

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Art of Living

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
August 7, 2011

Scripture Reading: Psalm 150 (A new translation)

I have mentioned before that our type of animal, the human primate, has two very deep drives, and all the spiritual teachers of the past knew this. You see it not only in us, but you see it [as well] in our relatives - the gorillas and chimpanzees - that when confronted with stress, we have two survival programs. One of them is called agonistic and the other is called hedonic. Agonistic is when two monkeys or humans see a third, and gang up on that one. There is a bond that takes place then. Sometimes we feel so relieved when we are able to express all that tension by attacking each other. It's a very powerful bond. It may be one of the most powerful bonds in the short term that you can have. But there is a stronger bond, long-term, called the hedonic, which is the healing, the loving, the nurturing bond, and you see it in monkeys, you see it in apes, of which we are one.

Almost every day of our lives, we have a choice between these two responses. I would say that it's the difference between *creativity* and *cruelty* that is there every day of our life, and these responses trigger wholly different parts of ourselves. You will actually see a different world depending on that choice. I'm not saying that you will fall into or out of your world with one choice; you can lose your temper, you don't have to worry about that, but if you do that back-to-back and time after time, you're going to see the world in a different way. Those little gossamer threads that, at first, look like little spidery sinews eventually become steel bars, and we see a world of enemies, we see a world of threats, or, [on the other hand], we see a world that is our family and our home.

As I was working on my book, I realized that there is a whole section that I was leaving out. This was not a happy discovery for me. We've talked about faith in science, we've talked about ethics and justice, but there's a whole third of our life together as a spiritual community that needs to be addressed: the rituals, the arts, of a community. We've dealt with it some; but I want to lift up a much deeper understanding of the sacraments, not as magical rituals but as the poetry of life. The songs that we sing so that we can share the birth of each other's children, the arrival of adulthood, a community supporting two people that make a pledge to one another...a symbol of repentance when you've done it all wrong, or the community lets go of that mistake, and you let go of that mistake. When somebody who you love passes out of your life...a symbol, a song that the community can do together.

Our very emotions tie us to one another...just like one ant by itself is not really an ant; the ant is calibrated for the whole community, the hive. Even more so is a human being

not meant to be alone. Your emotions themselves tie you to other human beings. Religion should not set you up for a relationship with God to the deprivation of a relationship with other human beings, or with life, with nature. Religion is not, and has never been, about a relationship with an invisible hypothetical person. Even if that is what you were taught, I suspect that if you tried to have a good relationship with your invisible friend, it's been less than satisfactory. I suspect that sometime when you needed it most, nobody showed up.

What I want to do in the re-translation of this song is to move from worshipping God as an object, just for a moment, to experiencing prayer as expressing your source, your ground of being. Not just in a ritual in church, but whenever you sing, whenever you work, whenever you play...to not think that God is somebody hiding from you, but as the very ground of your being, which you are expressing with your creativity.

Now the Catholics say that there are seven sacraments, and they go through the different passages of life. The reformers, in their wisdom, said, "No, there's only two, because that's all we can find in the Bible." But here's the problem with that. You don't live in the Bible. It's a book. You live in this world, and you need lots and lots of art. There's not even just seven, there are however many you need to realize that your life is sacred.

And so we're going to think about what those rituals might be. I'm going to come up with several, over these next months, seven is what I think it is now, but it's a hypothetical number. The point is to realize the art of life, the art of living. *To sing from your source*; that might be what works for you, it may be dancing from your source, it may be speaking, it may be gardening. Do some translation with me here. But what the prophets said, and the ancient poets said is, "Without this kind of vision, the people perish." I want to suggest that the nation in which you live is perishing for lack of vision.

I was at a rally yesterday that was pointed in exactly the wrong direction, but I wanted to speak there because I can't ignore the bad things that are being done. But if you vilify the people that are doing them (the bad things), you are missing the fact that you are doing them, too. So I was at the Perry rally, and I had written an article on "the five scriptures that you won't hear at the Rick Perry prayer rally." Some of the responses that I've gotten have been absolutely furious. But [from] around the country, people are writing, saying, "I've felt that way my whole life...that religion is love, and I'm not going to be asked to believe something that makes no sense to me. I'm not going to be asked to hate people just because they're different."

So somehow we've got to figure out how, in the face of cruelty, instead of making the choice of confronting it with more cruelty, we can find a deeper art. That's my hope today in this conversation...that religion can be a way of keeping you in touch with a deeper poetry that might actually save the world.

I pulled up behind somebody this week, and I think it was a pretty big truck that I was behind, but I was focused on the bumper stickers, which were absolutely horrifying. I'm assuming the driver was a veteran. It said on one side of the bumper, "I jump out of airplanes and kill people" – (go ahead and laugh – it's uncomfortable), and the other side said, "I'm a sniper: don't bother running, you'll just die tired."

