looked out the east-facing window just as the sun broke over the horizon, casting a tangerine-colored orange glow on the farm. Quite pretty. I pulled a chair up beside that window and drank that first cup of coffee in peace watching the sun rise and the birds playing in the trees.

A moment ago Mark read the poem "At the River Clarion" by Mary Oliver. The poem comes from her book entitled *Evidence*, which I think is a most intriguing title. It makes one wonder--Evidence for what? For God? Meaning? Beauty? Goodness? Or all of the above?

There is a quote at the beginning of the book from the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard: "We create ourselves by our choices." Does Mary Oliver think that we have to choose to see evidence of love, goodness, and God?

The book's first poem is entitled "Yellow" and is quite short.

There is the heaven we enter
through institutional grace
and there are the yellow finches bathing and singing
in the lowly puddle.

We learn about grace from the doctrines of the church. And we experience it when we watch the birds. That's one reason we go to Elizabeth's farm for that particular series of lessons in the confirmation class. It is one thing to talk about God as creator and our role in caring for the earth. It is another thing to have a little experience of nature, to feed the horse, and to see the routines of the farm.

In the poem Mark read, Mary Oliver can't tell you for certain who God is or even if God exists, but she does know something about the beauty and goodness of the river and how it contributes to the meaning of life. She does know that if God exists, then God is everywhere, and that this is important. She writes,

Yes, it could be that I am a tiny piece of God, and

each of you too, or at least
of his intention and his hope.
Which is a delight beyond measure.

In a similar line of thought, Jesus said,

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me,
and let the one who believes in me drink. . . .
Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.

And the author of the Gospel informs us that "he said this about the Spirit."

Father Richard Rohr wrote, "The Holy Spirit is that aspect of God that works largely from within and 'secretly,' at 'the deepest levels of our desiring.'" **If we are thirsty, then we must drink from the living water that flows from out of our own hearts and this is the Spirit of God.**

Father Rohr is one of the bestselling spiritual writers today. He is a Franciscan priest who makes his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In 2011 he wrote a book entitled *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. The basic message of this book is that real spiritual growth and wisdom occur in what he calls "the second half of life." During the first half of life we are generally focused on giving shape to who we are. We pursue our education and our careers. We form intimate relationships that help to define us. We are often ambitious and driven. These, he says, are all good and necessary things.

Common wisdom is that in the second half of life we diminish. Age slows us down physically and mentally, and we begin to retire from much that engaged us early in life. However, Father Rohr believes that the common wisdom is wrong. The true journey of the second half of life is not a diminishment but a broadening of perspective, a gaining of true insight and wisdom. Somewhere along the way, often after a real crisis in our lives, which brings us suffering, we begin a second journey. At least, spiritually healthy people begin a second journey. He calls it "falling upward."

In the second half of life, we cease to focus our attention on what was good and necessary in the first half of life—career, ambition, and accomplishing goals. We aren't as concerned with following the rules, we care less about whether we get our way, we don't worry as much about what other people think of us, and we no longer want to waste time on the people and the things that don't enrich us. We begin to detach from things that used to concern us, and, instead, we focus on the deepest desires of our hearts, our True Self, our Home, which he believes in God's Spirit within us.

Part of this journey is learning to let go of our ego and our desire to get everything right. He writes, "We grow spiritually much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right." He explains:

If there is such a thing as human perfection, it seems to emerge precisely from how we handle the imperfection that is everywhere, especially our own. What a clever place for God to hide holiness, so that only the humble and earnest will find it!

We can choose to beat ourselves up over our limitations and our failings. Or we can choose to see that even in our imperfections, the grace of God indwells us. There is a Spirit inside of us, which can heal us.

So, healing begins when we realize that the power to heal belongs to us already. It is that divine spark we all share. Once we realize that we are a tiny piece of God, then we can begin to accept ourselves and to forgive ourselves. Forgiveness removes shame and guilt. And we are released from some of our fears and anxieties. We are set free into a new peace and joy, a “delight beyond measure.”

Father Rohr describes this process as coming home. One important set of moral and health issues facing the United State is the homecoming of our veterans. We have seen alarming rates of veteran suicide and mental health issues in recent years. And we have a much greater appreciation for the role that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder plays in the lives of many veterans.

While helping veterans coming home again, some theologians have begun to explore what is called “moral injury.” As Rita Nakashima Brock explains it, “Moral injury is the result of reflection on memories of war It comes from having transgressed one’s basic moral identity and violated core moral beliefs.” Veterans with moral injury “feel they no longer live in a reliable, meaningful world.” Now, moral injury and PTSD are not the same thing, as a person can suffer from one and not the other, but they are often linked.

Most of our soldiers and sailors are motivated to enter the service because of their deeply held moral beliefs. Military service promotes the virtues of “integrity, courage, personal discipline, humility, a sense of purpose and responsibility, and a commitment to the lives of others.”

Yet, combat veterans are also called upon to kill other human beings. Most report that in the moment, on the battlefield, there is not time to think and consider, one simply responds to one’s training, and the need to defend one’s self and one’s friends. It is often later, especially when soldiers return home, that they have time to reflect and this reflection can lead to this feeling that one has violated core moral beliefs or that there has been a serious conflict between one’s moral duties. This can be particularly difficult when one returns to a society in which the majority did not sacrifice during the war but continued living their lives as if nothing had happened. Veteran Mac Bica has written, “Healing and coming home from war are difficult, complex, and perilous journeys of introspection and understanding.”

Those who work with veterans now realize that we need to offer opportunities for soul repair. This is a new area in theological ethics, but already we have learned a little of what is required of us. The larger society needs to be aware of the issue and empathetic toward our veterans. We also need to take responsibility for our own actions and how war affects our lives and our morality. We should also learn to give veterans the space they need to work with each other in the healing process. One thing I’ve personally heard from many combat veterans is that they have to help each other, that they can’t and don’t want to open up to those of us who haven’t served. But we should befriend them as they are on this journey.

For veterans, coming home is a journey of healing that involves reconnecting with their deep moral core, their true self. They must nurture each other’s humanity and offer each other grace. In this way the soul is repaired, and that tiny piece of God inside us all can become the

source of delight.

And what is true of our veterans is true for all of us. Healing begins when we realize that the power to heal belongs to us already. It is the Spirit inside us.

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