

Hunger for God

Romans 8:12-27; Luke 12:13-21; Psalm 42:1

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I'm not going to read the "Reading From the Present," except a few lines in order to introduce what I want to reflect upon with you on this morning. Robert Solomon is a philosopher in a university in Texas. I came across his book recently and was enamored with the title, *Spirituality for the Skeptic*. I thought, "Well, that fits," and found out that he is a person who in his mid-life woke up to the question of what is the meaning of life. His background was Jewish, but a Jewish person can lead a totally secular existence, as he did, non-observant altogether, and then came to a point of wondering what is the meaning of it all. He discovered a larger, enhanced sense of life, and he came to think again about Nietzsche, the German philosopher-nihilist; and Sartre, the French atheist-existentialist; and Hegel, the German philosopher, and he began to think of them who are identified in our minds generally with modern atheism, and began to see them as thinkers who were trying to re-value and revise spirituality. And now, in his mid-life as he is asking about the meaning of life, he is looking at them with new eyes and seeing perhaps what they were doing in their day was what he finds it necessary for him to do in his day, and frankly what we have been trying to do around here in our day. He says, speaking of Hegel and Nietzsche, "They attempted to revalue and revise our concept of spirituality. Or to put it a different way, what both Hegel and Nietzsche tried to do was to naturalize spirituality..." When I read that, I thought, my goodness, that's what we have been talking about.

Have you found it true that sometimes you become aware of something or you learn a new word or a new idea and suddenly you find it everywhere? It was always out there, but just sort of passed over, and suddenly you become aware of it and you see it every place. Here I read Solomon and he is talking about naturalizing spirituality to get away from the other-worldly religions and philosophies and to re-appreciate or re-enchant everyday life. That word re-enchantment has been popping up all over the place. That, as a matter of fact, is what we are all about. I mentioned it several times this summer, the re-enchantment of life, for us to come to a new appreciation of ourselves and our reality and God in order that the human experience, the daily experience of our

lives, the world might be re-enchanted, that we might receive it with a new dimension of delight and awareness and gratitude and joy. So, here is this philosopher down in Texas who is going back to these old 19th century philosophers and he says, "What I think they were trying to do was re-enchanted everyday life." The idea is to recombine spirituality with science and nature, rather than play them off against each other. How often have we been talking about that here? To recombine spirituality with science and nature rather than that awful war that has existed for so long. Thus, for Hegel, nature is spiritual, and spirituality is nothing less than nature fully developed in us. Hmmm. Nature is spiritual and spirituality is nothing less than nature fully developed in us. My goodness, I have been saying that. I must have been right.

You will remember this summer we talked about Creation as God's ecstasy and as the garment of God, and about God, the Infinite Source of all, being a Mystery, outflowing and becoming embodied in the world, becoming embodied in the stuff of the cosmos, the story we are told that goes back 15 billion years, fifteen billion years of the development of this process that eventuated in stars and stuff, and then just lately on the scale of that 15 billion years the appearance of life, of consciousness, of awareness, of the human being. The human being has just arrived, as it were, in this long process of billions of years, and that human being with awareness has become the intelligence of the cosmos, being able to rise above, to transcend the process and see the process, and to speak of the process, and to stand in awe and wonder of the process, to become the tongue of praise of the process, to become the consciousness of it all. This human being that we are, the finite embodiment of the Infinite Mystery, with a mind and a voice so that here we are, human that we are, finite, matter, matter which is one with the dust of the universe, because we are stardust, after all. And yet, we are stardust that has come alive, become conscious, become aware, able to wonder, stand in awe, and we human beings find within us a longing for something.

The Psalmist said it so beautifully and it was sung so beautifully in our presence this morning, "As the deer longs for living streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God."

The Apostle Paul, in the 8th chapter of Romans, in that very complex letter when he was giving expression to that amazing experience he had, there was something in him that recognized that there was something in God in him, and there was something in God in him that was reaching out to God beyond him. The Spirit sighing, sighing within us, or longing within us.

