

Desiring True Communion

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India's priceless contribution to the world, discovered anciently by her rishis, is the science of religion—yoga, divine union”—by which God can be known, not as a theological concept but as an actual personal experience.
—Paramahansa Yogananda, *The Yoga of Jesus*

Ancient Witness: Revelation 3:15-20

One of the great spiritual truths, it seems to me, is that God is *always* present. No matter who we are, no matter what we've done, no matter where we are—God is present. No matter if we call upon God or not, no matter if we are faithful or not—God is present.

And so, since God is always present, one of the primary religious tasks is *awareness*. This is an endless religious task because most of our lives we are quite unaware of God's presence. The experience of God's immediate presence is brief and fleeting at best. And there are many reasons for this: We are occupied with many things, personal goals and daily concerns. We have things to do, people to see. Sometimes we go through whole periods when God seems completely absent, hidden by pain and sorrow. But we know from the great teachings of our tradition that God is not just occasionally present and sometimes active, but God is continually present and always active. And so the goal is an awareness of this Presence, to seek true communion, a oneness with God.

We see this in other religious traditions, as well. In the Hindu tradition the term “yoga,” is not simply about physical exercise. Rather, the goal of yoga is union with God. And there are many different yogas or spiritual practices that help us realize this deep, intimate, internal union—this communion—with the Divine Reality. So there are different yogic paths: Hatha yoga, the most familiar with physical postures; Karma yoga, the path of selfless service; Mantra yoga, the path of centering the consciousness; Bhakti yoga, the path of devotion and unceasing worship, seeing and loving the divinity in every creature; and Jnana yoga, the path of study and wisdom.

I was listening to a lecture by Richard Rohr recently, and he said this:

If you look at the real trajectory of the scriptures, especially fulfilled in Jesus... you see that... the goal of religion is not a perfect moral stance; it's union with God. Perfection is not the goal... the real goal is union. And the way you come to union with God, if I am to believe the biblical characters, is much more by doing it wrong than by doing it right!

And so the sacrament of the Lord's Supper that we sometimes refer to as communion is not really communion itself. Communion with God is a way of living which the sacrament signifies. True communion is a 24-hour-a-day activity.

Once two friends were walking down the sidewalk of a busy city street during rush hour. There was all sorts of noise in the city: cars honking, feet shuffling, people talking. And amid all this noise, one of the friends turned to the other and said, "I hear a cricket."

"No way," her friend responded. "How could you possibly hear a cricket with all of this noise? You must be imagining it. Besides, I've never seen a cricket in the city."

"No, really, I do hear a cricket. I'll show you." She stopped for a moment, then led her friend across the street to a big cement planter with a tree in it. Pushing back some leaves she found a little brown cricket.

"That's amazing!" said her friend. "You must have superhuman hearing. What's your secret?"

"No my hearing is just the same as yours. There's no secret." the first woman replied. "Watch, I'll show you." She reached into her pocket, pulled out some loose change, and threw it on the sidewalk. Amid all the noise in the city, everyone within thirty feet turned their head to see where the sound of the money was coming from.

"See," she said. "It's all a matter of what you are listening for."

If we really want to have full communion with God, then we will be listening for God as we walk through life. One thing is certain, that with all the noise and commotion of our lives, with all of our worries and responsibilities, if we are not listening for God, we're not going to notice.

In our reading this morning, the spirit of God says, "Listen, I am standing at the door knocking." The question is, Can we hear it? Can we hear the sound of the ever-present God knocking at the door to our hearts? Like the sound of a cricket, sometimes it is very difficult to hear, but if we listen carefully with open hearts, it is there.

God is not going to hit us over the head or zap us with a lightning bolt. God does not force herself upon us. God does not knock the door down and barge in on us. I'm afraid that many of us think this is how God operates. And if this is what we expect, it is no wonder that God seems absent from our lives. But God stands at the door and knocks, requiring of us to hear and to exert ourselves. If we want God's spirit to come in, to sit at our table and eat with us, we need to stop whatever it is we are doing, go to the door and open it up.

