

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Lent I, February 14, 2016

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

Is God Both Transcendent and Eminent?

Two Sundays ago I made a sort of theological comment in the sermon, in which God is supposed to be both transcendent — that is, sweeping the cosmos, unlimited by space and time — and also immanent — that is, close, intimate, at hand, within us. However, the church has historically had no problem at all envisioning God as transcendent, but it has had a great deal of difficulty envisioning God as immanent, at the same time as being transcendent.

Similarly, Jesus is considered as both human and divine. Once again the church has no problem with the divine part; the big problem is with the human part. The divine attribution has been emphasized throughout the ages at the expense of the human attribution.

So that was two Sundays ago. Then last Sunday, in the announcements, Renée Guidelli pointed out a workshop on the nature of the soul, which took place last week.

Then a third coincidence having to do with the soul interrupted my concentration on a book by Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest of whose work I've been reading a lot lately. The book is entitled *Immortal Diamond*, in which he writes a section called "Soul, Our Inherent Identity." Which of course caught my attention because I've been thinking about it recently. Let me read a few lines to you:

"My studied conviction is that our inherent identity is what almost all the world religions and philosophies have essentially meant by *soul*. We still have many different definitions for *soul*, which reveals the insight of the original Greek word, where "*psyche*" literally meant butterfly." [AMS: How about that! "Psyche" is the Greek word that in the *New Testament* is always translated as "soul."]

"Soul and the True Self have always been hard to pin down; they are elusive and subtle like butterflies. Our inability to see the True Self clearly is like our inability to see air; it is everywhere and so it is nowhere. Thus, learning to pay positive attention is the secret formula of almost all mature religion."

And that's the sentence that arrested me. It stopped me in my tracks. I read no further. "Thus, learning to pay positive attention [to the soul, essentially] is the secret formula of almost all mature religion."

I Have a Core Belief but Can't Prove It

I can try to be persuasive, but that's the best I can do. (My core belief is found partly in the Statement of Oneness in your Bulletin, as expressed in its fourth paragraph, and partly in the quote from St. Paul and St. Luke after the Postlude.)

And the core belief is that “In God we live and move and have our being,” but also “The kingdom of heaven is within us.”

So there’s an interplay, an interflow, an intertwining of us being in divinity and divinity being within us. It’s mystical. It doesn’t make a lot of sense on the surface. It’s hard to understand.

But my core belief is therefore that the soul is who we are in God and who God is in us. Let me repeat that: The soul is who we are in God and who God is in us.

Now any preacher worth his salt would try to explain that apparent lapse in logic at this point. So I’m sitting at my desk wrestling with how in the dickens to illustrate this concept to you. How am I going to explain this?

Then an idea popped into my head. It’s a terrible idea, but I can’t do any better. This will appear weird, counterproductive, off the subject, and not worth your time at first. But humor me. Cut me some slack and hear my analogy on how to explain this intertwining of the soul and divinity.

The Question and Some Answers

It starts off with an unusual question: What was the origin of World War II? Do you remember your history from college or high school? Or did you google it? Here’s the kind of stuff that’s going to come up:

The Fascist Party was founded in Italy in 1919 by Benito Mussolini on a platform

of vehement anticommunism and advocacy of the glory of war. In 1921 the party was invited to join a coalition government, and in 1922, following the collapse of the government, it was invited by King Victor Emmanuel to form a government. Mussolini became Prime Minister and ruled the country as a Fascist dictator, leading Italy into three wars, the last of which ended in his death by Italian partisans, who killed him by firing squad.

Less well-known but also highly significant was that the relationship between Japan and China was getting really tense. Japan was becoming very arrogant and militaristic. It invaded Manchuria in the Second Sino-Japanese war in 1937-45 as a result of Japanese imperialist policy to acquire political and military advantages in order to gain access to raw-material reserves and other economic resources, particularly food and labor.

The Rise of Fascism in Europe

The economic collapse and the political instability caused by World War I led to the rise of Fascism in Europe. The Nazi version was dedicated to reversal of the Versailles Treaty and the establishment of a German Empire by means of war and conquest.

The National Socialist German Workers’ (Nazi) Party came to power under Adolf Hitler in 1933 when he became Chancellor of the Reichstag. This is seen as one of the principal causes of World War II.

There’s also the Treaty of Versailles. This is what concluded World War I on

June 28, 1919. That treaty had some problems that made it really difficult for the German people and the Weimar Republic that also led to World War II.

For example, the treaty had what's called a War Guilt Clause that said in effect, "Germany, you're at fault, and you need to pay for the damage you caused." This was not a problem until after the depression in 1929. Suddenly the government and the people couldn't afford what they needed to pay for the damage Germany caused in World War I. This economic hardship breded resentment and anger among the German people, and they wanted to shake that off.