And Jesus in this little story I read, where somebody says, "Settle this dispute," and he says, "This dispute isn't worth worrying about. Let me tell you about the investor whose stocks were so good that they were going through the ceiling, and he began to plan his future in terms of wonder and glory. And then in the midst of it all, it was over." And Jesus said, "You really ought to be concerned about being rich toward God."

The point of those lessons is simply my contention that there is a hunger for God in the depths of every human being, and that is not surprising because, after all, we are made of God-stuff. We are the consciousness and the awareness of the finite creation which is the embodiment of the infinite God, the infinite source of all being that is Mystery beyond us, flowing out into the concretion of creation of which we are the conscious inhabitants, become co-creators, having within us a longing for something, a longing for God. And why shouldn't we have a longing for God? For we are made of God; we are inspirited by God. God is our home; God is our source, the source of our being.

Paul quoted an old pagan philosopher, "In God we live and we move and we have our being." Someone like Robert Solomon, studying the 19th century philosophers – we have talked about them all here, Feuerbach and Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, identified with modern atheism – Solomon looks again and says, "I wonder if they weren't just trying to find a way to say God in a world that had drastically changed?' Because, you see, our storybook arose at a time when the conception of everything was totally different than our present conception of everything. The sense of ultimate reality was altogether different. In the expressions of the Hebrew prophets or in the New Testament letters of Paul or in the talking of Jesus, it was a totally different conception of the reality of which we are a part. So maybe it was necessary for this old world, on its way in human development, to go through that period, that backwash of atheistic thinking, which sent such tremors through the Church, an atheistic movement that alienated scores and scores of people and generations, a modern atheism that has affected the academic community and the intelligentsia of the world today so that the Church becomes a defensive community trying to hold on, but too often trying to hold on with an old way of thinking and speaking so that it doesn't resonate with the reality of our present world.

Robert Solomon says maybe those atheistic philosophers were simply trying to naturalize spirituality. Maybe they were trying to learn how to say God in their day, because *A-theism* does not necessitate atheism. And that is not just a little play on words, because what the modern period did was to reject a theistic conception of God that was in the tradition, the idea of that supernatural being up there in control, running things, the God who interrupted the process on occasion, the God who could intervene here and there. In a world that had become so convinced of the findings of the natural sciences, a God out there doing that kind of thing just didn't make a lot of sense. And so, to a lot of people who thought about it, there was alienation and there was movement out of the Church. Bishop Spong would call them believers in exile.

I believe that the largest part of the congregation of Christ Community Church is out of the Church, and if they could only hear the good word, they'd be back in, because it is possible to say God and to have a spiritual existence in our day without adopting a world view that doesn't make sense anymore. Down deep in the human heart is a hunger for God, but the heart can not long rest where the

mind cannot follow. That is, if the mind is operative at all, if one is thinking at all, the heart cannot long rest where the mind cannot follow. And so, so many have been alienated.

I decided long ago, before we left for Europe, to speak about the hunger for God today because I knew I would be coming back to preach this Sunday, and then next week David Ray Griffin would be here, and David Ray Griffin is the one who has been so stimulating to me. He was introduced to me by Howard VanTill in the book *Religion and Scientific Naturalism*. It is a very fine book in which he tries to do what Solomon speaks of here, he tries to say *God* in a conception of reality which is consistent with all that we know. In other words, with the best understanding that we have of ultimate reality, given that, how do you say God? That's the thing that David Ray Griffin has worked at. In the concise title of his latest book which I have quoted here, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism*, he says volumes. Reenchantment of the world -that's what Solomon speaks of here. He says that is what Hegel was about and Nietzsche, trying to find the reenchantment of everyday, because what was happening was that old image of God and that old conceptuality was so challenged, leading to atheism.

