

THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHURCH
3) Passionate Spirituality: A Faith with Feeling

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September 25, 2016

In our current series of sermons, “The Once and Future Church,” we are considering what Loren Mead refers to as the five challenges that faces any church that aspires to have a vibrant future. In his widely respected book, “The Once and Future Church,” he puts forth the premise that laity must essentially own the responsibility for doing ministry, that there must be new structures for a new day—that is structures that transcend the boundaries of denominationalism even as they build bridges between various faith traditions. Last week, Luke shared Mead’s premise that the church of the future will be one in which there is a shared understanding that each one of us has a calling to serve and be in ministry. We are called, says Mead, to be an “Apostolic People,” a people called to carry out the work of the Apostles.

This morning, we consider yet another challenge before the Church as we prepare for the future that is now before us. We must, says Mead, cultivate a “passionate spirituality,” or, as I have entitled my message, “a faith with feeling.”

One of the trends that we are seeing in the expression of faith practiced by many of our denominations is the trend of a faith that is somehow separated from our emotions—a faith that is much more comfortable living out of the head than the heart. We Protestants are pretty good at cultivating a thinking faith. We are pretty adept at our ability to be logical when it comes to the theological. We’re rational and objective, thoughtful and intellectual. And that is not, by any means, a bad thing. It is good to have a thinking faith.

The only problem is that we have come to rely so much on the intellectual, rational and logical aspects of faith that we have neglected to cultivate the more emotional and experiential elements of faith. We tend to approach the mystery of God as an equation to be solved rather than as experience to be encountered. As a result, we often tend to live more out of our heads than our hearts. Indeed, it has been said that the greatest distance in the world is actually only 18 inches—the 18 inches that separate our heads from our hearts.

What Loren Mead is suggesting is that if the church is to have a vibrant future, the people who are a part of it must be able to bridge that distance. They must be able to experience and express a faith that can be emotional as well as thoughtful, a faith that feels as well as a faith that thinks. I would agree. The simple truth of the matter is that our traditional, rational, intellectual approach to faith is one that many in the 21st century find to be boring and uninspiring. There is no life, no energy, no passion to engage them and they have determined that they have better things to do.

Now, whether they actually do or not is beside the point. The fact is that they simply aren’t interested in the boredom and monotony of a faith without feeling and that does not bode well for the church of the future. We must find a way to bring the feeling back! We must find

a way to rekindle the flame and renew the passion. Otherwise, there will be no future—that much is quite clear.

So, how do we do that? How do we cultivate a passionate spirituality?

Perhaps the first step is to understand the fundamental differences between what Mead refers to as “Traditional Spirituality” and “Charismatic Spirituality.” I think it is important not to read too much into the term, “Charismatic” spirituality. Mead isn’t necessarily advocating a Pentecostal, “Holy Roller” kind of approach, but one is merely freed up of some of the restrictions of the more traditional approach. As a way of defining his terms, Mead lists some of the differences between these two forms of spirituality.

Traditional

Form is central
Structure is important
Rational
Disciplined, ordered, patterned
Measured (Mozart)

Charismatic

Experience is central
Free-flowing movement of the Spirit
Emotional
Spontaneous, surprising
Multi-patterned (Jazz)

Now, in comparing these notable differences, let me say the obvious: Both are essential ingredients of a vibrant faith. Both have an important contribution to make. It would be unfair and unwise to suggest that one is “better” than the other. What I am suggesting is that, at least, some of us have become so reliant upon the traditional / rational approach that we have lost our ability to experience the charismatic / emotional dimension of faith. We can never quite get to our hearts because our heads tend to get in the way! Like Spock on Star Trek, if it’s not logical, we’re not interested. (I realize that comparison date me...)

Probing a bit deeper, I believe that our reluctance to be open to a more emotional, spontaneous, experiential faith can also be linked to our discomfort over what might happen if we choose to “color outside the lines” by following the lead of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, you see, cannot and will not be limited to our next little structures and bulletins and programs. The Spirit will not abide by our insistence that emotions be kept in check and that everything is in its proper place. The Holy Spirit is, you see, unpredictably powerful and powerfully unpredictable. You never quite know just where it may lead or what it might call you to do.

Annie Dillard, in her book, “Teaching a Stone to Talk,” writes about this unpredictable power: “**Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?**”

The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash

helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.