I thought about the traumas that it must take to shut a heart down to that level. To see those bumper stickers and feel “Yeah, that’s what I want on my car. Yes, I’m tough. I can hurt people.” I want to tell you that the courage it takes to be a soldier is nothing compared to the courage it takes to be gentle. Let me say that again, because we celebrate heroes of violence. It takes a tenth of the courage to injure, wound, or hurt another person than it does to risk injury to stay in a relationship. There’s no comparison of the courage that it takes to be gentle over the courage that it takes to be violent.

I’m back on the radar of the religious right again, (laughter)...I suppose that means that I’m doing things right, but it’s never a very pleasant ride. I went on one web site that took my article, which says that if you take these scriptures, Christian and Jewish, seriously, then you’ll realize that there’s something wrong with the Rick Perry prayer rally. [Unfortunately], they cut off the first part of the article, and summarized it by saying that I had said that the Jewish and Christian scriptures should not be taken seriously. (laughter, moans) So now I have a whole wave of people that have seen that and think that’s what I [actually] said.

I got another wonderful e-mail response that said, “It’s none of my business, but is it possible that the reason that you’re spouting off about Rick Perry is because you weren’t invited?” (loud laughter) That one I responded to. I said, “I *was* invited. I’m white. (laughter) I’m Christian. I’m heterosexual. I was in like Flynn. My problem is, my savior calls me to *leave* the invited and be with the *uninvited*. That’s my problem.” So I sent that. (applause)

There’s one I didn’t send. That last one was still in touch with compassion...kind of. But the next one I knew to hold back. I think you’ve all experienced the beautiful honeyed dagger of Christian love, when somebody in the name of Christ, in the name of love, is sticking it to you. “Pastor, I want to let you know that today I will begin to pray for you.” You’ve heard that one before? “I will pray that you return to God’s word and you will repent for leading Jesus’ children from the truth.” The first thought I had when I saw that was, “Thank you so much for that sincere prayer. I want you to know that I’m going to be praying for you that Jesus will forgive you for sitting in his chair...” (laughter) “because the risen Christ is supposed to be in charge of judging the quick and the dead, but if you’ve gotten that promotion, great for you.” (laughter) But I figured that I probably wasn’t having the love of Christ in my heart at that time...(more laughter) so I’ll wait ‘til I calm down and can be more loving in my response.

My favorite, though, was from somebody who wrote and said that the only reason that somebody like me could do something this evil - and by preaching that God is love, that’s evil - was if I was doing it for the money. (laughter) Yeah. She said she had looked it up - and you Presbyterian pastors who are here will enjoy this - the average salary of Presbyterian pastors, according to this woman, is a hundred thousand dollars a year. (laughter) I also didn’t respond to that one, but the thought I had was that there are a few Presbyterian pastors that make a hundred thousand dollars a year, but they’re on *your* team. (laughter) What I did write was if I thought that working for a mid-sized Presbyterian church was going to give me a hundred thousand dollars a year, I’d be not only *evil* but *stupid*. (laughter) That’s not going to happen.

What do we do when we're confronted with fear that looks like brutality...traumatized hearts that look so frightening to us that we want to lash back? At some level we know that's the last thing the world needs from us, because the truth is that you and I are not the ones who live in harm's way. It'd be easy for me to write to a homophobe and make them feel bad about themselves, but I'm not the one who's going to pay the price for that. It'd be easy for me to challenge a racist by assaulting them verbally, but I'm not the one who will take the brunt of the anger that would cause. What we're called to do by the Gospel is to be the ones who bear that pain and turn it from cruelty into creativity.

You don't want cruelty in your head. At the time it feels so good to lash out, but you don't like living with that view: the color begins to bleach out of your world when you let anger and hatred dominate. The world divides into polar opposites; all of the color is gone, and all of the complexity, all of the music is gone, and all you hear is noise.

In Buddhism there is a wonderful story of a lotus blossom that blossoms from the filth, from the sewers. It is a beautiful flower, pure, white, growing from the garbage, growing from the sewer. Buddha taught that that's what compassion should be. When surrounded by bitterness, by anger, by hatred, to feel that as a call to deeper compassion. I think that's what Jesus on the cross means. It's the lotus blossom: Somebody living at a time when oppression reigned, empire reigned, violence reigned, but he refused to let his heart shut down. That is the redemption of the cross, not that God was mad and Jesus took the bullet – but that Jesus refused to hate, and because he didn't lash back, we have the chance of realizing our own love and our own compassion and of following that path.