One day the Zen master Nan-in had a visit from a foreign scholar of Eastern religions who came to inquire about Zen. Instead of listening to the master, however, the visitor kept talking on and on about his own ideas and all that he knew.

After awhile of this talking, Nan-in served tea. He poured the tea into his visitor's cup until it was full, and then he kept on pouring. The tea poured over the side of the cup, filled the saucer, and then spilled over onto the man's pants and the floor.

Finally the visitor could not restrain himself. "Don't you see that it is full?" he said. "You can't get any more in!"

“Just so,” replied Nan-in, stopping at last. “And like this cup, you are filled with your own ideas. How can you expect me to give you Zen unless you offer me an empty cup?”

Every spiritual tradition speaks of a quieting of the mind and the importance of silence for opening a space to be at one with the Sacred Reality. Ram Dass used to say, “The quieter you become the more you can hear.” Paul wrote that Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” Zen teachers often refer to the idea of a “beginner’s mind” for those who wish for true understanding. (I talked about this last week.)

In the story it was the expert’s ego that kept him from stopping and listening. One of the ways we can hear the spirit’s knocking at the door is to practice empty-cup stillness and attentiveness. Cultivating a “beginner’s mind” can help find true communion. For those of us who want a deep and true communion with the God, a unity with the hidden, holy presence, we need to empty ourselves and we need to listen for it. Anthony de Mello tells this story:

Each day the disciple would ask the same question: “How shall I find God?” And each day he would get the same mysterious answer: “Through desire.”

“But I desire God with all my heart, don’t I? Then why have I not found God?”

One day the master happened to be bathing in the river with the disciple. He pushed the man’s head underwater and held it there while the poor fellow struggled desperately to break loose.

The next day it was the master who began the conversation. “Why did you struggle so when I held your head under water?”

“Because I was gasping for air.”

“When you are given the grace to gasp for God the way you gasped for air, you will have found God.”

Many of us may practice being attentive and listen for God. Many of us strive for an empty-cup stillness for true communion with God. Many of us may ask the question, “How shall I find God?” like the disciple. We may even put this at the top of our list of things that we want to accomplish in our lifetime. However, with all the demands that life makes of us, we often do not put it on our short list until we have a crisis. Often our desire on only lukewarm. We don’t gasp for God.

Sometimes it is a matter of preparing ourselves and being ready to take advantage of the opportunity that a crisis might bring. For not everyone who encounters crisis truly turn toward God. But failure and crisis are opportunities. As Augustine wrote,

Why do you try to stand on your own strength and fail? Cast yourself upon God without fear. For God will welcome you.

Crisis is an opportunity to cast oneself upon God, to experience God’s welcome, to hear the voice of the Spirit, to open the door of your heart, to share an intimate meal. Sometimes it’s a

matter of being ready when the crisis comes. And sometimes it is a matter of cultivating this desire within us until this flame grows brighter and hotter. I like what the English writer, Aldous Huxley, once wrote:

Every moment of our human life is a moment of crisis; for at every moment we are called upon to make an all-important decision—to choose between a way that leads to death and spiritual darkness and the way that leads toward light and life; between interests exclusively temporal and the eternal order; between our personal will... and the will of God...

Here the aim is primarily to bring human beings to a state in which, because there are no longer any God-eclipsing obstacles between themselves and Reality, they are to be aware continuously of the divine Ground of their own and all other beings...

For the lover of God, every moment is a moment of crisis.

As our text says, often our desire for God's presence is only tepid because we don't see every moment as a moment of crisis:

So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered and I need nothing." (Revelation 3:16-17)

For the lover of God, every moment is a moment of crisis.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are starving for justice, for they will be filled." In other words, those who desire true communion with God so much that every moment is a crisis. "Blessed are the pure in heart, those who are single-minded," said Jesus, "for they shall see God."

"Listen!" says the Spirit, "I am standing at the door, knocking." Amen.