

SHINING IN SPLENDOR

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 15, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Cutting Up an Ox

One of the most beloved books of my personal library is called *The Way of Chuang Tzu, a book of "readings" collected* by Thomas Merton. He is my subject for today in this sermon series on modern saints and mystics. Merton became interested in Zen and Taoism and collected a huge number of the sayings and poems from those traditions over his lifetime. Chuang Tzu was the first and initial disciple of another person by the name of Lao Tzu, who is credited with being the founder of Taoism in China.

"The Bright Cleaver Murmured Like a Gentle Wind"

I'd like to read a poem for you. It's as odd as all get-out. The title of it is "*Cutting Up an Ox.*"

Prince Wen Hui's cook
Was cutting up an ox.
Out went a hand,
Down went a shoulder,
He planted a foot,
He pressed with a knee,
The ox fell apart
With a whisper,
The bright cleaver murmured
Like a gentle wind.
Rhythm! Timing!
Like a sacred dance,

Like "The mulberry Grove,"
Like ancient harmonies!

"Good work!" the Prince exclaimed,
"Your method is faultless!"
"Method?" said the cook
Laying aside his cleaver,
"What I follow is Tao
Beyond all methods!"

Then, "I Would See the Whole Ox" ... Now, "My Whole Being Apprehends"

"When I first began
To cut up oxen
I would see before me
The whole ox
All in one mass.
After three years
I no longer saw this mass.
I saw the distinctions.

But now, I see nothing
With the eye. My whole being
Apprehends.
My senses are idle. The spirit
Free to work without plan
Follows its own instinct
Guided by natural line,
By the secret opening, the hidden
space
My cleaver finds its own way.
I cut through no joint, chop no bone.

"A good cook needs a new chopper
Once a year – he cuts.

A poor cook needs a new one
Every month – he hacks!

“I have used this same cleaver
Nineteen years.
It has cut up
A thousand oxen.
Its edge is as keen
As if newly sharpened.”

Whump! The Part Falls Away

“There are spaces in the joints;
The blade is thin and keen:
When this thinness
Finds that space
There is all the room you need!
It goes like a breeze!
Hence I have this cleaver nineteen
years
As if newly sharpened!

“True, there are sometimes
Tough joints. I feel them coming,
I slow down, I watch closely,
Hold back, barely move the blade,
And whump! the part falls away
Landing like a clod of earth.

“Then I withdraw the blade,
I stand still
And let the joy of the work
Sink in.
I clean the blade
And put it away.”

Prince Wan Hui said,
“This is it! My cook has shown me
How I ought to live
My own life!”

There are other pithy writings in this book. I just chose one of them. And here are three quotations from Merton:

The World “Is Absolutely Transparent; God Is Shining Through It All the Time”

“To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.” He wrote this in *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949).

“The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, all involved in one another.” This sentence is from his last lecture in Bangkok (December 1968), right before he died.

My favorite maxim, found on posters, is: “We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time.”

Thomas Merton was born in 1915 in France. Some of the sisters at the local Benedictine monastery came from that same town where he was born – this would be in the middle of World War I – and some of the sisters actually knew him as a child. Merton moved here at college age to study, and then he moved to New York as a young man, and eventually he moved to Kentucky.

Died of Electrocutation by a Fan

Merton died on December 10, 1968, the same year in which Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy died. In the same way that Mother Teresa’s death was eclipsed by Lady Diana, who died only a week or so before Mother Teresa, so also Thomas Merton’s death was eclipsed by the deaths

of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy.

He died during an interfaith conference in Bangkok, Thailand, of electrocution. He slipped as he got out of the bathtub and grabbed a hold of a fan that apparently had faulty wiring.

Merton ended up being a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. He had entered that monastery as previously planned. He hadn't entered it on a whim, but the date, December 10, 1941, is significant. What was your average young man doing on that date? Enlisting, not entering a monastery. But we should all be glad he made that choice.

Merton ended up with more than 70 books to his credit. At one point when I was doing some research on him, I discovered over 350 Ph.d. dissertations about him. (And here I am trying to prepare a sermon! Trust me, I've got lots of material.) The thing I like best about him, though, is this:

Of All His Virtues, Honesty Is the Best

Of all Merton's virtues, and there are many, here's the one I like best: He's honest. He's an honest writer. He was honest about his past and his past indiscretions. He's honest about his doubts, which is always tough for religious professionals. We're supposed to be confident. He was honest about his temptations. Well, we're even more quiet about that. He was honest about the incompleteness of his understanding. Ah! We won't say much about that either. And he was honest about his love of women and his

affairs. Hm! Not going to hear anything at all about that.

But it's this that is most significant: Merton was honest about the logical consequences, the logical deductions one must make if certain preconditions are true.

For example, we read in Luke that "The kingdom of heaven is within you." The logical consequences of that are tremendous. We're almost afraid to explore them. The kingdom of heaven, where God lives, evidently, is within you. And Jesus said, "Greater things than these will you do." This is another one that we sort of shy away from because the logical consequences are astounding.

