

# OUR PRIMARY IDENTITY

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017

*Lectionary Reading: Acts of the Apostles 2:1-21.*

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

## **W**edding Day: Two People Walking Their Path Together

One thing I like about preaching at weddings is that I know the bride and groom can't escape. They're right there, and they have to listen for a bit. I often talk about a Hebrew word, neshúmah, which is translated most commonly as "soul." The point I try to make with the couple is that I am dealing with two people in their finery coming together on their wedding day. But if you get past the physical appearance of it — the tuxedo, the wedding dress, the flowers, all the accoutrements that go with the wedding — if you get past that, underneath it all at a spiritual level are two souls choosing to walk their path together.

Now the hard-core materialists among us will say, excuse me, but we have two hormone-laden bodies that have decided to get together for a while, which is true, but I don't believe that as the essence of marriage. Yes, people hook up all the time. But to make the choice of marriage, there's something going on underneath. I think it is best explained by choices that our souls make, that our bodies and our minds become aware of over time.

## **W**e Are Spiritual Beings Having a Human Experience

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,<sup>1</sup> in one of his most famous quotes — I can't do a Pentecost Sunday without mentioning this quote — said, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." Let me suggest that you should not be fooled by the simplicity of that statement. There is a world of difference between the two approaches to who we are.

The gospel of John says that "God is spirit." It is one of the equations in the Bible. And so, if we are made in the image and likeness of God, then it follows that our primary identity is spirit. Our primary identity, our essence, is neshúmah, a soul having a human experience.

Here's a little thought experiment that bears out this point: Suppose you are in a car accident and you lose an arm, which must be amputated. After that, you look at your body and note that it isn't what it used to be. "I lost an arm. It's gone. My body is less than what it was." So you can ask of the person who

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, was a French idealist philosopher and Jesuit priest who trained as a

paleontologist and geologist who took part in the discovery of Peking Man. — Wikipedia

lost the arm, is he or she any less than a person? The answer is no, not even close. The person isn't affected by the loss of an arm because he or she is more linked to the essence of who we are underneath material things such as the body. It was C.S. Lewis,<sup>2</sup> the evangelical scholar from a generation ago, who said that "A body is something that we have, not something that we are."

## **Questions Down the Road: What Happens at Death?**

This then brings up some questions if we go down the road a bit. As you can tell in this sermon, I'm not proclaiming anything. I'm thinking out loud. I'm sharing some thoughts with you because this borders on deep aspects of our lives. If we are primarily a spirit, primarily a soul, what happens at death?

Let me tell you about a wonderful YouTube video: There was a Jewish woman who died on September 11, 2001, in the World Trade Center disaster, and her funeral was being filmed in a large synagogue with hundreds of people in attendance. Her son was delivering the eulogy, and he had just begun, only a few sentences into his eulogy. Standing up there in a handsome pulpit and a beautiful setting, the son said the word "mother."

At that very instant a little bird lands on his head. It's difficult to imagine what was going through the man's heart and mind at that moment. Here he is, not a public speaker, talking to hundreds of people right after 9/11, giving a eulogy for the death of his mother, and a bird lands in his hair. He stops for a moment. The scene is arresting as he tries to take it in. "Did a bird really just land on my

head?" He reaches up and very gently, keeping his palm open, he grasps the little bird and holds it, just looking at it for a moment.

## **Pressing the Envelope for Hard-Core Materialists**

Meanwhile, a good friend of his in one of the front rows, comes up to take the bird from him and help the guy out a littlebit. He hands the bird to his friend, and the friend also, ever so gently, holds the bird for a moment and then opens his palm and lets it fly off. This presses the envelope for the hard-core materialists among us.

Yes, there is a chance that a bird might land on somebody's head at any given time, I suppose, but at that moment, when he says "mother" in that context? You ask him, and people marveled at the incident. The son was asked about this when being interviewed much later for a television show, and if you watched closely on the show you could see the bird on his head. And there was a profound sense that his mom was okay. She was not limited to her body that died on 9/11.

There's a military funeral for a serviceman who had been killed in Iraq. His brother was at the graveside, giving a eulogy for the fallen soldier. He's there talking about his brother when a little bird comes and lands on his shoulder, and if you were to watch the YouTube video, you would see that it stays there for almost a minute. Once again, I am hard-pressed to imagine the feelings that must have coursed through that brother's soul as he's there, giving the eulogy for his brother, with a bird on his shoulder. Then off it goes.

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<sup>2</sup> Clive Staples Lewis was a British novelist, poet, academic, medievalist, literary critic, essayist, and

Christian apologist. He held positions at both Oxford University and Cambridge University. — Wikipedia

There's a couple I married around fifteen years ago, and they were married for about ten years when the groom passed away. His name was Heinz Klein, a management professor at Binghamton University, and his wife's name was Linda. He was a strong atheist, and it was inadvisable to talk religion around him.

Except that one Sunday I'm there in the pulpit doing my thing, and I see him standing in the back. He had come in late and stayed only about twenty minutes. I guessed that was pretty much all he could stomach. I saw him leave, and I wondered about it, but then I learned he had died two days later. So, he attended church once, partially, before he died.

