

Blue Ocean Spirituality

We're in the fourth week of our membership class sermon series, and today we're talking about Blue Ocean Spirituality.

Earth as Temple, Humans as Priests

In the beginning of our Scriptures, the book of *Genesis* opens with a story about a God called YHWH creating a giant temple, and that temple is the earth. The language that's used in that opening narrative, the architectural imagery, the symbolism tells us the early Hebrew people viewed the entire world - the entire universe, really - as an enormous sacred space where we humans commune with God. That's our entryway into the Bible.

If the earth is God's temple, then we humans are its priests. Priests are stewards of temples and sacred spaces, just as the humans were made to be stewards of the earth.

Genesis 2:15 - And the LORD God took the human and set him down in the garden of Eden to till it and watch it.

The Hebrew words for "till and watch" are later translated as "serve and guard." Those are words used for describing the role of priests in the tabernacle and temple. It is the distinct role of the human to work and steward and guard the earth-temple of the Most High God. That's the picture we're given of our purpose.

In the Hebrew imagination, God's presence can dwell anywhere, and it seems especially welcome in places where his priests till and tend to the places around them.

God's reality, his sacred space, is quite large. We can't put God in a box because he's too big, and his temple is too big, and if we try to stuff him into a box we might find that bits of him have leaked out all over in unexpected places. This offers us an encouraging sense of wonder about each moment and each person we meet. Because each and every person is made in the image of God, and so each and every person has the capacity to reflect something of God if we have eyes to see. The possibilities for growth and insight and understanding God's beauty and character really do prove to be immense if we start looking for God outside of the usual or presumed places.

Spirit Breath

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The story goes on to explore how humans are best equipped to tend God's temple. And the answer seems to be that having an intimate connection with this Most High God is the way we come alive to do our priestly work.

... then the LORD God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature.

The text tells us the way humans can be fully alive is to have connection with this one, powerful God. Intimate connection. The kind of connection that's almost like a kiss. It's the feeling of emptying out your lungs and picturing God putting His mouth over your nose and mouth and forcing much-desired air down inside you. *Genesis* says that when this kind of intimate connection occurs between God and a human, something both physical and mystical happens. Something spiritual happens inside our body; it fills our actual physical being.

The New Testament writers talk about this something being the Holy Spirit of God filling us as part of a new creation. The word for the Holy Spirit and the word for breath (this breath coming into the nostrils) are the same. Christians over two millennia have told us when they have an experience of this breath coming into them, an infilling of the Holy Spirit, the world looks different. It comes alive and they see themselves differently in it. It's like waking up. We more easily access joy and peace and purpose and hope, even in the midst of hardship and suffering. There's a sense that God's presence is near, or that it's guiding us.

There is Always Hope

My friend who is a nurse and a missionary lives and works in one of the hardest places on earth. She lives in northern Somalia, caring for very poor women. And something she always said to me was, "Emily, there is always hope. No matter how much suffering there is, with Jesus there is always hope." She carries this Spirit-breath, this God-infused hope, inside her as her source of life to continue to extend that hope to others.

Intimacy Happens In the Dirt

The idea of God's breath coming into us gives witness that, not only is all space sacred space, but also that spirituality is earthy and natural. It happens in our bodies. In these vehicles we have to move around on the earth. In English, the word *human* comes from the Latin word for earth, soil: *humus*. Intimacy with God takes place in the everyday world, in the dirt, if you will - in our diaper-changing, music-making, driving in snow on the highway world. That's where God can be found.

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In fact, I would say that learning to commune with God in a personal way in these seemingly mundane activities is a way we mature in our faith. It's trusting that God cares about the small details of our lives. It's vulnerable, because it means we're saying, "I hope there is a God who does actually care about these details, who cares about me like that." And opening ourselves to share those moments with him, even if we feel like we're making it all up. Maybe it's being aware of God enjoying watching your baby sleep as much as you do. Or asking God what you can do to help bring peace to a significant relationship, maybe with your spouse or your boss. Or insight on how to treat an employee. Even if you don't expect a response. Taking a step toward God to see if a moment of inspiration comes your way in return.

Blue Ocean Spirituality acknowledges that humans are both the dust of the earth and the breath of life. Capable of intimacy with God, capable of carrying his presence into all the space of the earth, and doing it in and with these bodies that both amaze us and humble us.

Pilgrims

We're going to assume that all of us here come from different places with different ideas and different experiences that pertain to the question of spirituality. Jesus walks with us and leads us down all sorts of paths to help us grow in our faith. At Blue Ocean we believe there's a lot of breathing room for people, because Jesus is working on different ones of us in different ways, at different times.