A Seminal Event: a Vision, an Insight

Merton had a seminal event that took place in 1958, and I would like to emphasize this more than most of all the things I could talk about today. It happened at Fourth and Walnut streets in Louisville, Kentucky. Many of you already know about it, but this event bears repeating. I stood at that intersection for a while when I had a chance during the time I was in Louisville.

At fourth and Walnut there's a monument that has been erected in that place, along with a plaque that explains what happened at that location. Merton was on a trip from the monastery, which is about 60-70 miles south of Louisville, and he would go up and frequent the public library in that city. He was on a trip to the library when this happened, but he didn't write about it for three more days because he didn't have his journal with him. Thus the journal entry is a

little later than the event. But this is what happened on March 18, 1958.

(By the way the reason we're having this event on the coming Saturday is that he was born in 1915. This is the 100th anniversary of his birth, and we decided to have our recognition of Merton on the Saturday closest to March 18, when this mind-changing, life-changing event took place.)

We Are All Shining Like the Sun

So three days later Merton wrote in his journal:

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.

“This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud.

“I have the immense joy of being a man, a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

That vision, that insight took place on March 18, 1958. He died in 1968. During those ten years, he got busy. That was when he made his mark upon the world.

He was honest about the logical consequences, the logical deductions one might make if certain things are actually true. What if that vision, that insight about the nature of human beings is really true? Maybe we all can't see it, although a number of people really have, but what if we really are shining like the sun?

Thus began two of Merton's principal activities: One was his activism, and the other was his conversations with other religious traditions. Activism and conversations dominated the final ten years of his life.

Activision Led to Speaking Out On the Ills of Society

As for activism, he was a child of the 60's and 70's, with perhaps a little of the 50's. Merton began to speak out on racism, on economic disparity – matters that are still with us today. Vietnam was a really big issue of his time, and even though he was a male monk, he also spoke out a bit on feminism, but it was there. If “shining like the sun” is true, then dehumanizing is blasphemy.

Here was his conclusion: *If* this is a logical statement, *if* shining like the sun is true, *then* dehumanizing “the other” is blasphemy. To repeat for emphasis, if shining like the sun is true, then dehumanizing “the other” is blasphemy.

Pardon me if I become offensive in these next few lines, but here are some of the

words that we have used to dehumanize the “other”: Nigger, feminazi, jap, kraut, gook, commie, raghead, retard, and fag. And that’s just the top of the iceberg. Every single one of them needs to be railed against.

Merton did so, and while one can never say for certain why people do what they do, my speculation is that he had seen into the true nature of humanity. He saw what we really are. Just like Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, he had seen what is the true nature of the black woman, the homosexual man, and the Vietnamese soldier.

He had seen them all and came to the conclusion that dehumanizing anyone, *anyone*, *anyone* is like a denial of the sun; it is ultimately a blasphemy.

Extended Conversations With Other Religious Groups

Merton also began extended conversations with other religious groups outside his own order. He began a conversation with a group that practices Hesychasm. In Russian orthodoxy there is a group known as Hesychasts. It’s a Greek term that means “the way of silence.” They’re either monastic or of a monastic bent.

He began a conversation with Sufis throughout the Middle East. Not the Suni, not the Shia, not those who are always mad at each other, but the Sufis, the mystical Muslims. He began a conversation with the Kabbalistic Jews, those interested in the text of the Zohar, mystical Judaism.

He began a conversation with the Tibetan Buddhists. The Dalai Llama? Every time

he comes to the United States, he goes to Kentucky and puts a flower on the grave of Thomas Merton. They were deep friends. And then most of all, probably more than anyone else, he began a conversation with the Zen Buddhists that results, for example, in a book like *The Way of Chuang Tzu*.

Merton became a friend of D.T. Suzuki, who was a Taoist master, a Zen master, who then brought that knowledge of Zen Taoism to the West, probably more than anybody else has done. Once he said to Suzuki:

“I have my own way to walk and for some reason Zen is right in the middle of wherever I go. If I could not breathe Zen, I would probably die of asphyxiation.”

The Center of Our Being Is Untouched by Sin and Illusion

Merton considered himself both Christian (Roman Catholic) and Zen, similar to Thich Nhat Han of Plum village in France. One of his insights – let me just share one other insight, linked to that vision in Kentucky – is this. He wrote:

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion. A point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal but from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our mind or the brutalities of our own will.

“This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of

heaven which is in everybody, and if we could see it, we could see these billion points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.” In French he called it “la pointe vierge,” the vanishing point, the point of nothingness.

Logic Is Appreciation of Merton’s Life

For me, speaking personally, yes I’m a preacher but not speaking as a preacher. And yes, I’m a follower of Jesus. I try to be Christ-conscious. But not that way either. Simply as a person. For me it’s a matter of logic, my appreciation of what Merton has done and what he’s written.

Are we all walking around, shining like the sun? Yes or no? No matter that not all can see it. For me, too many have seen it for one to simply deny it. And so if “yes,” if that really is who we are, then I believe his conclusion follows logically. Dehumanizing anyone is ultimately a blasphemy. Therefore, our job is to make loving relations with everyone insofar as we are able, insofar as it is up to us.

The cook taught the prince how to live his life. And the monk has done the same for me.

Amen.