

Blurring the Line Between the Sacred and Profane

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Ancient Witness: Acts 10:9-15, 24-28

You probably noticed that at the opening of worship today we used a liturgical greeting where I say, “God is with you,” and the congregation answers, “And also with you.” Now, this is kind of a twist on the usual opening found in many mainline Christian churches that goes, “*May* God be with you.” In that form, the presence of God is expressed as a wish. “Maybe God is with you, maybe not. But I sure hope that God is with you.” I also modify the benediction from Aaron to say, “*May you know that* God blesses and keeps you. *May you know that* God is kind and gracious to you, etc.”

But it seems to me, and I suspect to most of you, that there aren’t any “ifs, ands or buts” about it. The experience that many of us have points to a different kind of God, to a Sacred Reality that is not arbitrary and capricious. to a Loving Presence that is not conditional. So I’ve changed that opening sentence to a simple declarative statement, an affirmation. *God is* with you.

For God is not found “in here” but not “out there.” Part of what churches like ours have to say—the good news we have to share—is that the Sacred Reality is embedded in the world—everywhere—in every crack and crevice of creation—every person—every tradition—every moment of existence.

As the poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, wrote (from “Aurora Leigh” Seventh Book):

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware...*

And so the main problem that we have is that we don’t *see*. We are mostly blind to the presence of the Divine in our midst. And we need help. We need practice to see, hear and experience the Sacred that is within and around us. And so I often describe the essential religious task—and I’m being serious about this—as *blurring the line between the sacred and the profane*. This is an important spiritual practice. And the more we are able to do this, the more we can begin to see and hear the reality of the Holy everywhere.

And in the Christian tradition, this is the reality that Jesus was all about—that the world—the universe—is one. Life is an undivided whole. And it is *all* sacred. And part of what we’re doing, it seems to me, is recovering and reclaiming this part of the tradition.

We hear this message, what has been called a *non-dualistic* way of seeing, we hear this very clearly in the eastern religious traditions. And it has been said that Jesus was the first non-dualistic spiritual teacher in the west.

Dualism, you could say is the “normal” way of seeing things, divides things—between the good and bad, enemy and friend, right and wrong, clean and unclean, pure and impure, sacred and profane,

ordinary and holy. Now these distinctions in one sense can help us survive and flourish. But Jesus and other great spiritual teachers saw these distinctions as essentially superficial, and at the deepest, most important level there is a unity, a wholeness. And seeing this leads to a whole new level of flourishing.

One of my favorite spiritual teachers, Richard Rohr, said,

There is only one Reality. Any distinction between natural and supernatural, sacred and profane is a bogus one...

It's not that the sacred is over here and the profane is over there. Everything is profane if you live on the surface of it, and everything is sacred if you go to the depths of it... Jesus lived and loved the depths of things, as all mystics do.

So the division for the mystic is not between the secular and the sacred, but between the superficial and the profound.

Now please hear me—this doesn't mean we shouldn't act ethically, that we and others aren't called to act with compassion, justice and fairness, and not selfishly and fearfully. People and actions can be wrong and right. But at a deeper level, a more profound level, even these distinctions disappear.

It was the Muslim mystic, Rumi, who wrote,

*Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, There is a field.
I'll meet you there.*

Jesus was also about getting us to see this field, to move beyond our distinctions, even between right and wrong. Jesus cared about acting ethically. He was in the prophetic tradition concerned about justice and righteousness. But Jesus and the prophets were about far more than ethics. It would be a mistake to reduce Jesus or any authentic spirituality to this. Jesus was about experiencing the holy. His ethics flowed from this, but it did not stop there. He was about much more than morality. Jesus and the prophets were also mystics.

Mechthild of Marburg, another mystic, famously said, “The day of my spiritual awakening I saw—and knew that I saw—all things in God and God in all things.” The divisions disappeared, and what remained was togetherness—wholeness—communion— of all things.

And so in our ancient texts, Jesus was someone who “broke down the dividing walls” and demolished the distinctions between “us” and “them.” Building upon his own Jewish tradition of monotheism that “God is One,” Jesus moved beyond tribalism and nationalism. He acknowledged that truth is one. If something is true, it is true, regardless of the source. He obliterated the divisions between Samaritan and Jew, men and women, clean and unclean, rich and poor, righteous and unrighteous, the sinners and the saints. This oneness, this wholeness, was the bedrock, the starting point.

