

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, July 26, 2015

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

If You See the Buddha, Kill Him

A few weeks ago in the sermon, I mentioned a saying that is in the Buddhist tradition, which several of you remarked on during the following week. The saying was, “If you see the Buddha walking down the road, kill him.”

Yes, it’s a counterintuitive kind of weird statement, and I explained in the sermon that the gist of it was that, if you see somebody that you recognize as *the* Buddha, what it means is that you have been deceived or fooled into not seeing your *own* Buddha nature. So it’s that you put all of Buddhahood on the *other* one, venerating that person, and you neglect the nature within *you* yourself.

Pray to God to Get Rid of God

Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) was a German mystic of the Middle Ages. Many of his sermons were transcribed, by the way, so there’s a corpus of literature from them. In one of his sermons, he said, “I pray God to rid me of God.” Now once again, the rational mind says, “I’m sorry, but that just doesn’t make any sense at all. It’s nonsense.”

And so it takes a certain kind of consciousness to understand these sayings: “If you see the Buddha walking down the road,

kill him.” Or, “I pray God to rid me of God.” The second God in the latter statement is the notion that there exists some entity out there, separate from us, better than us, more righteous than us, more just than us, and knowing more, seeing more than us. Therefore we venerate that separate entity out there and pray to that kind of God.

But Meister Eckhart is saying, “No. Please, divinity, in all of its inwardness and outwardness, rid me of that idea, so I’m not plagued by it anymore.” He went on to explain as much in all the hundreds of his sermons that had been recorded. He was also very fond of using different metaphors to try to get at his notion of what it means that there’s connectedness all the time between humanity and divinity.

The Metaphor of the Great Pneuma

One of the metaphors of which Eckhart was fond, although he can’t take credit for it because it’s older than dirt, was the notion of spirit. In both Hebrew and Greek, the word “spirit” means multiple things, and it means them both separately and all together. So you’ve got “pneuma,” from which we get pneumonia or pneumatic, meaning wind, breath, atmosphere, and then there’s the “great pneuma,” the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. All of it is part of the same. And what’s cool about it is that,

yes, there's air and wind, but the *pneuma* is also always within you, linked to life. If there's no breath, you're dead.

The Metaphor of Scrambled Eggs

Another metaphor that Eckhart used frequently was a notion of eating. (This one gets a little graphic.) So whatever you had for breakfast this morning, pancakes, granola, scrambled eggs, whatever it was, imagine one bite of what you had for breakfast. There it is on your plate, separate from you.

You take a bite of it, and now it's in your mouth. It's still separate from you, though, and you're able to spit it out if you want to. Then you swallow it, and your breakfast is still separate from you, at least for a few more moments. You can take a dose of ipecac, and out it comes.

But there comes a time when it's no longer separate, when the food that was on your plate is now part of you, having been digested. Actually, as you keep going, the process will revert, but we're not going to talk about that.

This is a fascinating thought experiment. When does something that is not you become you? The breath. You're sitting there, looking at a storm. You're watching Hurricane Gertrude slam into the Florida keys! And that same atmosphere is also within you. You can talk about that storm, but only so far because that same atmosphere is also part of the breath within you.

The Metaphor of the Flask and the Lake

Here's a third metaphor of which Eckhart was fond. He took a flask, filled it with water, carried it down to the lakeside, waded into the water, and put that flask full of water down into the water of the lake, laying it upon the sand on the bottom of the lake.

Then he showed his congregation and asked two questions. Is the water in the flask? Yes. Is the water not in the flask. Yes. As you attempt to think of these things logically, it becomes sort of like the wrong question to ask. Yes, the flask water is separate. Yes, it's in the flask and the lake water is not in the flask.

Eckhart was trying to say, "So also with God." So also with *you* as the holder of the flask. Within you and outside of you, the water is one continuous thing.

Meister Eckhart died in 1327. He was silenced by the church in 1329, which is an interesting thought. You know he had been dead for two years, but they silenced him anyway. What this really meant is that the hierarchy didn't want anybody to be reading his sermons anymore.

Does Illness Lead to Visions or Do Visions Lead to Illness?

Thirteen years pass, and a little girl is born in England. Nobody knows what her given name was at birth in 1342. Then when she was in her early thirties, in the spring of the year, this woman began to have visions.

On one particular day – it's unknown whether she was ill and had visions or if she had visions and appeared ill – but it seemed to her friends that she was near death, such that a priest was brought in. Considering the

limits of medical knowledge they had at that time, he just stood at the foot of her bed holding a crucifix. And so, as the woman went in and out of consciousness, she would lie there and stare at the crucifix that the priest was holding.

What she saw, though, was more symbolic than the crucifix alone. She saw Jesus suffering as she looked at that symbol of the crucifixion, but she also heard him talking to her for hours. Now, like a mystic, she realized that what Jesus was saying about himself, he was simultaneously saying about reality above all. This is what that kind of consciousness is, once again, that allows the mystic to understand the sayings: “Kill the Buddha.” And “God, rid me of God.”

Going for Life to the Anchor-Hold

This was such a profound experience that the woman we now refer to as Julian of Norwich eventually asked her bishop to enclose her in what was called an anchor-hold. And so the church where she had her anchor-hold was Saint Julian’s of Norwich in England. She was later named after that church because nobody knew her real name since she never signed anything that she wrote. This gives you a little insight into the lack of ego in her character.

