

“Outsourced Spirituality”

Romans 12:1-8

August 24, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

We all need time away. Here’s a story about why:

Rev. Smith had been working feverishly and finally fell ill. Even while sick he fretted about his parish: “What will they do without me? What about Mrs. Jones? What about Mr. Green?”

In this anxious state Rev. Smith fell asleep and dreamed of heaven. In heaven he saw God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit walking around with all the angels looking on sorrowfully. They were wringing their hands, shaking their heads and groaning, “Oh, what will we ever do without Rev. Smith while he is sick.”

Or, to put it more directly: I was talking on my cell phone with Dolly Bonisch the day before my vacation and I had a poor connection. Dolly said, “*I’m missing half of what you say and I think that’s a good thing.*” Dolly, I told you that you’d be in a sermon for that!

The apostle Paul makes two important points in the reading from Romans. First, all of us are members of the Body of Christ and have a special gift to offer. Second, none of us should think more highly of ourselves than we ought. Together we find balanced Christian living.

All of us are members of the Body of Christ and have a special gift to offer. If you’ve been around the church for a while this seems like old news. But in fact it is refreshing “new” news to those who have not yet heard, and it is rejuvenating news to those of us who **have** been around and forgotten what it means.

You and I are unique. You have a special gift. This is an amazing idea. It is a revolutionary idea in a world where people are too often seen as commodities, as disposable, as dispensable. Still, this uniqueness is understood in the context of being part of a larger whole. Paul says that our unique gift finds fullest expression when we understand it as part of Christ’s body, the church.

We affirm this especially at baptism. Brooklyn is a unique and special child of God, and nothing we do in baptism adds or subtracts from that. But Christians believe that this unique life and journey and spirituality that we are given finds fullest expression in the Church, the community of folks who follow Jesus.

Yet we do not always do our own work. The promises made by parents, godparents, clergy and congregation become forgotten or are assumed to be the responsibility of others. Our lives of faith become what one writer called “Outsourced Spirituality.”

Outsourcing is nothing new: paying others to perform certain necessary functions that we believe can be acquired less expensively, more professionally, or both, from specialists. Some members of our church make their livelihoods through outsourcing. But it’s not just business. Hiring a home-cleaning service, a nanny, a personal trainer or a personal clothes shopper (I am not making this up!) has become a mark of certain lifestyle levels.

So it was just a matter of time before we outsourced our relationship with God. Enter the spiritual director. Not that spiritual directors or spiritual direction is new. They go back to the beginning of Christianity and are nothing more (or less) than guides who can help us live our faith. There is a place for spiritual direction and spiritual directors.

What seems to be different today is spiritual direction without spiritual community. With increasing frequency I hear and read “I’m spiritual but not religious” which usually translates, “I’m on a personal quest but don’t mess it up with institutional religion.”

Here’s the problem with that view: community, church and the corporate nature of spirituality is not going away. Not only is it not going away but, from a Christian perspective, it is integral to the faith process. People sometimes say, “I can be Christian and not go to church.” Maybe, under certain circumstances. But church without community is like saying “I’m a baseball fan but I’m not interested in being on the team, going to team meetings or visiting the ballpark.”

Now, we may not like a particular faith community or the idea of faith community; and no faith community is perfect as no person is perfect; but community cannot be divorced from what it is to be a Christian. Not only is the notion of isolated, outsourced spirituality foreign to the mind and heart of God—the Bible is, among other things, the record of God’s creation of a community—but today’s passage from Romans says we are specifically given gifts to provide the elements of community we need: “For the body has many members.....”

This notion of being “spiritual” but not “religious”—that is, the separation of faith from community—also leads to a phenomenon I like to call “Protestant monasticism.” As you recall, monasticism was the movement within the medieval Church to allow people to give full time devotion to the spiritual life. Men and women lived in monastic, set apart, communities. The problem with this was that after a while the laity—that is, non-ordained and non-monastic people—decided they didn’t have responsibility for spiritual growth. That became the province of religious professionals.

In response came the Protestant Reformation of which we are the heirs. The emphasis on salvation by faith and the priesthood of all believers was a correction to medieval monasticism. Protestant spirituality in general and United Methodist spirituality in particular finds its roots in Paul’s writing and the idea that all of us are called to live the holy life. But 500 years have passed and now sometimes Protestants think that the “truly” religious person is ordained. I don’t buy it and I know many of you don’t, either. But that brings to us a responsibility for living out our faith in some form of service.

So what do we do? Be active in ministry in some form. Worship. (Yes, I know, I’m preaching to the choir.) Offer your unique gift. Respond, if at all possible, when called on to serve. Please understand I apply this to myself. The day I wrote this message our interim bishop, Neil Irons, called me on the telephone. Now I can count on one hand, and have a couple of fingers left over, the times I have been called by a bishop. And usually such a call is filled with anxiety. So was mine.

I'm pleased to say that our bishop's request was a relatively easy one: that I serve in a long-range planning process for the Annual Conference. In a few weeks you may be called by a member of our Nominating Committee to consider service to the church. Please do, truly, consider and pray about this.

Keep growing in faith. If you would like assistance in spiritual gift discernment, there's an app for that. Seriously, I don't know if there is, but probably. But there are people too, who offer discernment skills as well as a wonderful array of small group learning experiences. September offerings include Pastor Hal's study on wellness, healing and prayer based on the book Stretch Out Your Hand and Don Hastings Bible study, Disciple 3. Both are detailed in today's program. More offerings will come as fall unfolds. And there are some places—the choir and teaching of children come to mind—that by their nature become places to grow in faith while serving.

Alert listeners will recognize this sermon is near its end and I've spent little time on Paul's counsel "do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." Funny thing about that: most people I encounter who take seriously the responsibility for their faith journey are the most humble. They understand that the special gift that God has entrusted to them is part of a larger whole, without which the special gift might put on a dazzling display but ultimately be of little use.

Another funny thing: I firmly believe this church understands that. No, we're not perfect and yes, we stumble from time to time. But a new member, who had no reason to say what I am about to recall other than it is the truth as they understand it, recently said to me: "*The thing I like about this congregation is that when I am in worship I experience joy.*" In fact, that joy—and a willingness by this individual to seek a new church home—has led them out of a painful past church experience and into ours, which has led them to raise their hand to get involved in ministry. Exciting stuff! Kingdom-building stuff! Godly stuff!

And spirituality that is our own, not outsourced. Thanks be to God!