Richard Rohr called Jesus “the living icon of integration,” pointing to the merging of the spirit and material in the world. Jesus helps us see that God's word is continually becoming flesh and that the incarnation is an ever-present reality. He taught that God is everywhere, and “causes the sun to rise on the bad as well as good, who lets the rain fall on the honest and dishonest alike.” (Mt. 5:45)

Again, it was Rumi who wrote,

Every instant a revelation comes to our innermost souls.

Every instant God speaks to the heart of all people, all things. Every moment is filled with grace. Not just the spectacular “Grand Canyon” moments. Not just those inspiring moments of kindness and love. Not just the beautiful moments. But the moments of pain, struggle and destruction are also filled with grace. It happens to us not just when we are strong and true, but when we are broken, in our failures and worst moments. Every instant.

In Jesus’ world, a tax-collector was seen as unholy and a sinner because they extracted unjust taxes for the occupying Roman regime. And the Pharisee, the orthodox upholder of the Jewish law was seen as holy. Yet Jesus told a story where the holy man saw himself as superior, looking down upon others, outwardly following the rules. He seemed to be focused on himself and his own agenda with no real contact with the Mystery beyond himself. Meanwhile, the “unholy sinner” showed true humility, and he was the one who went home “right with God, and the other did not.” (Luke 18:9ff.)

A religion that makes a sharp, clear distinction between the sacred and profane can often be self-serving. They can be like a business, the exclusive owners and sellers of God, keeping the customer satisfied by feeling safe and superior yet stunted and unchallenged. We can see many forms of this kind of religion in our nation today.

Jesus challenged this false external distinction between the holy and unholy; he challenged religion that had become a business, and this is one reason he was a threat and was put to death. Because there is no “holy land”; all land is holy. There are no “holy people”; all are created in the image of God. There are no holy times; every moment is “crammed with heaven.” Within everything, every person, every moment—internally—the sacred and profane mingle together.

And so the Jesus-followers, like the apostle Paul, realize this. And he writes, “There is one God and creator of all, who works through *all* and is within *all*.” (Eph. 4:6) And in this morning’s ancient witness, Peter realizes that at the most profound level—the level that matters most—there is no distinction between clean and unclean, pure and impure. *Everything* is clean. *Everything* is pure.

And we see in Jesus’ understanding, the division even between enemies dissolves, and we are called to love and think of our neighbor and enemy as ourselves. We are one. There is no difference at the deepest, most profound level.

There’s another place in our ancient text where we see this in cosmic symbolism (Mk. 15:38/Mt. 27:51) when upon the death of Jesus, there is the tearing of the veil—the curtain—in the temple, separating the holy of holies from the rest, separating, in the Latin, the *fanum*, the holy, from the *pro-fanum*—that which was in front of the *fanum*. We see that the division is no more! Jesus teaches that the curtain was removed. We may no longer divide the world into the sacred and profane. There is only one world, and it’s *all* sacred.

It was Einstein in his great worldly spirituality who said,

There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.

People have often said to me—sometimes accusingly—“Steve, you don’t believe in miracles.” And it’s true, I don’t experience God as a supernatural force that occasionally intervenes. My view is more radical, that there is a sacred presence integrated into every single moment of all existence. *Everything* is a miracle. As Thich Nhat Hanh (or Thay, as his followers affectionately called him) said,

The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth, dwelling deeply in the present moment and feeling truly alive.

I end this morning with an Hasidic story told by Martin Buber of a little boy playing hide and seek with his friends. When it was his turn to hide, he hid really well and waited. And he waited. Finally he came out, and his friends were nowhere to be seen. They hadn’t even looked for him. Heartbroken, he ran to his grandfather, crying. Rabbi Barukh said to his grandson, “God says the same thing. ‘I hide, but no one wants to seek me.’”

And so that is what we do. We seek God who is hiding in the world—not just part of it, the *whole* world. In the amazing and the mundane, the spectacular and the ordinary.

We try to see as Jesus saw, as Mechthild and Rumi and Thich Nhat Hanh and Einstein saw that every bush is a burning bush,
every creature, a word of God,
every person, an image of God,
every moment, a miracle.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)