An anchor-hold was a room built into the wall of a church, where it served as a place of solitary confinement for the anchorite – a monk or nun or other religious person who had renounced the world to live in seclusion for life. There was a window for Julian to peer into the sanctuary so she could participate in the mass. And there was a window opening onto the street where she

could talk with passersby and could offer counseling and prayers to them.

This arrangement was a marvelous thing in reality. It was also a marvelous thing symbolically to connect the street and average persons having average problems with the mass and with their own spirituality. And so anchor-holds were popular all over Europe during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and anchorites lived in solitude and contemplation while yet being able to offer counseling and prayers to others.

20 Years to Write It, 600 to Understand It

Julian felt the need to go apart and reflect on the religious experiences she had undergone when she was thirty-one years old. It took her twenty years finally to write down what had happened to her so that the larger church would understand what she had seen. And then it took us six hundred years to begin taking her seriously.

In very many ways it’s reminiscent of what happened with Darwin. Once he had his seminal idea, which other people had as well, it took him ten years to get up the nerve to write it down, knowing that the church was going to come down hard on him.

People like Julian don’t want to engage in debate. They don’t think in terms of argument. They don’t need to prove they’re right. And so they often become hermits. They go apart and find a way to experience their truth in a healing or transformative kind of way.

Julian first wrote a short text of her “Showings of Love,” which is what she first

called her experiences. Soon thereafter, not being pleased with the first effort, she rewrote it, and that became the book now called *Revelations of Divine Love*. By the way, this is the very first book written by a woman in the language we now call English.

Her interpretation is unlike the religious views common for history up to Julian's time. It is not based on sin, guilt, shame, fear of God, or fear of Hell. Instead it is actually delightful, free, intimate, and full of cosmic hope.

Deus ad Intra and Deus ad Extra

That ten-year delay that Darwin experienced? Well, the shadow of the Inquisition that Eckhart also experienced was spreading throughout all of Europe, and Julian too knew about it full well. The priest was holding a crucifix in front of her, and in her vision she saw a flow of blood from the hands, from the feet, and particularly from the crown of thorns. To Julian it wasn't gory, it wasn't like a Mel Gibson movie. Instead it was a flow of love.

Mystics tend to understand things symbolically, much more so than the rest of us, more than the rest of humanity. She saw the flow as the love that first flows within the Godhead, within the Trinity. In Latin theology, the term for it is *Deus ad intra*, the flow within God, between Jesus and God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

And then this is the love that, if we don't block it, if we allow it, if we nurture it, if we provide the flow path for it, this love flows from God into us, into others, and back to God. This is called *Deus ad extra*, the flow

of love that comes from outside of God into the world and embraces the world, unlimited by space or time, without any recrimination.

This is the love that allowed Jesus, while still proudly carrying his wounds as the risen Christ, to return back to God. Julian wrote – and once again here is another counter-intuitive kind of statement – “Our wounds are our glory.” Having seen the risen Christ, with the holes in his hands and feet and the crown of thorns, this is really one of the most counterintuitive messages that we have ever gleaned from our faith. And Julian got it.

Here Is the Point of the Sermon

All of Meister Eckhart, all of Julian of Norwich are condensed now to this. Whether our wounds are caused by others or by our own mistakes, Julian frames it all as grace, saying, “First the fall and then the recovery from the fall, and both are the mercy of God.”

And yet we say, “Um-m-m. Not so sure. The recovery from the fall, that's nice. The fall? Well some falls are pretty hard. Some falls are devastating. Some falls require therapy for the rest of your life.”

And she's saying counterintuitively, “First the fall and then the recovery from the fall, both are the mercy of God.” Her “Showings of Love” helped her to understand that in falling down we learn almost everything that matters spiritually.

Humans come to full consciousness precisely by shadowboxing, facing our own contradictions and introducing ourselves to our own mistakes and failings. As Lady

Julian put it in her Middle English, she made up a new word, saying that, “Sin is behovely.” No wonder it took us six hundred years of largely dualistic thinking to sort of get it and take her seriously. “Behovely” is behoove, as in “It behooves me to do this, and it behooves you to do that.” Practical plus lovely. World and spirit. Flesh and God together.

Religion Has only One Job Description

Any problem that exists within religion can be traced back to not paying attention to its one job description. And the job description is found in the word itself. “Re” means “again.” “Lig,” the root in the middle of the word, means “to connect,” as in ligament. Reconnect. The job description of all religion is very simple. Whatever is two,

make it one. Reconnect. Whatever is severed, whatever is alienated, whatever is torn asunder, make the two back into the one whole.

God is saying, in all incarnations, that “I am not totally other. I have planted some of me in all things that long for reunion.” Julian wrote, “We don’t pray *to* god. We pray *through* God.” Any notion of God as the absolute other results only in absolute alienation. Add to that any notion of God as petty or angry or even torturing and the mystical journey grinds to a halt.

So God created similarity and compassion in the human person to overcome this gap. God in you seeks to see, know, and love God, like a homing device that never turns off.

Amen.