We're not Done Yet

Lest we think we in the West are lily-white, Germany also observed very closely the history of colonization by the West. Spain, France, Belgium, and England in particular were guilty of this practice, but here's the kicker for us:

Germany also observed very closely what we called Manifest Destiny — the right that Americans thought they could rely upon to sweep through the West and rid ourselves of "sub-humans," those whom we didn't want to live there anymore. And we exploited this attitude of American expansion with a vengeance, resulting in the removal of native American inhabitants, the settlement of the West, and war with Mexico.

So why, therefore, shouldn't Germany colonize Czechoslovakia and Poland? And why shouldn't they, in a twisted

sense of conscience, rid themselves of their own "untermenschen" of Jews, homosexuals, and Gypsies.

Now Here's the Point

Every one of those reasons, those causes of World War II, has its own history. The history of Japan-China relations is one of the most complex subjects you could ever study. And think of the books and the courses that have been offered on Manifest Destiny or the understanding of the Treaty of Versailles and the way that led ultimately to Nazi sensibilities.

In other words every single one of these causes of World War II has its own causes, its own deep, complex, fingers-in-every-pie kind of history. Such that, to answer the question — What was the cause of World War II? — in a sense you need to know the history of the world.

To know one thing, you need to know everything.

I offer that conclusion to you as a weird analogy for how we might look at one another. Another neighbor, another country, another tribe, another type of person, different from you. Repeat to yourself that quote from Richard Rohr, "Thus, learning to pay positive attention [to the soul] is the secret formula of almost all mature religion."

When you look upon another person, what do you see?

We have a tendency as immature spiritual beings to see only external features. There's a suspicious-looking black man.

There's an angry-looking white male. There's a feminist. There's a flaming gay. We categorize people based upon absurd externalities, and we miss the soul.

Christ, as a mature spiritual being, wasn't fooled by the way in which externals present themselves, catch our attention, but we know full well that there is a soul, there is divinity residing underneath and hidden in every person.

An Example: Paying Positive Attention

In a recent book — I've not yet read it, but I did read the review, and it was amazing. The book is entitled *How the Universe Got Its Spots*, subtitled *Diary of a Finite Time in a Finite Space* by Janna Levin. She is a theoretical physicist, and she wrote the book in diary format in order to try to explain to her mom what she does every day. That's why I think it should be a marvelous book.

Levin writes one section about Einstein. (You'll notice I haven't done an Einstein quote in a long time, but I bring this one up because it's pretty cool.) It was a hundred-and-one years ago, in 1915, that Einstein set forth four different papers on his theories, particularly about general relativity, which predicted all sorts of stuff. One of the things they predicted was gravity waves, which were finally confirmed last Thursday after physicists had waited for more than a hundred years for proof of their existence.

One other aside on this review. Levin writes of Einstein's struggle to find an equation for general relativity, one that

would describe his pioneering model of curved space-time.

But one other thing you need to know about Einstein is that he wasn't good at math. It was his Achilles' heel all along, but he didn't let it stop him. Try doing physics without good math. It's hard, but all the same he did it. He's world-famous, and yet he was no genius at math.

Here It Is! Another Einstein Quote!

Here's what Levin wrote about Einstein:

“Armed with the crudest mathematical instruments, he pierced the surface and saw through to the core. First he identified the object of pursuit, geometry. Then he realized he was completely un-equipped to handle a battle with such complex geometry.

“Einstein had created an unwieldy monster that in a way he couldn't tame. He conjured up a theory reliant on mathematics in curved space-time that still demands years of its students' attention.

“Though he managed to use those tools, compared to his mathematician friends, he used them clumsily. Isn't that great? I love that. His fragility, his defiant brilliance in the face of his own limitations. He ploughed right past his inadequacy.

“Maybe this is what he meant when he said, ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge.’ Like

a bad plumber, he hacked and hammered and slapped together a mathematical model of curved space, correcting error after error in his own formulation, sloshing between despair, doubt, and conviction.

“When he finally pulled something together, something that worked, he was overcome with elation for days. He had trudged through the darkness of his own confusion and found what he had set out to discover: a theory of gravity based on curved space-time and faithful to the principle of relativity. It’s like Michelangelo revealing the sculpture he believed hidden within each stone.”

I thought it was beautiful. Just beautiful.

We’re not all Einsteins. As a matter of fact, there’s not one in the room. However, we can be disciplined. We can each in our own way follow that hero’s path.

We can, with discipline, correct our mistakes as we find them, sloshing our way through.

We can look upon our neighbor, our brothers and sisters upon this planet, and force ourselves by sheer will to remember that each one of us is a child of God made in the image of God, including those who have a different religion and those of a different political party and those of a different color and those of a different what-ever.

Think of It as a Lenten Discipline

By sheer will, we can remember that each one of us is a child of God, that each one of us is made in the image of God, that each one of us is endowed with a soul every bit as divine as yours and mine.

Each one of us has a history and a constellation of hopes and dreams, and hurts and disappointments every bit as complex as the precursors of World War II.

It’s called loving your neighbor as yourself. It’s called doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Think of it as a Lenten discipline worthy of your soul.

To see one another in this way is to have the ability to heal the world.

Amen.