

How is an Inner Life Possible Today?

Isaiah 58: 1-9a Matthew 5:13-20

Is a rich inner life even possible today?

You have to wonder sometimes.

Many people today are desperate for a quiet interior in our lives!

A calm inner refuge from the outer chaos and noise which we experience daily?

How do we travel the rough terrain into that spiritual dimension?

In a world which, what the Bible calls principalities and powers—seem to have no boundaries—rules—or laws—our need for inner balance is deep.....insistent.

But is it possible to find it?

Sustain it?

One of my favorite hymn text writers, Shirley Erena Murray, spoke to this basic human need when she wrote hymns like “Wounded World That Cries for Healing”, “Come and Find the Quiet Center”, “Star Child”, “Who is My Mother?” and “For Everyone Born”.

A New Zealander, Shirley Erena Murray died at 88 about two weeks ago.

We miss her holy presence amongst us.

Yet she is still here “in the singing, in the silence, in the heart expectant”

I especially resonate with her hymn text:

- *Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead.*
- *Find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed.*
- *Clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes that we can see.*
- *All the things that really matter, be at peace and simply be.*

Easier SUNG than DONE?

Doesn't finding "*a quiet center in the crowded lives we lead*" demand a significant inner reorientation of your mental and emotional focus?

In his Prayers, Beatitudes and Parables, Jesus is said to possess a magnificent, **inner** compass for just that purpose—reorient your focus!

And navigate!—your inner!—longer!—deeper journey.

But how and where do we acquire the inner compass Jesus discovered and developed?

Isn't it challenging work?—as we are driven!—lured!—dragged!—and distracted!—into living our lives almost completely in the exterior realm?

The interior action that takes place in reading, meditating, praying, contemplating, singing, self examining, writing, dreaming—creating!— is the spiritual antidote to material, physical exterior demands we all face every day.

But sustaining that interior action requires commitment!

Sending yourself on the Jesus-following adventure!

Do you know what Jesus called people who have managed to escape the persistent demand to live mostly external lives—and instead nurture an inner life?

“The Salt of the Earth”.

“You are the Salt of the Earth!

He saw such souls as higher consciousness human beings and he blessed them in his Beatitudes.

You know what Jesus called people who manage to struggle against the constant temptation to live mostly external lives?

“The Light of the World!”

You are the light of the world!

Salt!— and Light!

That’s how Jesus blesses anybody who actually manages to create a rich inner life.

Remember how he put it in his Beatitudes!

“You are the poor in spirit.” Jesus said. ***“I am blessing you!”***

I am blessing you because you know that you need God.

You are humble enough to know that you need the Stupendous Creative Source, from whom your soul emerges.

Blessed are you impoverished in spirit!

You are blessed because you have become humble enough to open your soul’s window to the Mysterious Wonder woven into the infinite tapestry of the universe.

You understand your own need for higher consciousness of the Living God’s LOVING activity in the course of your daily actions, encounters and strivings!

You cannot put your lamp light under a bushel—because that would inhibit your contact and connection with God.

I made a curious discovery this week while studying and contemplating the scriptures for today.

The salt and light teachings of Jesus follow immediately after his teaching we call—famously— The Beatitudes.

That word Beatitude struck me differently this time.

Be.....attitude. Be.....attitude!

What if—in the face of anxiety and fear, painful personal pressures and ever increasing alarm over man’s inhumanity to man— and planet—you begin to develop a **Be.....attitude**.

What would that look like?

Here’s what I am thinking.

Drawing on the inner compass idea we considered earlier in this message, I think it would look like—reorienting your mental and emotional focus.

The chaos—the fear—the anxiety—the daily pressures—the tyrant’s cruel voice—are all still going to be there!

And they are going to demand you pay attention to them, just like—say—you were crossing some difficult wilderness terrain trying to get somewhere—that you knew only by its compass point—and you would have to pay attention to obstacles—go around boulders and trees!—carefully cross perilous streams, not tumble in rough places or fall over dangerous precipices .

Still, all the time, you must keep your inner focus on that little magnetic needle of your compass—always pointing north so you can sustain your desired direction despite all the interference and intervention of exterior forces acting upon you.

That inner compass is your **Be.....attitude**.

Meaning....

First—Who do you want to **be....with**?.....start focusing on that **Be....attitude**. Whoever it is.....start **being** with them....however that happens best...physically **being** with them. Phoning....Messaging....just thinking of them....start **being** with them.

That’s your first BE...ATTITUDE!

Then....Who do **you** want to **be.....now....today....who do you want to BE....come** tomorrow?

Start saying to yourself.....my **BEing** is coming.....who I **want to be** is coming....I will make some preparation today for his or her coming.....I will clear out a few minutes in my schedule to make room for my being that is coming—like a friendly visitor I am happily waiting for—you will be arriving soon....and very soon.

And then another **BE**.....attitude that will help re-orient your focus:

Who needs you to **BE....strong** for them?

Who needs you to **BE** your best, loving, consistently faithful self for them?

This BE....ATTITUDE....has an infinite range of possibilities.

I will share with you one illustration I saw somewhere on the internet recently. Someone, I don't even know if it was a man or a woman was holding in their arms a very large cat.

And I do not mean a domestic cat.

I mean a very big cat. It was some rare big cat, a rare leopard, I think. Very young. And its mother had been hunted and killed. And this leopard was so sad. You could see how sad it was in the look in its eyes. But this person was holding it and promising to care for it and Be strong for it.

That is an example of a **Be....attitude**....you and I can practice amidst the madness of our times. I'm sure you can be creative and come up with your own.

Who do you need to BE....STRONG....for?

And then.....Who do you need to **be strong** for you? Go to them. Spend time with them. Nurture and grow and deepen your relationship with them.

My last Be.....attitude....and then we will close....is an ancient one, that precedes the teachings of Jesus even...and comes from one of the great Jewish Psalms.

Be.....still.....and know that I am God.

Be still.....

Now if you are one of these people who believes that God does speak in some way...and even today.....then the way this Psalm is phrased, it appears that it IS God speaking and that what God is saying is:

Be still.....Be still...

I know you are agitated. I know you are upset. I know you are anxious and angry. I know you are confused and I also know you are courageous and inconsolable and indignant.

Be still....That's your final....**Be.....attitude.....**which if you practice it patiently, will give you a richer inner life....lead to a higher consciousness yourself and with others....strengthen you for the struggle that is now and which lies ahead....

Be still....and know that I am God.....Amen.

Rev Scott Myers, Westport Presbyterian Church, Feb. 9, 2020

The first three steps involve a kind of inner reorientation of your spiritual focus.

That is!—**You become poor in spirit** as you become more and more aware of your overwhelming need for God in your life.

You mourn when you mourn the way your life is without God.

You mourn the state of your life the way it is when your heart is closed!—when you are lost!—when you are miserable!—when you are hell bent on getting what you think you have to have right now—no matter how it affects anyone else or any other living thing around you.

You mourn the state of the world the way it is—fallen!—fallen out of all harmony and all balance and fallen out of awareness of the ways we are connected to each other and the ways we are connected to the One Whose Love and Beauty is Everywhere even if we aren't noticing it.

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And you become meek—or humble!—as Moses was described as being meek!—As Jesus was described as being meek¹—when you begin to take yourself out of the command center of your life—when you begin to diminish **your** commanding role—and you instead begin to let God get into the command center and take over the commanding role.

Those are the first 3 steps!

Maybe you and I need to work on one of them this afternoon.

Maybe we need to spend some time taking one of these 3 steps this coming week!

In the next 4 steps, you are re-orienting your focus with respect to the world outside of you.

You are focused on justice and mercy: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice—meaning—You are focused on discovering the truth in a situation

that is out of balance, so that you can work to bring the people affected by this out-of-balance-situation back into harmony. This may be a situation at work, or it may be in the community, in your family, in the neighborhood, in the world.

And you are focused on being merciful to people who have been judged unmercifully by others. Blessed are the merciful to those who are judged because of their race, age, gender, their religious convictions, whatever way they are being stereotyped and judged—for the merciful shall receive mercy.

And you are focused on becoming a peacemaker in the various relationships and situations in your life and in the world. At the very least, you are deciding to subtract yourself from the confusion and the violence of action and language and you are deciding to add to the need for clarification and complexity and understanding multiple perspectives and exploring multiple possibilities for creating peace where no peace exists or where peace is marginally present.

All three of these steps are very, very challenging to take because now you are mixed up in all the world's mixed up problems! And you are going to get mixed up too unless you take the next step which is to become pure in heart. That is, your heart becomes undivided. You discard your mixed motives, and you become wholly devoted to Jesus and you begin to give your heart—your undivided heart—to Jesus's agenda, which is these nine steps—the Beatitudes.

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Finally, by taking these steps, it is certain you will be insulted and assaulted, persecuted and reviled, and you have to take the step that involves both accepting that reality—because your heart is set on a higher goal—and finally, you rejoice in taking all these steps because you know that the harder way is ultimately the better way.

So rejoice and be glad, for so all the prophets of all time and every place and day and age have had the same thing done to them long before it was done to you.

In other words, you're in good company.

Now, the fact of the matter is, so far, we are—as they say—just talking the talk of these steps.

We're just talking about them.

I'm just trying to explain them—to the best of my ability.

I am convinced that these 9 beatitudes, or blessings, are steps in the Christian life.

Nevertheless, we can't just talk the talk.

We also need to walk the walk.

Take the steps.

Work the steps.

Ask yourself: “How did I do taking that step this morning?”

What can I do to take the first step today?—become poor in spirit!

And when you do!—take these steps!—walk this walk!—with Jesus—

You ARE!— the SALT OF THE EARTH!

And you ARE!—the light of the world!

Now, understand that when Jesus talked about being the salt of earth, he was using a common saying, an ordinary proverb, like we might say “Don’t burn your candle at both ends”.

Jesus was talking salt talk, which people understood, because salt, with its unique saline quality, gave it the power to preserve food. And if the salt they were using lost that special preservative quality, which often happened in those days—when it was mixed with other ingredients to make it go further—well then, the salt became absolutely useless. **The salt lost its saltiness!** That is to say, it had lost the unique quality which made it salt. As we might say today, it wasn’t worth it’s salt—any more!

So a follower of Jesus’s who is working and walking the 9 steps of Jesus’s

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central teaching of the Beatitudes—was, without even trying, going to become the salt of the earth. He or she—you or me—are going to possess the unique quality which makes us followers of Christ. Just by walking the walk!

And, you are also the light of the world—by virtue of walking the walk of the Beatitudes!

Light is going to shine out of your heart and your life into the dark places and dark situations that always exist in this life and this world.

Now in telling his followers “You are the light of the world”, Jesus does mention the possibility that some might want to hide their light under a bowl or a bushel basket. Hundreds of years later, a Moody Bible Institute musical director, Henry Dixon Loes, wrote a hymn to spread this teaching to children and adults—“This Little Light of Mine”. Later, Zilphia Horton of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, took that hymn and as she had done with hymns like “I Shall Overcome” and “I Shall Not Be Moved”, she helped turn them into anthems of the civil rights movement.

“This Little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine....

“This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine....

“This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.

Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.

So maybe, out of fear, or worry in the face of persecution, followers of Jesus might be afraid to let their light shine. So Jesus reminds them not to hide their light under a bowl or a bushel basket. After all, what could be more meaningless than a hidden light? And for that matter, what could be more useless than saltless salt?