

SLD06.07.15 Intro to Saint Series
Emory Presbyterian Church
Galatians 5:22
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“What Is Spirituality?”

Galatians 5:22

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness.

Well, here we are at the beginning of our Summer Saints Series, our annual adventure into the lives of distinctive disciples over time. Through our ‘Saint Series’ each year we step out into a whole continuum of challenges, trials, risks, and choices, made over time by God-wrestlers, Jesus-followers, and BFF’s of the Holy Spirit. We sometimes also, through this series, step out of our century, our denomination, our theology, even of our faith, as we explore through others’ lives what it can mean to live the gospel.

Because this is what we’re about in this community, right? Living the gospel? Or trying to, anyway. Trying together somehow to integrate the gospel of Jesus Christ into our daily lives so we might live it out with joy, humility, and authenticity? Sure we have our good days and our bad days collectively, as individually, but generally speaking, the band of bozos on this particular bus called Emory Presbyterian Church share the same aim, hope, and anticipation of live out through our own lives what scripture tells us – that God so loved, and so loves... the whole wide world, and every last creature in it, that all might flourish and have eternal life.

Isn’t this the good news we proclaim throughout the blessed Easter season? The good news that finally penetrates on Pentecost? The good news around which we keep trying to order our communal and individual lives? Yeah, but easier said than done, right? It’s not as if we don’t try. But, according to Ronald Rolheiser, a healthy

spirituality is not all that easy to come by. It's tricky because while a healthy spirituality fires us up, it also keeps us integrated so we don't fall apart. While a healthy spirituality energizes us, it also keeps us glued together.

And just what, surrounded as we are by a preponderance of humanity who describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious,' do I mean by 'spirituality?'

Well, what we're rooting for here is something deeper than the doctrines of a particular faith community or belief system, something more elemental than denomination or creed, yet which animates both; something more universal to the core of humanity. Indeed something that animates, for better or for worse, all human impulse, religious or otherwise.

In his book Holy Longing, Rolheiser says that *everyone* has a spirituality, though it may have more to do with whether or not we can sleep at night than about what we believe, or whether or not we go to church. *Everyone* has a spirituality because, and this may be my favorite quote from his book – “each of us is precisely fired into life with a certain madness that comes from the gods and we have to do *something* with it.” Each of us is fired into life with a certain madness, says Rolheiser, ...and we have to do *something* with it. This resonate with anyone else here? I like to imagine that much of humanity can identify with this statement, church-goers or otherwise. We're all fired into life with a certain madness, and we gotta do *something* with it. Never mind what we profess or believe or we hope for, we're all being and doing in the world according to deep, internal, elemental impulses which, whatever we may call them, are forcefully dynamic and operative.

Rolheiser puts it this way: “at the center of the human experience burns “an unquenchable fire, a restlessness, a longing, a disquiet, a hunger, ... a ‘congenital ache’

that hits us sometimes as pain, sometimes as longing, sometimes as hope, sometimes as creativity, but always, always, toward something more.

“We are not easeful beings who occasionally get restless,” he says. “We are driven persons, forever obsessed, forever *dis*-eased, who only occasionally experience peace.”¹ And what we do with our longings, our restlessness, our desires, both in terms of handling the pain and the hope they bring us, he says, this is our spirituality. Our spirituality concerns what we do with our desire, or our eros, or our fire, or, as John of the Cross put it, with “love’s urgent longings.”

Pagan Plato put it this way: that we humans are perpetually “on fire because our souls come from ‘Beyond,’ ...and ‘Beyond’ is ever trying to draw us back to Itself. St. Augustine’s spin was a little different: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” However you want to describe it, says Rolheiser, “we do not wake up in the world calm and serene; we wake up crying, on fire with desire, with madness. (Perhaps a less creedal manner of describing how the Holy Spirit is at work within and among us?) And what we do with this madness, what we do with this fire, with that unrest, this is our spirituality.”

Our Summer Saints Series offers us the opportunity to explore the spirituality of others who attempted, or attempt, to order their lives around the gospel. The hope is that we may learn something from the particularity of their choices and sacrifices, their mistakes and triumphs, of the spirituality that animates the outcomes for which they are admired and remembered. Then, too, we can make a judgment regarding how healthy their spirituality was, or is. Sometimes it’s easier to make that judgment on others’ lives than our own, though, of course, as Mary Oliver suggests in her poem, “Journey,” we’re

¹ Ronald Rolheiser, [The Holy Longing, The Search for a Christian Spirituality](#), Image, New York, 2014. “What Is Spirituality?” pp. 3-19.

all meant to stride deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing we can do...to save the only life we *can* save, which is, of course, our own. But this year we are invited to examine and form an opinion about the healthy of the spirituality of our 'chosen ones.' The madness with which they were seeded, how did it fire their livers. actions? For Rolheiser's spirituality is associated not only with desires and impulses but with the actions that arise from them.

"Desire makes us act and when we act, what we do leads either to a greater integration, or a greater *dis*integration, of our personalities, minds and bodies, to either the strengthening, or to the deterioration, of our relationship to God, others, and the cosmic world." Did the actions of this year's saint integrate their lives, hold them together, was it their glue? Or did it blow their lives apart, or even end them?

Obviously some ways of handling holy madness, unrest, or eros, are healthier and more balanced than others. This summer we'll observe a whole spectrum of end results of intense spirituality, some life-giving, some life-ending, some integrating, some *dis*integrating. To illustrate how differently people may handle the madness with which they are fired into life, I offer as introduction Rolheiser's description of the lives of three famous, and what he calls, 'highly erotic,' women: Mother Teresa, Janis Joplin, and Princess Diana.

Now, granted, few of us would regard Mother Teresa as erotic, but Rolheiser says she *was*, not so much in the narrow Freudian sense of the word, but because she was a dynamo of energy. She may have looked frail and meek, but, in fact, she was a human bulldozer. And regarded by virtually everyone as a saint. Why? Because 'a saint is someone who can, precisely, channel powerful eros in a creative, life-giving way. Soren Kirkegaard once defined a saint as someone who can will the one thing.

(reminiscent of Curley in the movie *City Slickers*, right?) And the one thing Mother Teresa willed was God and the poor. At least to her they were one thing. And onto this one thing, God and the poor, she poured out all her fiery eros, which made her who and what she was.

Okay, may we can buy that, that Mother Teresa was an erotic, spiritual giant. But Janis Joplin? Erotic, sure, but spiritual?

In case you're not familiar with "Take Another Little Piece of My Heart" Janis Joplin, she was the hard-driving, hard-drugging, lead singer of the psychedelic acid-rock band Big Brother and the Holding Company in the late 1960's, who burned the candle at both ends her entire brief life only to die of an overdose at the ripe old age of twenty-seven. Wherefore, few of us regard her as very spiritual. Yet, says Rolheiser, an exceptional person of fiery eros, Joplin was also, a great lover, a great pourer-outer of herself. Regrettably, unlike Mother Teresa, Joplin never could will just one thing. Indeed, she endlessly willed many, many things, until her wonderful energy was dispersed in so many different directions, it morphed into an excess and an exhaustion that led to her early death.

Still, Rolheiser would argue, all Joplin's activities – all her total giving over to creativity, performance, drugs, booze, sex – this **was** her spirituality. Precisely *how* she channeled her fire, her madness, her eros. In her case, though, the result was not a healthy integration but a *dissipation, a disintegration*, of personhood. In the end, Joplin simply lost hold of the things that normally glue a human person together.

And Princess Diana – where does she fit in the mix? According to Rolheiser, in terms of eroticism and spirituality, somewhere in the middle between Mother Teresa and Janis Joplin. The erotic in Diana was obvious – she was the most photographed

woman in the world, widely admired for her physical beauty. She routinely spent millions of dollars on clothing, had affairs, vacationed with playboys on yachts in the Mediterranean. Diana had erotic down pretty well, but spirituality?

Well, interestingly, Diana's spiritual dimension was also often obvious. Early on one recognized in her a depth, a habitual effacement, an anxious desire to please, a moral ambiguity that never allowed her fully to be comfortable being only a jetsetter. Indeed, (apart from the royalty, the world-class beauty and the Mediterranean yachts) Diana was actually much more like you or me, certainly than Mother Teresa or Janis Joplin. For, however imperfectly, Diana also willed God and the poor, even if she still willed many other things, too. And as a result, we see in her a tremendous complexity, a painful struggle between choice and commitment, an oh-so-human combination of sins and virtues. Diana's spirituality was comprised of both a commitment to the poor *and* to Mediterranean vacations, with all the pain and questions in between.

Do not many of us, like her, also wish to serve the poor and have a simple lifestyle? But who of us does not also want all the comforts of the rich? Sure we all value innocence and purity, but don't we also want to experience and taste everything that life has to offer? Of course we find it desirable to achieve the depth afforded by solitude, but not if we have to miss out on anything! Who of us, besides Truette, doesn't wish we prayed more? But who doesn't wish even more watch television, read a good book, talk to friends, and go out? There's a reason so many of us are so often tired and pathologically overextended!

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Sure, the good news we proclaim throughout Easter, that hopefully actually penetrates on Pentecost, and around which we keep trying to order our lives, is that

God so loved, and so loves... the whole wide world, and every last creature in it, that all might flourish. But easier said than done, right? A healthy spirituality is not all that easy to come by. It's not all that easy to get fired up about one thing without giving up another. Like Rolheiser says, every choice is also a renunciation. How often does our spirituality integrate our lives? How often does it blow them apart?

Clearly the relationship between our desires and our actions, between our core impulses and the ways we choose to lead our lives, is both intimate and inextricable. "Desire makes us act, and what we do invariably leads to either a greater integration, or a greater *disintegration*, of our selves, our souls, and our relationship with God and one another. What we do with the fire inside us, how we channel our eros, how we manage our madness, this *is* our spirituality. And its health may be judged not merely by what we say we believe, or even by the actions we choose to take, but by how integrated are our lives by the disciplines and habits and rhythms by which we choose to live them.

"*Everyone* has a spirituality," asserts Rolheiser. Each of us has a fire burning within us, and what we do with that fire, how we channel it, whether we use it to integrate, or *disintegrate*, our lives, this is our spirituality." As we explore the spirituality, the lives, and the actions of our Summer Saints, and of our own, let's keep in mind how a healthy spirituality keeps us energized, but also glued together. For sure, if God so loved, and loves... the whole wide world, surely an integrated, energized, and self-giving life is how best we can love God back.

To the glory of God. Amen.