

Seeking
Denise Cumbee Long

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Matthew 7:7-12

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*Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened to you.*

It seems that Christians have been seekers for as long as the Christian faith has existed. I think that we are all seekers. We all have a sense that faith involves searching for something that we don't quite have, something that is elusive and precious.

Richard Holloway, former Bishop of the Church of Scotland, describes the religion of his youth as an endless searching for something more. He says:

I was drawn into religion as a small boy from the back streets of an industrial town in the west of Scotland. The religion I encountered there was of the high romantic variety, heavy with incense and laden with mystery. I had no clear sense about what it meant except that it suggested heroic adventure, an endless quest after an object flying from desire. Years later I recognized myself in A.S. J. Tessimond's poem 'Portrait of a Romantic':

*He is in love with the land that is always over
The next hill and the next, with the bird that is never
Caught, with the room beyond the looking glass.*

(Richard Holloway, *Looking in the Distance*, Canongate Books: Edinburgh, 2004, p.3-4)

Religion as an endless quest after something that is never caught is one way of thinking about what it means to seek. But this outlook also seems to imply that we will be perpetually unsatisfied; that we will never feel that we have "arrived". Jesus said, "Seek, and you shall find." I don't think he meant that we would find some magic answer, some final destination, but that we *would* find a spiritual contentment that comes from just being on the journey.

A traveling spirituality is something that is familiar to us. Pilgrims go to far off places in search of spiritual enlightenment. A rock star seeks a guru in

India. On the plane to New Zealand a few weeks ago, I met a woman who had given up a career in New York as a stockbroker and was going to begin an itinerant life in New Zealand, traveling to places of mystical and spiritual importance to the Maori people.

One ancient image for a traveling spirituality is the labyrinth. During the season of Lent, there are many churches that sponsor a labyrinth walk or even construct permanent labyrinths in their gardens or courtyards. For several years now, all the sanctuary chairs have been removed at Binkley Baptist Church during Holy Week, and a giant cloth labyrinth is unrolled on the floor. It is a copy of the 800 year old maze from the Cathedral of Notre Dame in France.

This cathedral was one of the pilgrimage sites in medieval Europe. Like most cathedrals of the time, its architecture was not just supposed to be visually pleasing, but it also served the purpose of a catechism, a great teaching. The stained glass windows contain a thousand images of biblical stories, and the labyrinth puzzle on the floor was probably the most important lesson for pilgrims who journeyed there. It provided a teaching about the journey of life, and was intended to be a maze-map, reflecting the traveler's journey to God.

Walking a labyrinth can remind us of many things: a sense of searching, a feeling of sometimes being dislocated and anxious, a desire to find a spiritual home at the center. The old hymn speaks of "Amazing grace". Perhaps we can look at our lives as labyrinths, as grace that is found in *a maze*. As Edward Hays says, "Anyone who is on the way is already *in* the way." He reminds us that the fourteenth century mystic St. Catherine of Siena said, "All the way to God *is* God." ...It is the journey itself that is the nourishment. (*Edward Hays, The Lenten Labyrinth, Forest of Peace Publishing: Kansas, 1994, p. 20,22*)

The early Christians used to refer to their faith as simply "the Way". It was a manner of living and being in the world that involved the whole heart, mind, and body. It was following the radical love of Jesus, not belief in certain theological propositions. Jesus' followers were recognized for what they did- practicing hospitality, healing and forgiveness- rather than by the doctrines they believed.

In the passage we heard read from Matthew today, Jesus is offering his own version of what it means to be a spiritual seeker. “Seek and ye shall find”, he says. And then comes the encouragement to trust: “Would any of you who are fathers give your son a stone when he asks for bread? Or would you give him a snake when he asks for a fish? As bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask!”

Now I don't think Jesus is saying that God is a magical slot machine, and if you put in a coin, you get exactly what you wish for. In our Living the Questions discussion this week, we talked about this as a commonly held view of prayer. If only I am good enough, then when I put in my coin, God will reward me with what I am seeking.

No, I think Jesus is saying that we have to trust that God wants good things for us, but that the spiritual joy that we are really looking for doesn't always come in the neat packages we expect. In fact, the verse that ends this part of Jesus' teaching is critical: “do for others what you want them to do for you,” Jesus says. “This is the meaning of the Law of Moses and of the teachings of the prophets.” So, really, our requests of God should always be in the context of how we treat other people. What we seek is not usually found in a remote temple on a high mountain, but we stumble into it along life's journey in the context of living and loving and serving people who need our compassion.