It is, I suspect, our fear that the waking god may draw us to where we can never return that causes us to be a bit wary of allowing the Spirit too much leeway in our lives. Life is much safer, much more predictable that way. I would suggest that it may also be far more boring as well. If the church of Jesus Christ is to have a vibrant future, it will be, in part, because we have reclaimed a passionately powerful spirituality—a faith with feeling.

It's informative to consider the experience of John Wesley himself when it came to matters of head and heart. For the first half of his ministry, Wesley pursued his faith with an intellectual and practical passion. He disciplined himself to pray, to read, reflect and write. No one was more focused or disciplined in his spiritual endeavors than he. But all of that left him empty and feeling like a failure. As he wrote in his journal when he left the colony of Georgia to return to England: "I went to America to convert the Indian, but who will convert me."

Upon his return to England, Wesley decided, one evening to attend a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street and it was there, while listening to Luther's preface on Paul's letter to the Romans, that Wesley finally felt what had long been missing. He felt the presence of God as he would later recall that his "heart was strangely warmed." And it was there, in that moment, that everything changed, not only for John Wesley, but also for the Methodist movement and its impact not only upon England, but also upon America as well.

What had been dry and withered suddenly sprang to life—and the rest is history—our history as a people of faith. It was only when his faith became personal that it became powerful, only when he experienced it not only with his head, but also with his heart that it came alive within him.

That was Wesley, but what about those of us who have inherited his rich legacy? What about our own heartfelt experience of faith, our own encounter with the holy? In what moments of your own life have you felt your heart "strangely warmed?" Where are the places to which you can point and say, "It was there, in that moment, that experienced the presence, I felt the mystery, I encountered the holy and I will never again be the same!?" I trust that there are those moments in your own life that you can reference. The future of this and every church may depend upon it.

After doing some extensive interview work with various people about their own experiences of God, Mead makes two intriguing observations:

1) Everyone that was interviewed could describe powerful, personal experiences of God. These experiences were unique to the individuals, he notes, but very real. Some occurred in religious settings, but many did not. And some of these experiences proved to be life changing events.

2) Not one of those who had shared their experience of the holy had been asked to share their experience with their congregation or pastor and none had ever thought of bringing it up. It was as if there was an implicit understanding that these experiences did not and do not matter to the church. Mead suggest that, “It felt to us (the interview team) like a collusion of silence.”

It seems to me that for our own sake—for the sake of a vibrant church that is truly alive with the Spirit of God, we must end this collusion of silence, we must learn to share our own stories of our own encounters of the holy—what Marcus Borg often referred to as the “thin places” where the realms of the holy and the human come close together. They need not follow a similar script, they need not overwhelm with impressive details of divine encounter...no, all that is really needed is the willingness on the part of individuals to simply tell the story of the way or the ways in which they came face to face with the holy.

We were talking about this at our worship planning meeting this past week and in that conversation, I asked Bruce Koliha if he would be willing to give witness to his own experience of the divine presence, his own encounter with the holy. **(Bruce speaks)**

It was Blaise Pascal, the brilliant mathematician, physicist, and philosopher who experienced a “thin place” of his own on November 23, in 1654. He was so moved by his encounter with the holy that he wrote about it on a piece of paper and sewed that paper into the liner of his coat. It wasn't until after his death that people learned of this and realized everywhere he went Pascal carried this experience with him. This encounter has become known as "Pascal's Night of Fire." Here is a portion of what Pascal wrote:

The year of grace 1654

Monday, 23 November, feast of Saint Clement

From about half past ten in the evening until half past midnight.

Fire!

'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,' not of philosophers and scholars.

Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace.

God of Jesus Christ...

My God and your God.

'Thy God shall be my God.'

The world forgotten, and everything except God.

He can only be found by the ways taught in the Gospels.

Greatness of the human soul.

'O righteous Father, the world had not known thee, but I have known thee.'

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

It was, for Pascal, a moment in time that changed everything! For two hours, he experienced the “fire” of God’s presence and he would carry that experience with him, literally, for the rest of his life.

My prayer for you and for me and the Church that we love is that we too might know the “fire” of God’s Presence...

- The fire that inspires a **personal** faith...
- The fire that opens the door to a **passionate** faith...
- The fire that enables the personal and the passionate to burn so intensely that it becomes a **powerful** faith, change not only us, but, through our witness, the world around us.

May our hearts indeed, be “strangely warmed.” Amen!