We approach spirituality as a journey, or to use a less over-used word, a pilgrimage. It's a pilgrimage we're taking together.

We're also going to assume that *each of us is simply looking to take "the next step" toward Jesus along this spiritual pilgrimage.* And my next step will be different than your next step; I may desperately need a sip of water to take the next step, and you may need to look at a map to get your bearings. Or you might need to quicken your pace to keep up with your kids. But we can help one another grow by sharing what we're learning along the way.

The Bible is filled with talk about pilgrimage.

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Psalm 84:5 says, “Blessed are those whose strength is in you [God], whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.”

The whole book is a kind of travel story. Abraham was a traveling man on a journey to a promised land. The Hebrew people were a pilgrim people moving from bondage in Egypt, through wilderness, into a land of promise. And God was on that journey with them - his presence held in a giant traveling tent called a tabernacle, where the people worshipped. The picture is of a God who traveled with people and camped among them. He was their guiding cloud by day and fire by night, and his presence camped in a tent when they stopped. You might say that God *was* their way, guiding them, just as Jesus later tells us that *he* is our way, guiding us.

Jesus himself might be considered the ultimate pilgrim. In the New Testament, he was a man on the move and his disciples were called “followers.”

John 1:14 - “The Word [Jesus] became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

The Greek word that’s translated as “made his dwelling” is εσκηνωσεν (eska’nosen), which literally means “pitched his tent.” Some of you may have heard it translated as “tabernacled.” It wasn’t the usual word used for dwelling in the Greek language, but was a specific word choice made by John to echo the ancient tabernacle. A better translation of the verse would be, “Jesus became flesh and pitched his tent among us.” Just as God did with our forebears.

So Jesus is the ultimate Pilgrim. He left His home in the presence of God to enter into our pilgrimage, on our behalf. To give us guidance and to be our Way.

We, therefore, are a pilgrim people, a people on a journey, as we follow this Way of Jesus.

Centered Set

To borrow some language from the field of sociology, at Blue Ocean Faith we take a "centered set" rather than a "bounded set" approach to spirituality. Many of you have heard us talk about this approach over the years.

[Explain bounded set approach.]

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Examples of bounded set criteria for churches: not drinking, not dancing, political affiliations, interpretation of Genesis and attitudes toward science, gender and sexuality, pacifism, etc.

Many churches or religious groups take a bounded set approach. In a bounded set group, the boundaries that determine whether a person is in the group or outside the group are clear. There are clear rules or identifying markers or beliefs that must be adhered to or signified or accepted in order to belong. Whether spoken or unspoken. In bounded set groups, it's often difficult to get in; sometimes it's also difficult to get out.

Often, to fit into a bounded set and have a sense of belonging, people will wear masks to hide the way they really feel. And, at its worst, that can create a sense of shame. Shame is the feeling of not belonging because you think there's something inherently wrong about you, or something unworthy of allowing you to belong. One of the things we're trying to do - and we won't be perfect at it - is to create a shame-free church. Where you can come as you are, without judgement and without the threat of not belonging. No matter what your story is. We honor your story and where God is at work in your life.

By contrast, in a centered set group, who is "inside" and who is "outside" is less clear. The most important thing isn't even "how close" or "how far away" you are. The most important thing in a centered set group is which way you are moving.

[Explain centered set.]

Notice that, like an airplane approaching the airport, when you're far away from your destination, many different trajectories will bring you closer. But as you get closer to the destination (the center) your aim has to be exact. The closer you get, the more you'll exhibit the features of the radical lifestyle of Jesus if you're moving toward him - generosity, lavish hospitality, peace, joy, forgiveness, love, gentleness, self-control, etc.

C.S. Lewis: "The world does not consist of 100% Christians and 100% non-Christians. There are people (a great many of them) who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but who call themselves by that name: some of them are clergymen [sic]. There are other people who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so. There are people who do not accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly

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attracted by Him that they are His in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand ...”

To place people in a binary of “in” or “out” with God doesn’t seem true to our lives, or to the lives of people we know and love. Most people who come to faith as adults describe coming to faith as a process.

Many of us don't respond well to a bounded set approach. We're more like cats than we are like cattle. If we're thirsty, we'll be drawn to a pail of milk placed in the center of a large field, but please, don't try to herd us or fence us in. But we'll return to milk, or to a bowl of water, over and over again to draw life. Our spiritual life isn't force-fed, it's appetite-driven. We go to Jesus over and over because he brings us life. Because when we aim toward him, our lives are better.

Sometimes people get the impression that a centered set approach is soft or superficial. This doesn't square with the fact that Jesus called people to leave everything in order to follow him. There's a cost to discipleship. When we take that next step on our path, we know we may be asked to leave something behind.