Diana Butler Bass says that healthy churches today have returned to this itinerant way of practicing faith. She writes:

Christianity is not a map religion. Christianity is a religion of the streets, of signposts on the ground, of people walking along the way....Although no map can fix the way, there are signposts to point Christians in the right direction, toward the wisdom of God, toward love, toward home. Things like hospitality, contemplation, healing, testimony, and justice. Christians call these signposts “practices”, the activities drawn from our tradition that we do together in community.

...emerging Christianity is not about pure doctrine or agreeing with a set of philosophical presuppositions. The kind of Christianity enacted in the congregations where I traveled is more like a recovery group: “Act as if...” If you act like a Christian by joining in Christianity's

practices, following its tracings, you may well become one. Being a Christian is not a one-moment miracle of salvation...It is a process of faith and a continuing conversion. And it can be a long walk.
(Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, HarperCollins:New York, 2006.)

Because spiritual seeking can be a long walk, one of the dangers that we must watch out for along the way is something Kathleen Norris calls *acedia*, or “spiritual sloth”. The Greek root of the word “acedia” means “the absence of care”. It is also translated as sloth, one of the Catholic church’s seven deadly sins.

Spiritual sloth is the inertia which keeps us from staying alert to God’s presence in our daily lives. “Rouse yourself, rouse yourself!” the prophet calls to Jerusalem as God prepares to release the people from their oppressors (Isaiah 51:17). The psalmist also echoes this call: “Awake, my soul!” (Pss.57:8, 108:1).

The Gospels contain many parables of Jesus urging his hearers to be alert or awake (Matt. 24:42, Mk. 13:37) and several examples of disciples falling asleep when times were tough...In Orthodox Christianity, one of the primary definitions of sin is to be asleep. (*Elizabeth Canham, “Pay Attention to How You Listen”, Weavings, Vol. XXII, No. 6, Dec. 2007, p.16-17*).

For Kathleen Norris, a writer, poet, and occasional monastic, spiritual sloth describes periods in her own life of soul-weariness and despair, lack of energy and enthusiasm for life, an inability to care about what was happening to her or her world. She found a remedy in focusing on the small daily acts that reminded her to look for God, washing dishes at a window while watching a bush come to flower, praying the Lord’s Prayer and remembering that we are praying for today and not tormenting ourselves about tomorrow.

Another way of keeping joy alive on our spiritual journeying is to stay alert and pay attention. A couple of years ago, Mary Oliver published new book of poetry, *Red Bird*. This is part of her poem “Sometimes”:

Instructions for living a life:

Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.

(Mary Oliver, **Red Bird**, Beacon Press: Boston, 2008, p. 37.)

These are good instructions for all of us. *Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.* When we are walking the labyrinth of our lives, it is the small things along the way that can amaze and astonish us, that can be threads leading us to God. And if we are surprised by moments of joy along the way, we need to tell each other. If we share our experiences of amazing grace, grace in the maze of life, we become spiritual companions and guides for others on the journey with us.

As we pay attention to the field marks of God's presence, we may see God to be like the wind in that famous poem by Christina Rossetti:

*Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling
The wind is passing thro'
Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads
The wind is passing by.*

We have all felt the power in our lives of that which is not seen. Perhaps love is the most easily identified. We cannot *see* pure love, we only know it when it is embodied. And so it is with our faith: God's presence is embodied in the compassion that we show others and the justice we do in spite of risk. Our faith is not agreement with a set of propositions, but internalizing the wind of God, looking within to see God's writing on our hearts. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that God says, "I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. None of them will have to teach a neighbor to know the Lord, because all will know me, from the least to the greatest." (Jer. 31:33-34)

We are all walking a labyrinth, seeking and finding God's windy spirit, and then seeking again. Sometimes we round a bend and there is an "aha!" moment when something becomes clear. Sometimes we turn into a tight corner and feel dislocated and lost. I remember as a child wandering into the corn field that was beside our house in rural Virginia. At first it was great fun, walking beneath the towering stalks that seemed like a forest overhead.

But then, I turned to go back and realized that I had become confused. I went one direction, and then another. I began to panic. Still no sign of my yard, Just endless stalks of corn. Finally, I heard my mother's voice, calling me from the back steps of our house. I pushed aside the corn stalks and walked toward her voice, right back into the sunshine of my own backyard, safely home.

The labyrinth of life can be a scary place sometimes. But, there are guides to help us. Those who love us call out and encourage us when we need a little help. And a sacred presence whispers to us that the journey itself is our home. T.S. Eliot said it well:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*
(T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding")