

Pastor Roy's Sermon from Dec. 15, 2013 - Advent 3

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to be spiritual? What do we think of first when we think of being spiritual? Isaiah says that the spiritual life, spirituality happens in totally unexpected places. We expect God to follow our rules, but God does not. God does not work through our competence—by our ability to get things done. Spirituality is not gained or learned by our successes but in our failures. Think about it, when was the last time you were inspired by someone who always gets it right, who pulls it all off perfectly. What happens is that we discover that those people are illusions and fakes. Everyone is incomplete, messed up, and fallen. We are inspired by those who fail, who make the mistakes, who go astray but then find the courage to go on anyway. To keep plodding along the path of faithfulness is never easy or filled with spiritually uplifting moments of wonder and amazement, but instead more often with disappointment and discouragement. Sounds like a downer doesn't it? But isn't it true?

A Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, adds

Struggling with one's own shadow self, facing interior conflicts and moral failures, undergoing rejections and abandonment, daily humiliations, experiencing any kind of abuse or your own clear limitations, even accepting that some people hate you: All of these are gateways into deeper thoughtfulness and the flowering of the soul. These experiences give us a privileged window into the [present moment] because impossible contradictions are staring us in the face.

Much-needed healing, forgiving what is, and weeping over and accepting one's interior poverty and contradictions are normally necessary to invite a person into the contemplative mind. A Spiritual Master said, "Avoid the spiritual journey, it is one insult after another!" Yet in facing the contradictions that we ourselves are, we become living icons of Yes/And. Once we can accept mercy, it is almost natural to hand it on to others. You become a conduit of what you yourself have received.

--Richard Rohr

Isn't it funny that the very thing that shows us we are making progress in our journey with God tends to make us think lowly of ourselves and want to give up.

When we read Isaiah we're tempted to think, well, if I am where God wants me to be, then the blind will be seeing, the deaf, hearing, and the paralyzed will be leaping for joy, the desert, coming alive.

Jesus adds "the lepers are healed, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them. What is he talking about?"

John the Baptist is an example. Jesus asks, "Did you go out to the wilderness to see a finely polished politician? Someone who tells you exactly what you want to hear? A rock star, movie star? A best selling writer? A billionaire? An entertainer? No. A prophet. Someone who tells the truth in simple terms. John the Baptist was a great prophet, but each of us can be great also if we recognize that we are least in the Kingdom. The least in the kingdom is greater than John." Are the prophets and our Lord telling us we have to be and do the impossible to be spiritual, to do the works of God?

Or are we clearly not the ones who are acting in order to be spiritual. Perhaps we are the dead, and the blind, and leper, and the paralyzed. Perhaps we are the poor who have the good news proclaimed to us.

Perhaps when we look within and see such contradictions and messed-up-ness, that is exactly the impossible stuff with which God chooses to work. Our humble honesty is the beginning of possibility.

That God is going to work with our brokenness rather than our hypocritical strength. Our nothingness should not make us lose hope, but it should set us free to be humble vessels of God's mercy. We receive mercy. We share mercy. Until we truly receive mercy, we are incapable of finding and living the life of the Spirit.

We must not think of spirituality as some sort of perfection. Instead, our walk with God is about holding our imperfections, our loserliness, our loose screws up to God so that we may be bound together as one with all the rest of God's creation. We are here to be interdependent—herein is our hope and salvation.

As you walk the path, be patient with yourself. Let us be patient with our neighbor. Even be patient with the God who walks beside us! Our weakness contains the seeds of our growth and life and peace. As we learn to accept and embrace this, we will be filled with joy as God does the unexpected with the unsuspecting. Let us be surprised together by the works of God.

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Thanks be to God. Amen.