I wonder if you've ever heard of Thomas Aquinas. He was a Catholic theologian, and he said that beauty has three elements to it. During these next seven weeks I'm going to look at those elements as organizing principles – I think it's very hypothetical, those categories – but he said that when you look at beauty – and he was very visual...you don't see much about music in Aquinas, but he was very visual – he said that when you look at a painting, it's got a frame. If you look at theatre, it has a frame – so part of it is that discipline of meeting together at the same time, of practicing your instrument; there's a discipline there that puts a frame around it. Within that frame there's a *balancing* and a *harmonizing*; again whether it's dance or whether it's gardening. But then the third element, and the most wonderful is called *radiance*. That's the translation of it. And that's when you are looking at a painting, and all of a sudden it feels like it's a window, and you're seeing through it to the very beauty of life. Now I see that a lot more in nature, maybe some of you do, too, where a flower just kind of melts, and you have a sense that this beauty that you're feeling is an experience of something deeper – of time itself.

Those three elements are the arts we need in life, and I want to look at them in reverse order here. Worship has become something pretty boring for most people...present company excluded. (*laughter*) I mean, I'm not boring, but the rest of them are. (*laughter*)

What we're really doing here is sharing that radiance from other places. We're not even trying to give you the same feeling you'd have in nature; it's not going to happen. There's no stained glass window that is as beautiful as a sunrise, but usually you see a

sunrise by yourself. *The purpose of the sacraments is for a community to share that kind of intimacy with another.* So when you look at our stained glass window, bring your own sunrise! You have something that rings your bell, and what we have may not be it, but you stay in touch with what's really sacred to you, and we share it through a ritual, through a dance.

There's a brain scientist named David Eagleman who's just come out with another book. He writes wonderful things, and here he's talking about consciousness, which I find fascinating. He's saying that the brain doesn't see or hear anything. If the eyes were connected directly to the brain, we'd go crazy. Do you remember "Star Trek" where they'd run back and forth...No?...*(laughter)* It'd be like an earthquake all the time. Everything would be shaking. What he says is that you have a stable image of the world in your brain, and what the brain does is interpret the signals of difference, visual and audio. It nuances; it changes and inflects that little world that is inside of you.

If you look at it that way, you need religion. You may not need the supernatural, you may not need the creeds, but it's going to take some singing and dancing for you to make that bridge and be able to live in that world. What that implies is that our tendency, our default is to go to trance. There are people that I know that as they get older and older, they see less and less and hear less and less, touch less and less, and try less and less, and the world gets grayer and grayer and grayer. The purpose of worship is to keep that awareness, that freshness of eyes and ears open...opening our eyes and cleansing them, so that when we go out into the world where the *real* mystery is, where the *real* beauty is, we'll be able to see it, and then come back and share that experience. That's part of what I mean by "Singing from your Soul." It's in your creativity that you're going to experience it.

The second types of ritual are the rituals of initiation. They may sound strange, but if a child does not have a community that celebrates the arrival of adulthood, then they will seek for those symbols in other ways...probably a tattoo, or a piercing, or a pregnancy. Or perhaps it will be drugs, or alcohol or cigarettes...what they see the adults doing, and that signals arrival. There's no end of the misery that comes from not having art in our world to make the world beautiful, to feel at home in nature, to feel kinship with other human beings, no matter how different they are. The political nightmare that we're living out – and we're approaching even worse – is born, not simply from a lack of justice, but from a lack of heart...a poverty of vision. Without vision, the people perish.

With these rituals you have a sense of yourself emanating out of nature. You're not an alien, you're not an orphan, you're not an object that fell from the sky. In the Genesis story, the point is not to say God made us like a pot. The point is that we come from the soil, we *are* the soil. So we're not alone; we are part of that whole song. Sanskrit has a word for this, but it's like the thread that comes out of the spider. Creativity is not artificial...being shaped by an invisible person from someplace else. It's like a mother giving birth to things, which means that if Christianity does not return feminism back into its central symbols, we cannot find sanity and balance. If you're going to use the symbol of God as a parent, then Mother has got to be a part of it. We are born out of the earth; we're born out of this mystery.

Van Gogh had a lot of pain in his life, and he did seek after art, but he was off balance in that pursuit. He said this, and I'm hoping that this will clarify this idea of singing from your soul; "I can very well do without God, both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, suffering as I am, do without something which is greater than I am, which is my life; the power to create." Let me read that one more time. *"I can very well do without God, both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot, suffering as I am, do without something which is greater than I am, which is my life; the power to create."*

Now, what if somebody had taught him that that creativity *is* God. What if, instead of believing that God is this missing person, the invisible explanation of everything, what if he had been taught that he was a child of the earth, and this rapturous love affair that he had with colors, with flowers, with fields, *was* the spiritual life. But that's not what his religion taught him, so he broke apart.