### **A Cardinal Lands on Her Car Hood And Stares at the Widow**

A month later I'm having dinner with friends, including his widow, and there was a time when she and I were able to talk privately. I asked her, "Have you heard from Heinz?" Immediately her eyes moistened, and she told me that it was on a very hot day when he died in the middle of summer. About a month later, in August, she was in her car at the intersection where the Number Five Restaurant is. It was 90 degrees, the kind of day when all your windows are rolled up and the air conditioning is going full on.

She had stopped at a red light, and a cardinal, which was the favorite bird of both of them, landed on the hood of her car and looked at her for a moment, jumped around a few times, probably because of the hot hood, and looked at her again. The light changed, and off it went. Of course, we all know that about birds, particularly the dove, which is the classic millennia-old symbol for the spirit. Ask what happens at death, and we all have our

opinions about it, no matter whether we're materialists or spiritualists or anything in between.

The scriptures teach us about souls. But neshúmah is not a word that I am anxious to define because when you do, it sounds like a thing when it is actually more of an essence. Thus, neshúmah is the essence of the cosmos in the same way that we say God is the essence of the cosmos. In Greek, we have the word psyche, from which we get the word "psychology," so it's not your body but more like what's going on in your heart, in your mind. My favorite definition is in Latin, where we have anima and animus, and the notion that you have animate and inanimate objects. You have objects with a soul and objects without a soul, and every single one with a soul is alive, whether it's a plant or an animal or a bacterium or a paramecium or a human being. If it's animate, it has a soul.

### **Who Are We? Does Neshúmah Extend Beyond the Body?**

If our primary identity is being a soul, then some really big questions arise. Who are we, really? It's not who you see in front of you. If you look in a mirror, what you see is just the body. You don't see who you really are. Also, I'd like to ask, "Where are we? It seems silly that a soul is confined to a body. Does it extend beyond the body in the same way that the neshúmah of the world extends beyond any physical portion of it?"

Physics has now conclusively determined that there are eleven dimensions. And so we exist, our physical existence at least limited to the four dimensions — three spatial and one time. But if God is of the cosmos, then God is of all the dimensions. And if we're made in the image of God, is it the case for us

also? Then we exist at a higher level of reality, a higher dimension as well.

Eckhart Tolle,<sup>3</sup> one of the great spiritual teachers of our age, has a marvelous illustration of this, in which he takes the image of a glass of water, and you put your finger into the water and then you pull it back out. Simple. But his teaching about it I present to you not as gospel fact but as something for you to think about, something to push your envelope. His teaching about it is that who we are when we stick our finger into the water and pull it back, is like an incarnation for us. So, our 70, 80, 90 years upon the earth, relative to our neshúmah, is like that fingertip being in the water for a time. Just a small portion — time and space — of who we really are.

## **H**ow Can It Be That Heaven Is in Us and We Are in the Divinity?

And so, if we go down this road one more step, if you back up and place yourself on the moon, looking at the earth, what you see is a globe of intermingled souls all around it. If we are not confined to our bodies, if we are not confined to time in our true essence, then we have the intermingling of souls in this room and upon this globe where we exist, spread out upon the earth like children on a playground being overseen by an oversoul that we call God.

This explains something that is otherwise paradoxical. How it can be that the kingdom of heaven is within us and yet also, divinity is that in which we live and move and have our being? “Spiritual beings having a human experience.” That quote comes from de Chardin’s book called *Phenomenon of Man*.

Now I’ll conclude with two other brief quotes from that book. One of them is very famous; the other one of them I’m pretty sure you have not heard before. The famous one is this:

“Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.”

And then the quote you probably haven’t heard before. This is actually more of our marching orders:

“There is almost a sensual longing for communion with others who have a large vision. The immense fulfillment of the friendship between those engaged in furthering the evolution of consciousness has a quality impossible to describe.”

Embrace the larger vision of who you are.

*Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> Eckhart Tolle is a German-born resident of Canada, best-known as the author of *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose*. In

2011, he was listed by *Watkins Review* as the most spiritually influential person in the world. — Wikipedia

***Nota Bene***

*Here are a few additional pungent quotes:*

*by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:*

Growing old is like being increasingly penalized for a crime you haven't committed.  
It doesn't matter if the water is cold or warm if you're going to have to wade through it anyway.  
It is our duty as men and women to proceed as though the limits of our abilities do not exist.  
Death is acceptable only if it represents the physically necessary passage toward a union of a metamorphosis.  
Love is an adventure and a conquest. It survives and develops, like the universe itself, only by perpetual discovery.  
The most satisfying thing in life is to have been able to give a large part of one's self to others.

*And by C.S. Lewis:*

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.  
Failures, repeated failures, are finger posts on the road to achievement. One fails forward toward success.  
Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.  
An explanation of cause is not a justification by reason.  
Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.  
Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours.

*And by Eckhart Tolle:*

If small things have the power to disturb you, then who you think you are is exactly that: small.  
To realize that you are not your thoughts is when you begin to awaken spiritually.  
Being at ease with not knowing is crucial for answers to come to you.  
It is through gratitude for the present moment that the spiritual dimension of life opens up.  
Many people identify their sense of self with the problems they have, or think they have.  
To know yourself as the Being underneath the thinker, the stillness underneath the mental noise  
the love and joy underneath the pain is freedom, salvation, enlightenment.