There were those who were living then alienated without any sense of the reality of God. And yet, you can't wipe out that deep hunger for God, because we are, after all, the embodiment of God, so if that Infinite Mystery has overflowed into the concretion of nature, and if we are the voice, the awareness, if we are the human beings who are the finite embodiment of God, the conscious expression of that concretion, then is it any wonder that there is a longing for God within us because, after all, God is our source and God is our home, and we cannot be at home in this world, we cannot be at home with ourselves unless we are at home with God. Unless we have a sense of the reality and the presence of God in the reality of our lives and of our world, we cannot be whole. We have an opportunity next week to have in our midst someone who is working hard trying to bring all that to expression.

How do you naturalize spirituality so that our spiritual life isn't some other-worldly thing, so that our spiritual life isn't some Sunday business, so that our spiritual life is not some compartment in our being that does not affect the totality of our everyday? Rather, our spiritual being is the expression of our authentic being living with an awareness and a wonder and a gratitude and an amazement at the miracle of life. Because, you see, I want you to sense this - God breathes in you. It is not a question of whether or not God is in you. It is only a question of your awareness.

Let me tell you about Marina. She was our guide in St. Petersburg, Russia, for five days. A lovely, lovely person, a beautiful woman, articulate, with impeccable English, bright, knowledgeable, great humor, delightful spirit, and we all fell in love with her. And as we went day after day, one day on the tour bus she said, "That yellow church I was baptized in."

I said to her later, "So you were baptized?"

"Yes, she said, "I was."

I said "What year?" a question you must never ask a woman. She said, "1959."

I said "Oh, '59. So, you were baptized in '59?"

She said, "Yes, but my parents weren't religious at all. And I'm not religious and my friends are not religious." She said, "I did have my 12-year-old daughter baptized."

I said, "You did?"

She said, "Just in case."

And when we came off the grounds of a monastery, she made the sign of the cross, and I said, "I saw that."

As we gathered in Oslo a couple of Sunday nights ago at our little group reflection, I said, "I am convinced more than ever through this wonderful engagement with the Russian people, and that Eastern rite of the Orthodox tradition which was in danger of being intentionally stamped out, but which cannot be stamped out, I am so convinced of the irradicability of the spiritual being, because Marina is a spiritual being, a beautiful human being, and God is in that woman, and she is resonant with God. I would love to have the opportunity to pursue that more.

I said to Marina, "Tell me about your spiritual life."

She said, "Well, with my friends, we talk about ideas." (I think what she was saying was we do grapple with meaning.) She said, "We have suffered and suffering can lead to a spiritual sense."

Once again, you see, here is a non-observant Russian woman who is every bit modern, contemporary, wonderful and delightful, totally non-religious. But she is not non-spiritual, and it seems to me the only thing she lacks is the awareness of the Source of the beauty of her humanity, of her spirituality.

There is a hunger for God within the human breast, and those who may seem farthest from any kind of practice or observance, nonetheless at some time or other must, as Robert Solomon, come to say, "What does it mean? What does it mean?", and hopefully find some way through the maze. He concludes, finally in the end, thoughtful love of life is spiritual being. Well, yes. Thoughtful love of life, because life is gift and to be able to live with awareness and intentionality and appreciation and gratitude, to be able to lift a glass to the wonder, miracle, glory and joy of life, to be able to look at a sunset and an evening star, the smile of a

child and the embrace of human connection, to be able to live not just in the morning awake, breakfast, work, dinner, back to sleep, awake, breakfast dinner, sleep, but to live with awareness of every moment of every day that it is God-filled, that it is God-breathed, that we are the embodiment of that Infinite Source of being full of grace and creativity, to look at it all and to live with that constant sense of wonder and amazement - that is to come to the awareness of the roots of the hunger within us and, finally, to be at home in our skin, in our world, because we are the children of God.

References:

Robert C. Solomon. *Spirituality for the Sceptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life*. Oxford University Press, 2006.