

# A SUBTLE HINT

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Sunday, November 8, 2015

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

## **Evangelize the World with a Phone Book**

I was reminded of my college years several times last week. This would be — you can do the math if you want — in the late 70's and early 80's. I was a member of Campus Crusade for Christ. There were three large campus Christian organizations, some of them national, some of them international, that existed at that time.

Campus Crusade for Christ was one of them, Navigators was another that had chapters on campuses throughout the country, and the third, probably the most intellectual of the group, was Intervarsity, which ended up having the Intervarsity Press, a publishing house to this day.

Intervarsity was probably the most liberal of the campus Christian organizations, with Navigators in the middle, and Campus Crusade being the most conservative of the group. The plan of the last of these three, as articulated by its leader, was to evangelize the world by the year 2000.

Campus Crusade had a detailed plan on how to do it, involving a lot of cold calling. You sit down with the phone book, and I hated it, but I did it, cold calling, trying to convert people over the phone. There were lots of tracts, the main one being a little yellow pamphlet called "The Four Spiritual Laws." We used a lot of these tracts, but the basic plan can be looked at with either kindness or unkindness.

## **How Jesus Did It: A Pyramid Scheme**

To be kind about it, the plan was modeled after the way in which Jesus did business. So Jesus got twelve disciples, and then the twelve went out into the world. Their plan was that each one of the original twelve would get another twelve. So you've got 144. (Pardon the pun, but it does start to get gross after a while.) To be unkind about it, it's a pyramid scheme. You keep going twelve, twelve, twelve, twelve until you finally evangelize the entire world.

The subtext on this is that there was a lot of millennial thinking. You know, this would really be great if we could get everybody, if the whole world would be Christian, our kind of Christian, by the year 2000. Then the criteria would be met, Jesus would come back, and the Millennium as described in Revelation 20 would begin.

Telling you this is deeply embarrassing to me because I was part of it all, the foolishness of youth, a zealous kind of person. And so I was reminded, as I mentioned, that the head of our Campus Crusade chapter had his twelve. I never made that cut, but my roommate, a wonderful guy, a good person deep inside, was one of the twelve and he was constantly working on me to be one of *his* twelve.

He ended up going on staff for Campus Crusade. He became a computer science engineer, and now, 35-40 years later, he remains at work on computers for Campus

Crusade to this day. He's got grey hair, his kids are all grown, and he's still doing the kind of work on computers that he transitioned into after he graduated.

### **Fuel for the Fire Originates in Church**

The other reminder, to get a little more serious about it, is that I have been monitoring of late the news that has been coming out of Texas, specifically Dallas and Houston, in regard to the violence that has been perpetrated against the LGBTQ community in those two cities in particular.

Since the Supreme Court ruling against discrimination in marriages and then, in this last election cycle, the anti-antidiscrimination ballot initiative in Houston, there has been a drastically increased level of violence against gays, lesbians, and especially transgender people.

Why did this remind me of college? Because the fuel for that fire originates in the church. Let me say it again but in the form of a confession: "Dear God, I am really sorry to have been part of an organization that fuels the hatred that adds to the violence."

How do I know that? Because I was part of it. The Campus Crusade for Christ organization had very specific teachings about women and their proper role or lack of it in the church and their proper role in the family. They had even more specific teachings about anybody interested in a same-sex relationship. They had specific teachings about many things.

So my roommate is still on staff at this most-conservative of the campus Christian organizations. And what happened to me? How did I get from there to here? It would take a long time to tell you, but I'll leave out all except relevant portions of the story.

### **Heating up a Phase Change in Religion**

In chemistry there's something called a phase change. Say you take ice and heat it up, and you get water. Then you take water and heat it up, and you get steam. Ice and water and steam are radically different in their properties, but deep inside they are exactly the same stuff. It's all H<sub>2</sub>O but its various states are wildly different. When you add heat, it changes from one state to another. It's called a phase change.

I think that this is sort of an illustration of what has happened to me. That is, I'm still a Christian. I still believe in Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit but not in the same way that I used to believe. Not even close. Which begs the question, then, what was the heat? What caused the phase change in me? That change came in two forms. Lots of forms, but two main ones.

The first main form of heat or the phase change in me is represented by the fourth paragraph in the Statement of Oneness that we have in the Sunday Bulletin at the beginning of worship. I can't tell you how important that is to me. I can't get it out of my mind.

