
The Water of Life

John 4:5-42

Our goal, each and every day, should be to live as if to not take anything for granted, to wake up each morning in radical amazement. This is to live life *spiritually*. To experience the world as a gift, not flippantly, or causally. Jewish Rabbi, Abraham Heschel, said: “To be spiritual is to be amazed.” This leaves you open to be changed by truth, beauty, and goodness while also leaving you open to be a conduit by which to bring about truth, beauty, and goodness in the world. And amazement and awe usually are indicators that you are living life spiritually.

There is another way of seeing things. When we lose our spiritual vision, things could quickly turn into cynicism. We instead see the world and people with a utilitarian mindset—that everything and everyone is there to be used toward our personal happiness. As humans, we crave control and the spiritual life can feel like we’re losing control. In the act of being amazed, is the admission that we aren’t in control of everything. It can feel reckless to leave ourselves open. So, to resist this shadow side, we have to recommit to being a person who sows love. We have to practice gratitude daily and foster the practice of paying attention.

So, these days, are you a spiritual person? Are you sowing seeds of love and gratitude so to resist cynicism within yourself and challenging it in others? To be clear, when we talk of the spiritual life, we aren’t referring to your yoga routine, or your herbal regimen, which you openly discuss in the aisle at Whole Foods. Those things are well and good, but your spiritual self is that innermost, irreducible part of who you are. Don’t confuse it for the things you take on.

Psychologist William James made the point that there are **three selves** that constitute the one cohesive “self”. There is the **material self**. This is your awareness of the tangible things we can see—our bodies, even our clothes, our

immediate family, our home. We understand these things to be so integral to who we are that we see them as an extension of ourselves. The material self.

There is also the **social self**. This is determined by our interactions with our environment and those around us, as well as our interpretation of the reactions others have about us. This information is internalized and helps us determine *who* we are.

Thirdly, James says, there is the **spiritual self**. This is the most intimate of the three. It is our internal conscience. It is where we form our values and deepest assumptions about the world. Arguably, it is the most radical level of who we are, meaning that which is most fundamental and deconstructable. So you can imagine that if the spiritual self is left unattended, neglected, or toxified by a malnourished spiritual narrative, well it will affect all other facets of who you are and how you live in the world.

The good news is that today, you are off to a great start. There is a good chance that before it is even 11am this morning (the old 10am!), you have tended to all three facets of yourself here at church. You have taken care of your material self—you are here, clothed (hopefully), sitting in a warm, familiar place. You have exercised your social self by being in fellowship with other friends and visitors; and you have tended to your spiritual self through worship, prayer, reflection, and paying attention. We continue to affirm this increasingly rare benefit of being connected to a worshiping community, in a society that is starved for safe places that value the expression of your full self. There is a reason we should leave this place feeling better than when we came!

Another Jewish Rabbi, Jesus, once preached, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." The spiritual life is oriented toward seeing God. With the beatitudes, Jesus was giving a blueprint of what it looks like to live spiritually on earth. It is unclear just what it means to be *pure in heart* but I have to believe it has something to do with uncovering the spiritual self, that is often covered over. I don't think of "pure", here, in terms of morality. Perhaps "pure" has something more to do with the quality of a thing. When something is in its purest form, it is untainted by other things. It is "as it was made to be." I imagine a *pure heart* to be one that takes in the world with radical amazement. Jesus said, those who foster a pure heart will see God.

Lately, I've appreciated how some have questioned whether we should view the spiritual life as a counter-protest to a life lived according to the values of this world, of empire. These remind us that we should instead see the worldly life as the deviation from the norm. As spiritual-beings first and foremost, understanding the world spiritually is the rule. And other narratives that shrink that capacity are the alternatives, that are trying to quench that spiritual thirst in other less-than-satisfying ways. You see, our spiritual practices don't turn us into something we haven't been, but rather enable a return to our truest selves.

The French priest and scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, claimed: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." Isn't that an interesting way of thinking about it? We will need to live with that unexpected quote to fully grasp what it is saying.

Jesus, in our Gospel reading this morning, teaches us about the spiritual life in an encounter with a Samaritan woman who is drawing water from an ancient well. We know that this interaction shouldn't be happening in the first place. Jesus approaching her was a religious no-no, a social faux pas. She reminds Jesus of this: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (with the parenthetical note that "Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.") (Jn. 4:9) She was talking on the level of her physical needs. But Jesus stays around long enough to hear her spiritual thirst, and offers her living water.

She reminds Jesus that she is already drawing water from the well of her religious ancestor, Jacob. Now, Jacob's well, on one hand, represents a common public area, where Jesus was willing to break social codes in order to have this encounter with a person in need. But I can see that this deep well can also be understood as a metaphor for the depth of a person. The Samaritan woman challenged Jesus, who has brought no bucket with him, that he surely cannot reach lower than the waters of the religious tradition she is drawing upon.

"The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' " (Jn. 4:11-12)

It isn't hard to hear in this, a discussion about depth. For her, to draw up the waters of her religious tradition is what gave her life. But Jesus wants to draw

up from waters even deeper than that—living water that will quench her spiritual thirst. The spiritual life is attuned to the depth of things.

In the book of Revelation, there is a puzzling passage about the Tree of Life. It says that the Tree of Life stands on both sides of the river of the water of life. On a surface-level, we wonder how a single tree can be on both sides of the river. Surely, there must be two separate trees. This can only be so if the Tree of Life merely appears to be separated above the water but far beneath the waters, it is joined together by a single root system.

In Utah, one can wander through a one-tree aspen forest made up of over 47,000 tree trunks, and millions of leaves, all connected through just one root system. It is the largest living organism on earth, called Pando the Tree. You can imagine the feeling of being surrounded by thousands of trees. But wouldn't it be a change in perspective to know you are being cradled by a single tree? That must bring a rush of amazement.

I think of this, when I hear Jesus telling the woman at the well, “the hour is coming when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . .” Jesus doesn't want to flatten the diversity of religious experience, but to plumb its depths until it reaches its spiritual foundation. “God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.” To remember that God is spirit is to disarm our attempts to control God—to claim that God abides solely on that mountain or in that Temple.

In the season of Lent, people will often take on a new practice, or maybe give something up. This shouldn't be a move to become more religious or pious, which would only give the appearance of separation from those around us. Instead, spiritual practices, in this season and out, should serve to sharpen our vision so that we might see the world *spiritually*. These days, what do you need to tend to, in order to tap into the Living stream of God? Do you try to quench your spiritual thirst by merely addressing your material or social needs?

We hear Jesus's call that true worshipers will worship in spirit and in truth. May we tune ourselves to the depths of that well, and so draw upon the Living Waters of God. Amen.