

Church of the Crossroads
Third Sunday of Easter
April 30, 2006
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EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY

Luke 24: 36-49

In last Sunday's sermon, on Earth Sabbath, I spoke of panentheism, a theological/philosophical understanding of the nature of God to which I am personally attracted. I shared that panentheism is to be distinguished from pantheism (panentheism has an extra *en* in the middle). Pantheism believes that God *is* all things, and all things *are* God. Panentheism, by contrast, believes that God *is in* all things, and all things *are in* God. Because panentheism does not make God identical with all things, it allows for God's transcendence, God's otherness, as well as God's immanence, God's indwelling presence. The Apostle Paul came very close to panentheism when he drew upon the words of a Greek poet in describing God as the One "in whom we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28)

This morning, I would like to build on what was said last week. The main idea is this: if we take panentheism seriously, that God is in all things, and all things are in God, then we will be led to embrace an *embodied spirituality*. We will not allow our spiritual life to separate us from the world or from one another. We will not see the end of faith as getting to heaven. Rather, we will find our spiritual bearings and also spiritual fulfillment as we allow ourselves to see the sacred in the so-called ordinary things of the creation (which turn out to be extraordinary when seen with the eyes of faith) and also in the everyday interactions within the human community. An embodied spirituality will allow us to live our daily lives with meaning, simply because we will live our lives with the understanding that God is in all things, and all things are in God.

The Christian tradition has always had to wage a struggle against human understandings that have posed a dualism between spirit and matter. If we place value in spirit apart from the world of things, then we may well end up denying the importance of physical life and the sacredness of the earth. I believe that this concern is in the background of this morning's gospel reading. The risen Jesus appears to the disciples, and they think they are seeing a ghost. The story then goes to great lengths to establish a physical Jesus. Jesus invites the disciples to touch his hands and feet.

“Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” Then, in order to prove the point, Jesus takes a piece of broiled fish and eats it in their presence.

I hope we resist the temptation to get caught up in a literal interpretation of this passage. Surely, metaphor is at work here. But the message is clear. Luke wants to establish the idea that the resurrection of Jesus has to do not only with spirit but also with matter. The resurrection has something to do with physical life, with the material world. It has been thought that this story serves as a correction to the Gnostics and their tendency to emphasize a spiritual Jesus to the exclusion of a physical/historical Jesus. The Gnostics tended to devalue the physical world. Some even believed that matter was evil. They favored a spirituality that lifted human beings above and beyond the world of matter. Luke wants to emphasize exactly the opposite, that the resurrection has to do with this life as it is lived here and now, and that spirituality must always be an embodied spirituality.

But what would an embodied spirituality look like? Here I want to turn to a theologian and two poets, all of them women. Through the voices of these women, I first want to speak of an embodied spirituality that seeks to connect our own human bodies, and lives for that matter, with the rest of creation.

In her theology of creation, *To Work and to Love*, Dorothee Soelle writes,

For a person to praise something in nature- for instance, a magnolia tree amid the gray monotony of a city street- she has to be involved in that which she extols. Her act of praise means that she has acquired an intimate knowledge of this particular magnolia. She can visualize it in movement or at rest. Its varying hues at different times of the day and night are imprinted on her memory. With her growing sense of this magnolia’s beauty comes her own growth. So too the stargazer participates in nature’s beauty through naming, recalling, knowing those distant entities, and his praise is nourished through his contemplation of the galaxy. The aesthetic process is the result of our participation in the created order.

This participation is called for in a wonderful poem by Denise
Levertov called *O Taste and See*.

*The world is
not with us enough.
O taste and see*

*The subway Bible poster said,
meaning **The Lord**, meaning
if anything all that lives
to the imagination's tongue,*

*grief, mercy, language,
tangerine, weather, to
breathe them, bite,
savor, chew, swallow, transform*

*into our flesh our
deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,
living in the orchard and being*

*hungry, and plucking
the fruit.*

Through the gift of imagination, the things of the earth become part of us. We take them into ourselves. Our spirituality must always be an embodied spirituality.

Of course, such an embodied spirituality is impossible if we do not have what the Buddhist tradition calls mindfulness. To celebrate our connection with the things of the earth, we have to look and see, really look and see.

One of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, writes in a poem called *Mindful*:

*Every day
I see or I hear
something
that more or less*

*kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle*

*in the haystack
of light.
It is what I was born for-
to look, to listen,*

*to lose myself
inside this soft world-
to instruct myself
over and over*

*in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,*

*the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant-
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,*

*the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help*

*but grow wise
with such teachings
as these-
the untrimmable light*

*of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?*

For me, this is what an embodied spirituality looks like. If we were to see the relationship between ourselves and the world of nature in these ways, we would surely think twice before deciding to violate the earth. We can and should say that an embodied spirituality is necessary for the survival of the earth.

Such an embodied spirituality must also be nurtured in the human community. Did you catch the humor embedded in this morning's Gospel reading? After Jesus has his conversation with the joyful and disbelieving disciples and shows them his hands and his feet, it is time to get down to basics, the basics of daily life. "Have you anything to eat," Jesus asks. By this question, the disciples are brought back to the give and take of living in community, and the spiritual discipline of hospitality, so necessary for our life together. How could they be so thoughtless? Surely, Jesus must be hungry. Finally, the disciples give him a piece of broiled fish.

Just as we dare not envision our spiritual life apart from the things of the earth, so too we must not think that we can live a spiritual life apart from other human beings. For too many American Christians, the spiritual life has become privatized. Many believe they can have Jesus without being connected to the community of his followers. It cannot be. To be in Christ or to have Christ abide in us apart from our life with others is something other than Christian faith. The remarkable metaphor of the Body of Christ, employed by the Apostle Paul, speaks for itself. In the Body of Christ, we are members one of another, just as the parts of a human body are connected to make a whole. The image of the Body of Christ, as an image describing the church, celebrates an embodied spirituality. When one member of the body suffers, all suffer together with it; when one member of the body rejoices; all rejoice together with it.

My friends, whether it be our relationship with the things of the earth or our relationship with one another in the Body of Christ, may our spirituality always be an embodied spirituality. Let us not direct our lives and our living to that which is beyond the things of earth and the human community, but let us work out our human transformation in the midst of the daily and the ordinary and in the company of one another. So will we live our lives with grace. So will God be acknowledged as the God who dwells in all things, even as all things dwell in God. And so will God be pleased to dwell in and among us, today and always. Amen.