My phase change has in it a notion that comes from Acts 17:28 and Luke 17:21. In the Luke passage, Jesus says that "The kingdom of God is within you." Then in the Acts passage, Paul says no, no, no, "You live your life immersed in divinity," "For in [God] we live and move and have our being."

### **The Thought of a Lifetime: God Is Within Us; We Are Within God**

That interplay of thoughts — that we live our lives in God and at the same time the kingdom of God is within us — is for me one of those thoughts of a lifetime. I will spend

the rest of my days with that thought in the back of my mind trying to grab hold of it. It is indescribably beautiful to me. It is one of those mystical realizations that here is the interplay of the way creator and creation, physicality and spirituality, God and human intermingle. It's a way of stating that interplay of thoughts.

So that's one of the two main forms of heat that can cause phase changes. And by golly that's pretty hot for me at least. But the other one of the two main forms of heat that I referred to just above as phase changes has to do with the breaking down of a metaphor. In religious language — the order of worship, the sermon, the hymns, all that kind of stuff — metaphors are rampant.

Whenever we say, "God the Father," there you go. You have in your mind a father, hopefully a good one, and then you say, "Okay, God's like that only better." Using a metaphor is a way of saying something whereas otherwise, just saying it directly is difficult to do.

### **Freddy Is a Pig Is Like an Education**

Let me give you an example of a metaphor: Freddy *is* a pig when he eats. (Compare the metaphor with this simile: Freddy eats *like* a pig.) And we all know that Freddy is not literally a pig when he eats. It's just a way of saying that Freddy chews with his mouth open and is sloppy and noisy when he eats, so we use metaphorical language to communicate that kind of behavior.

Furthermore, we may say that education is a passport to a satisfying career, yet we all know it's not literally a passport that you get from the government. But rather like a passport, education allows you to go places, and it opens doors for you.

### **Spirit Is the Energy Behind the Universe**

Similarly, spirit is the energy behind the universe. But my problem — and I'm trying to make it your problem too — is that I can't find where that analogy, that metaphor, that simile, breaks down. And so theologians are talking about spirit, and physicists are talking about fields and energy. And I'm asking myself whether they are talking the same language. I sense that actually they are, although coming at the metaphor from their different directions.

This is difficult to explain. It is a mystical thought. The Christian message, in which we've all been steeped just by living in our faith can often be summed up in our two major holidays, Christmas and Easter. They are the two main anchors of the Christian story. We have a preexistent God who, upon seeing our plight, incarnated into humanity, taught us, led us down the path that would lead to life, and then was killed and resurrected at the end.

### **Adding Heat to the Christian Story**

There are other details, of course, but as I said, those are like two of the main anchors of the Christian story. If you believe it, if you buy into it, voilà, you're a Christian.

But now let me add some heat. If spirit does equal energy — it's not just a metaphor, but it's like there's an "equal" sign between the two — if spirit really does equal the energy behind this universe of ours, that means incarnation is everywhere. It means ours is an incarnational universe. It means the Big Bang was Christmas. And it means that we are in God and God is in us. This in turn means that it begins not to seem contradictory but begins to make sense. And that Jesus is just an example, a pointer, a pioneer.

### **A Complication: Spirit = Energy = Life**

And now let me complicate the equation one more level. What if spirit equals energy equals life? We bring in biology. We have the resurrected Jesus that we pay particular attention to in the springtime around Easter.

But what if that's only an example? A pointer, a pioneer? What if we actually have a living universe that is conscious, that is aware? And what appears as death is just a transition?

Points to ponder. But going back to Campus Crusade for Christ, it was extraordinarily militant, triumphalistic, exclusionary, and underneath, in hindsight, I can now see that it

was also hostile and fearful. But my apprehension of God, insofar as we were able in our youth to understand what divinity was all about, was pretty amazing. It was good. It was even great.

### **Worship a Leaf; See a Tree; Then a Forest**

But add the heat, and I now see in hindsight that, in a sense to propose a metaphor, before I was worshiping the leaf. And now I'm beginning to see the outline of the tree. And it's simply amazing.

And what sort of scares me is I have the feeling that after I die, I'm going to see the whole forest.

*Amen.*