Jesus talks about leaving behind our mother, father, sister, brothers if need be for the sake of his name. I've given away everything I owned a couple of times to do something Jesus asked. Oftentimes the things we're asked to leave behind aren't so dramatic - leave behind an old way of thinking to take the next step, leave behind an addiction, leave behind a toxic relationship, leave behind the belief that you're not worthy of belonging to God or of him giving you purpose in life. Or to leave behind caring what your friends think about you going to church.

And a centered set model takes this into account. We know that taking steps toward our destination costs us something. Just because you're taking a step out here doesn't mean it's an easy step.

Experiencing Jesus

The centered set model also fits with a spirituality that is all about connection with Jesus. We spoke last week about how now, a few hundred years after the Reformation, the authority of the church is shifting from Scripture (Sola Scriptura), back to Jesus (Sola Jesus - Jesus Alone). Because Jesus is the head of the church, the ultimate authority, the king of kings. He is risen, he is alive, and his Spirit of love has been unleashed into the world.

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And if he's alive, and if humans come more fully alive by intimate connection with him, then let's talk about a spirituality that helps that to happen. Intimate connection with Jesus. You'll hear us spending a lot more time on this during Lent.

Mystical Renewalists

If I had to describe Blue Ocean Spirituality, I'd call us **mystical renewalists**.

Richard Rohr says mysticism is just: "experiential knowledge of spiritual things, as opposed to book knowledge, secondhand knowledge or even church knowledge." Mysticism is experiential knowledge. Saying, "I, personally, have experienced something I can't explain, something outside of myself that seems like God." And that may require us opening up our worldview to include the possibility of a mystical connection with God.

We talked a bit about being renewalists last week when we talked about hoping and praying for revival in the secular West. A revival is just a spiritual re-awakening in a large number of people all at once. We want revival and renewal (spiritual re-awakenings) to happen because people are experiencing Jesus.

So to be a mystical renewalist is to believe your experiences with Jesus will affect you and the world around you in a positive way. If Jesus is good news, and if he is wholly and completely good, and if he's guiding and directing us, and then it seems like that could make our lives better.

Everyone experiences and hears from God in different ways. And there are lots of tools in the Christian toolbox for helping us do so. Ken talked about the four quadrants of Christian faith a few weeks ago - the liturgical quadrant, social justice, evangelical, and renewalist. And how, while our roots are in the evangelical and renewalist quadrants, we are happy to teach and practice and experiment with the treasures from any of our fellow travelers that will help us find more of Jesus as we move toward the center.

We come with open hands, knowing we need connection with God more than we need answers. Embracing uncertainty. Madeleine L'Engle once said, "Faith is not reasonable, it's marvelous."

We are never to check our brains at the door when it comes to faith - ask questions, wrestle - but also recognize that, at a certain point, it's not about figuring God out, it's about knowing God and being known by Him. Pursuing

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Jesus is like looking at a brilliant painting and, instead of trying to solve it like it's a puzzle, you let yourself be moved by it, seduced by it, transformed by it.

Two Minutes of Silence

We're going to have two minutes of silence. I invite you, if you want to and are willing, to start a conversation with God. Either about what your next step might be to grow spiritually, or perhaps a conversation about something pressing in your life that you need some help with. I'll watch the time and let you know when the two minutes is up.

Group Prayer

"Let's remember together, by name, our loved ones with needs. We have a growing prayer list that we pray for at our staff meeting and these are a selection from our list. We will simply speak each name aloud together in unison. Lord, hear our prayers for....."

Kirk, Phyllis, Georgia, Shawn, Jeff, Thom, Ryan, Sarah, Robbie, Colin, Norma, Kristin Ho, Danny, Alwen, Sharon, Michelle, Asta, Kisha, Dan, Edward, James, Jerry, Grace, Matt, and Katelyn. And those we lift up in silence:_____.

[cue communion ushers to go up during communion instruction]: I'll ask our ushers to come to prepare for communion.

Communion Instructions: For communion, the server will hand you a piece of bread. You can dip it in the chalice of wine, or take a small cup of juice to drink with it. No one drinks directly from the chalices.

Emily: Let's all stand if we're able, and look at the call and response.

Leader: The Lord be with you!

People: And also with you.

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Leader: Lift up your hearts!

People: We lift them up unto to the Lord.

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: It is right to give him thanks and praise.

Communion Prayer (Emily): Lord, we are thankful that you created us with the capacity to know and love you, and to be filled with your Spirit. And we're also thankful that you give us breathing room on this pilgrimage, walking with us however near or far we are, or we feel, from you. Lead us toward Jesus.

Corinthians passage: For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Lord's Prayer

[Emily will bring membership letter to the teachers after communion]