

## *Pray Naked*

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First, a word about the sermon title: It's not literal; it's metaphorical! Perhaps that should go without saying in a congregation like this, but I want to make sure.

There's a story of a young boy who is sitting on the shoreline and watching the waves crash on the shore. His mother comes and sits beside him and asks, "What are you thinking?" The boy says, "The waves just keep coming and coming, and there's nothing I or anybody can do to stop them." The mother says, "How does that make you feel?" The boy thinks for awhile and then says, "Relieved."

Today I want to talk about experiencing our lives with an acceptance that brings healing, peace and relief.

Our ancient witness this morning is from the Hebrew scriptures, from that episode that has commonly been called "The Fall" in Christian theology. Personally, though, I agree with Rabbi Harold Kushner, who asserts that this is a story "not of Paradise Lost but of Paradise Outgrown, not of Original Sin but of the Birth of Conscience." He writes:

*The account of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, as I see it, is a mythical description of how the first human beings left the world of animal existence behind and entered the problematic world of being human. It is the biblical account of evolution, seeing the difference between humans and animals in moral rather than in anthropological terms.*

And so with increased complexity there is good news and there is bad news. On one hand, we can feel love, joy, hope, achievement, faithfulness and creativity in ways that animals cannot. On the other hand, we can also feel loss, anxiety, frustration, jealousy and betrayal at levels animals will never know.

And I agree with Kushner that the story of the Garden of Eden is not a story of the Fall of Humanity, but the Emergence of Humankind. It is not a story of regression or slipping backward to a more imperfect state; this is a story of a kind of progression and ascent. He writes:

*It is the story of the first human beings graduating, evolving from the relatively uncomplicated world of animal life to the immensely complicated world of being human and knowing there is more to life than eating and mating, that there are such things as Good and Evil.*

Before they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, the ancient text makes a point of telling us that they were as naked as the rest of the animals, and like the animals, felt no shame. But once they rose

above the animal level, the gained a sense of self-consciousness, a sense of being held to a standard that no other animal is. It is not so much that being naked was immoral in this story, but that a human being with a sense of morality knows the feeling of being scrutinized and judged.

One of my favorite writers, Richard Rohr, takes this description of the human condition a step further in his book, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*. He says that these two trees are good metaphors for two different kinds of minds. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil represents “either-or” dualism, which the story warns us against. And the Tree of Life, on the other hand, promises access to eternal things. It accesses the deep ground of God and of the self. One could say that the Tree of Life represents the contemplative mind and the next evolutionary phase to which we are called. Rohr writes:

*A binary system of either/or choices is good and necessary in the lofty worlds of logic, mechanics, mathematics and science and in the everyday world of knowing whether to turn left or right to get from point A to point B. It produced the scientific and industrial revolutions that have served us so well in many areas. But these have begun to show severe limitations, and this mind can only take us so far; it cannot access eternal things. It is not the tree of life, but only the tree of “this or that.”*

And so that we have evolved is a good thing, but it is not the end of the story. Jesus and the saints and sages of other traditions show us what the next evolutionary step might look like. While the step toward the Tree of Knowledge has been good, and this mind has created amazing things, it also threatens the very existence of the planet. And so the ancient story is a challenge for continued evolution. It is not a call to return to a pre-rational state, but to move beyond our rational mind to what philosopher Ken Wilber calls a trans-rational mind.

And so I would paraphrase Karl Rahner’s famous statement like this: “The human being of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” The Big Mind, the new mind, is the Tree of Life for social and personal healing and transformation. Rohr sums it up like this:

*Immediate, unmediated contact with the moment is the clearest path to divine union; naked, undefended and nondual presence has the best chance of encountering real presence.*

So let me reiterate, the evolution to rational thinking—moral understanding—was good, but it also led to “clothing ourselves” with an identity, an idea of the self—adopting philosophies, systems and explanations—the ego. The ego is not bad or evil in itself, but it leads to a kind of blindness. And this blindness can be very destructive. Richard Rohr defines ego as “the unobserved self” that can “leave you blind to your own illusions and convinced that you see perfectly.” He says, “The ego diverts your attention from anything that would ask *you* to change, to righteous causes that invariably ask *others* to change.”

