



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Four Ways

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 2, 2021

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Based on Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

I've always been fascinated by the mystical theologians: Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich. There's something about the mystical approach that seems to me to be inherently more meaningful than, say, some of the more philosophic approaches to theology. One of my mentors noted that it was striking that the Anglican tradition had produced a number of great artists and poets, writers and mystics, but no great systematic theologians.

For me, the purpose of any theological study is to learn more about the nature of God and to learn more about how to live a better life. If there are any silver linings to the pandemic, they may reside in a renewed focus on how to best be living our lives.

Meister Eckhart, the twelfth century German Christian mystic, said that over the course of our lives, we travel four spiritual paths.

1. The first path is THE POSITIVE WAY.

This is the path that leads to awe and wonder and an appreciation for the stunning beauty of Creation. This path is grounded in the Incarnation of Christ, God's ultimate affirmation of Creation. God so values and loves his creation that after God created human beings, God became one.

2. The second is THE NEGATIVE WAY, the *Via Negativa*.

On this path we give up the things that separate us from one another and from God. This is the path that teaches us that we must ultimately let go of all we have and ultimately even our own lives. On this path, we encounter suffering, loss, and sometimes a breath-taking aloneness. Here, too, we give up any illusions we hold about ourselves. We surrender all the false visions and the dead dreams. We pare away everything that is not essential or true. This path, of course, is symbolized in the Cross, Jesus' ultimate act of letting go.

3. The third is THE CREATIVE WAY.

On this path we discover the extraordinary gifts God has given us to create and to discover. When we create, we emulate the Creator, and there is something sacred about our creative pursuits. Theologian Matthew Fox writes, "(The creation of) beauty is born of the coupling of the love of life and its harmonies with the pain of life and its discords."ⁱ Great art captures this dichotomy. This path is grounded in the coming of the Holy Spirit and the power it has to fill and inspire us.

4. And finally, the fourth path is THE TRANSFORMING WAY.

This is the way that leads us to changing our lives so that we are more compassionate and loving, the very purposes of God. This path involves *metanoia*, a turning away from our old selves and a turning into our new selves. On this path, our core values are re-shaped and our spirits are re-formed in God's Spirit. The transforming path is grounded in the Resurrection, with its promise of new and transformed life.

For me and for many people, I suspect, it is the second path, THE NEGATIVE WAY, which is the most challenging to follow. I don't like giving up possessions that hold special memories for me. I don't like to surrender roles that are important to me or relationships that are full of meaning in my life. I am not drawn to the experience of death. And yet I have come to realize that THE NEGATIVE WAY is the key to unlocking all the other paths. Some things need to be pruned and cut away. Only as I learn to live with pain and loss can I truly have compassion for the pain and loss of others. Only as we acknowledge the "little deaths" of life can we then prepare for our final death, our ultimate transformation.

The Reverend Roy Oswald suggests that the way we terminate relationships with friends or co-workers (or fellow parishioners, for that matter) may be a precursor of the way we will face death. If this is true, then I don't suppose I'll be very good at dying. I will probably be saying things like, "Oh this is just another small transition of life. No need for any protracted or sorrowful good-byes. We'll see one another again soon!" When we deny our feelings about a leave-taking and when we hate "good-byes" so much we can never say them, we are denying one of the ultimate realities of life: that everything comes to an end. Everything dies. And everything that dies finally rises again to new and transformed life.

Paradoxically, it's the relationships to which we cling most tenaciously that will have to be let go in order that we may preserve and keep them. Eventually we have to let our children fly on their own—and sometimes even crash—so we can be there for them, pick them back up, dust them off, and launch them back into flight.

Today's lesson from the Book of Acts is a fascinating example of the spiritual journey. In the early chapters of the Book of Acts we read of how a certain Philip first took the gospel to Samaria. In today's reading, this same Philip brings an Ethiopian into the faith, perhaps making him the first Christian convert that fits the call "to the ends of the earth." (By the way, this Philip is not the apostle Philip, one of the twelve, but rather one of a group of seven deacons first appointed in Acts 6.)

An Angel of the Lord has told Phillip to go toward the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. The author of the narrative notes, "This is a wilderness road." And having spent some time in the back of a Jeep traveling up and down this route, I can assure you that the biblical account is accurate! In fact, it may have required "An Angel of the Lord" to persuade Phillip to travel down that desolate road. He encounters a foreigner, a eunuch who serves in the court of the queen of Ethiopia. (We should note that Candace is a title meaning "queen" in Ethiopic and not the name of a particular queen.)

Jews and converts to Judaism weren't the only people who made the pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. There were Gentiles who attended Jewish synagogues and offered worship in Jerusalem who didn't officially convert to Judaism. They were called God-fearers, and this Ethiopian may have been one. I like to think they were the "spiritual but not religious" of their day.

This Ethiopian is a high-ranking official of significant means. His race is probably less significant than his sexual status. He's a castrated male servant who was deemed safe to serve in the royal household. To travel in a chariot, probably ox-drawn, is an indication of his status. He's in charge of the queen's entire treasury and has made a very long trip on his own. He's educated and can read; he possesses a scroll, an item only the wealthiest could afford. In this period, to read was to read aloud. Persons read aloud even

when they were reading to themselves. Philip is therefore able to hear what the man is reading, and he recognizes it's coming from the prophet Isaiah.

This book is a book of hope and promise for captives, the poor, the sick, the lame, and the outcast. It is the perfect message for a eunuch. The passage he's reading comes from the 4th Servant Song. You may remember that within the drama of Isaiah there are four separate passages concerning an unidentified "servant of the Lord," which seems to parallel with Jesus.

The Ethiopian asks Philip the question everyone eventually asks. "About whom, may I ask, does the prophet say this—about himself or about someone else?" How polite. How genteel. What he really wants to know is, "Does this Word apply to me?" We all want to know whether it applies to us or not.

I had been invited to preach at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, and I was looking for a parking space on Nob Hill near the cathedral. I came across a sign that most of us have probably seen which read, "DON'T EVEN THINK OF PARKING HERE!" But then in small, handwritten letters, the owner of the parking space had additionally scrawled, "Yes, that means you, BOZO!"

The Word applies to us. When the Ethiopian is presented with the Good News, he's actually more willing to respond to the message than the evangelist is to baptize him. "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" His enthusiasm is contagious. Philip and the eunuch go down into the water, and Phillip baptizes him, and one can only imagine what a difference the Christian faith made in his life and in the lives of those around him. Was he the first Christian missionary to the Nubian Kingdom? We will never know for sure, but I like to think that he could have been, quietly sharing this spiritual path that accepted him not as he might become, but for who he actually was.

God uses what is cast aside in the world. God uses what has been deemed lowly. God uses what is imperfect and blemished and broken. God uses people like you and like me. Imperfect. Chipped, scratched, and maybe even a little dented. And if God can use people like us, then God can mightily use anyone—everyone—to be his hands and his feet and his heart in the world.

Any one of us and every one of us can be useful and fruitful branches. As Jesus said, "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

Amen.

ⁱ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Theology*, Bear Press, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1983