There are people *here* who do not realize that your love of beauty *is* the spirit...*is* religion, *is* God, and that pursuit that you feel inside yourself, even if you don't believe in "a God," that's irrelevant. God is a symbol. *God is a symbol*. What is the second commandment? "Do not worship your image of the sacred mystery." You will fall off the horse every time. You'll fight with other people who have a different understanding of the mystery. Every time...if you think you've grasped the mystery, how is that possible? It wouldn't be a mystery: if you could fit it into the Apostle's Creed, it wouldn't be a mystery. That seems pretty clear.

You discover the sacred in your creativity...in your kindness, in your art, in your craft. I've talked about music, art, dance; that may not be what it is for you. It may be something that I haven't figured out. But you can! [Understand] that when you realize that the love you have of something, is an expression of that mystery...that in your own way you are singing from your soul.

The third group, and the last one that we're going to look at today, is consecration. That is realizing that you were given the gift of life, and you've got to give it up some day. When people did communion a long time ago, they weren't just "munching on Jesus." They were appropriating through Jesus that part of the human story where we are devoured by time. It's a very primitive fear within us to be eaten by an animal. It's probably not going to happen now, but you could be eaten by a disease, and you *will* be eaten by time. By doing communion, you realize there's a beauty and something underneath that so I don't need to be afraid. I can go deeper...I can go deeper.

But something has happened in this country where we have completely lost the sense of that. There was a speaker yesterday at the rally I attended, and he talked about when he was a kid, how he had a sense that his parents had sacrificed for him, and his grandparents had sacrificed for him...and the roads that he was driving on were the gifts of people before he was even born...and when he went to the University of Texas, there were people who were donating things to it, not for their own children, but for him. He said that there's a covenant between children and adults, that when you're a child, you take, but when you become an adult, you go through a transformation and you give back.

There are political movements in this country now that will destroy everything, everything of value in our lives. And there are people who are breaking that covenant, saying, “We’re going to take the legacy that was given to us by our forebears, and we’re going to keep it, and we’re going to live selfishly and for ourselves, and we’re going to give *nothing* to the children of the future.”

Now that doesn’t come from evil people. The easiest thing to do is to parody Bush and Perry. But then the question is, why is Obama doing the same stuff? The problem is deeper than the people, and you’re not going to get control of the whole problem, but you can begin to be the solution when you come to your art, when you *refuse* to make the choice of cruelty in the face of danger.

Now this doesn’t mean that you don’t leave a battering relationship, it doesn’t mean you walk out into traffic; you want to live as happily as you can for as long as you can. But you’re not going to make it, you’re going to die. So are you going to give yourself back? If you are an adult, are you going to spend the rest of your life – a lot of the time for yourself – but some of the time for the future, for the world? And when you are arguing with another person, are you going to remember that the rest of the world will bear the fruit of that argument? You could win the argument and hurt people in ways that you don’t even know. Do you know what I’m saying? When you or I – I’ll own up to that – think of that wonderful put-down, and shoot that zinger out through the web, you’re hurting someone else. See, you and I are relatively safe, we’re relatively safe compared to an immigrant. They could die from this dangerous view of humanity.

I don’t know if you know who Bonhoeffer is. He was a Christian martyr, a real one, who lived in Nazi Germany. I don’t agree with it, but he decided that the best thing he could do was to assassinate Hitler. Knowing the beautiful poetry that he wrote, you can understand how someone could get to that point. “I’m going to save how many lives by killing this one person.” The problem is that it’s never just that one person. If Germany had not been off balance, they would have institutionalized Hitler the first time he said anything. The country was insane. Our country is insane. So just vilifying one person or another is not going to do as much good as taking the opportunity you have, every moment of your life, to choose creativity over cruelty.

This is a quote from Bonhoeffer, and I’ll read this twice: he died as a result of having said this. He said, “We are not simply to bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice. We are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.” Let me read that again. “*We are not simply to bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice. We are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.*”

We need to respond creatively to options that are not on our palate; if you’re going out into the world this week, and it seems like a blank desert to you – well – wouldn’t you want your canvas to be blank? What’s missing is your creativity. What’s missing is your dance, your song. But one thing you know with your heart is when you live in a country where some of the children are born with a silver spoon in their mouths, and some of the children are born with a boot on their throat, something’s got to change, and you’ve got to stop playing the game as it is. Violence is not the answer, cruelty is not the answer; it’s *creativity, getting outside the box.*

What's missing in the world now is your and my creativity. If you go out into a week of cruelty or boredom or loneliness, *get outside the box*. Stop putting bandages on old problems. Find the spoke that takes you to another level of creativity. In other words, *sing from your source*.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.

Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,

Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,

Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:

believers and agnostics,
conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
women and men,
those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
those of all races and cultures,
those of all classes and abilities,
those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;

Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,

Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,

Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:

striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,

Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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