The ego doesn’t like uncertainty and being out of control; it’s ashamed of nakedness and vulnerability; and it’s uncomfortable with mystery and not knowing. It’s our highly defended self.

So we have two trees in the middle of the garden: the tree of knowledge and the tree of life—the dualistic mind and the nondual mind. The first sees things as we want things to be; the other sees the world and the self as it is. The first divides reality into all-or-nothing, either-or, us versus them, good-bad. The other simply allows and embraces reality as a whole. The first is the thinking mind; the second is beyond thinking.

And so true spirituality or authentic religion doesn't simply offer different beliefs or belonging systems to replace old ones; it offers a *new kind of mind!* Spiritual transformation is not about changing things within our normal dualistic framework—rearranging the furniture. It's about *adopting an entirely new consciousness altogether!*

In fact, it's not about thinking at all. It's about *being* and *experiencing* the present moment—things as they are. It is to live, as Rohr says, in the “naked now.”

Some call this *alternative consciousness* by different names such as “enlightenment” (Hinduism and Buddhism) or “conversion.” Jesus' primary metaphor for this alternative consciousness was the “kingdom of God.” It was not to be in some distant reality but to live in the naked now, the world without kingdoms, ethnic divisions, national boundaries or social identities.

So if immediate, unmediated contact with the moment is the clearest path to this, how does this happen? How do we enter deeply into the present?

Sometimes we enter the naked now against our will, through suffering. Sometimes (not all the time, it's not automatic) through suffering we learn to give up our defended state because we have no choice. Things we are attached to get stripped away. We go through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, resignation and hopefully *acceptance* of life as it is. One could say that suffering is the opposite of this kind of acceptance; it's a state of resistance and non-acceptance of our life as it is.

The other way that religious teachers such as Jesus, the Buddha, Hindu sages and many others is to be awake, alive, alert and aware. It is where one becomes the calm seer of the drama from a deeper level. There's a detachment, where one *observes* the self from a little distance as if the “me” is someone else. So we *dis-identify* from our own emotional noise. This is what the contemplative mind does. We still think; we can't help but think. But we practice ignoring it.

One stops thinking about this thing or that thing and falls into pure consciousness of nothing in particular. Some call this “object-less consciousness.” And a new sense of “me” starts to emerge. Rohr writes, “At this point God, consciousness, me, silent emptiness and fullness all start to feel like the same wonderful thing!” Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when he said one must “lose one's self to find one's Self.”

Now don't get me wrong. We still fight for justice and oppose evil in our world and in our political systems. But we do this with a different mind, a broader perspective, grounded to a deeper reality, with a peace that surpasses all understanding. As the mystic, Julian of Norwich

wrote we see that “all shall be well... and all manner of things shall be well. For there is a force of love moving through the universe that hold us fast and will never let us go.”

And it is through this radical acceptance that there comes a peace that cannot be taken away. Buddhist writer, Tara Brach says, “Radical acceptance is the willingness to experience ourselves and our life as it is.”

And so we practice living in the naked now. And buried underneath the layers, our True Self emerges. And we see ourselves as we truly are—in beauty and imperfection—in our nakedness—undefended, unfiltered, unprotected from the elements—as we are—rather than as we wish to be. No bravado, no pretension. In our weakness and vulnerability we discover a strength that comes beyond us. This is when true prayer happens to us. Prayer, it seems to me, is not something we do; it’s not speaking or thinking. It is union with the divine that we experience. It *happens* to us. We allow it to happen.

Instead of presenting a guarded self to the moment, true prayer stops defending or asserting an agenda. It offers itself “nakedly” to the now, open and vulnerable. This is the Tree of Life and the path toward the sacred encounter.

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