

"Soul Learning"

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church

by Rev. Dean Snyder

on Sunday, September 15, 2002

Ecclesiastes 12:11-14

Matthew 11:28-29

Let Us Pray: Open our eyes, Lord, that we may see Jesus. Open our hearts that we may love Jesus. Open our wills so that we may follow Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen

I've been reading a book entitled "WWBD." WWBD stands for "What Would Buddha Do?" At the end of the book, there are even instructions on how you can send away for a bracelet.

Now, I am a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ - Jesus Christ is my savior and Lord. I put all of my trust for my salvation in Jesus Christ, but I must admit I have a soft spot in my heart for the Buddha.

The way I came to admire the Buddha was this: After my mother died, I got into the habit of taking long walks during my lunch time, and I began walking into a multi-cultural neighborhood near the church in the city where I then served. I was drawn there by an old Italian Catholic Church that had a statue of the Virgin Mary on the lawn outside the church. I was drawn to this statue almost every day. (I know this isn't very Protestant) I would sit and talk to the Virgin Mary because I had this irrational fear that maybe my mother was lonely. So I would sit and talk to the Virgin Mary and ask her if she would hang out with my mother some.

I discovered during my walks that right across from the old Italian Church in this multi-cultural neighborhood there was a Vietnamese barber shop. In the front window of this barber shop, there was a statue of the laughing Buddha.

I don't know if you've seen a statue of the laughing Buddha. He sits there - and he is large - and he has no shirt on and there are just rolls and rolls of flesh. The laughing Buddha is just sitting there - his cholesterol level must be sky high - he's just sitting there, not caring, with his head thrown back and a big laugh as though he knew all the secrets of the world -- and he could still laugh.

I appreciated sitting with the Virgin Mary in the church lawn, but I also came to appreciate standing with Buddha outside the barber shop because he made me smile at a time when I needed to smile.

So, I've been reading about the Buddha in "What Would Buddha Do?" and one of the things I've found interesting is that Buddha refused to answer certain questions. It's almost as interesting to read what the Buddha refused to talk about as it is to read what the Buddha had to say.

One of the things that the Buddha refused to talk about was questions like - where did the earth come from? What existed before the earth was? Are our body and spirit and soul one connected thing, or are they separate things? Whenever his disciples asked the Buddha questions like this, he would refuse to answer.

When his disciples asked him, Why won't you answer our questions about the mysteries of life?, the Buddha would say, because it will not help you reach enlightenment - it will not take you on the path to nirvana. And then the Buddha would say that everything that you really need to know is already inside yourself, if you would only attend to what is already inside yourselves. He said that we have inside ourselves an ocean of perfect knowledge - and if we would only attend to what is already inside ourselves, we would be able to discover everything that we really need to know.

I must admit that the Jewish/Christian tradition is a tad more practical than that. We think it is important to study the world around us. I, for example, would not want to find out, were I to one day lay on a surgeon's table, that the surgeon that was about to operate on me had learned medicine by looking inside him or herself rather than by attending medical school. I would not want someone about to operate on me to have tapped into an ocean of perfect knowledge inside themselves. I want them to have practiced and to have learned how the world works.

Science, really, has grown out of our Jewish and Christian tradition. Once we discovered that we could learn the laws of God through revelation, it was a logical deduction that we should also be able to learn the laws of nature and the laws of the world.

And once we realized we could learn the way the world works, then it became a moral obligation to do so for the sake of making the world a better place on behalf of humanity.

So, while, like many parents and offspring, Judaism and Christianity and science sometimes fight, science is really the child of our religious faith. It grew out of our religious assumptions. Once we discovered we could learn the way the world works - and then use that knowledge to make the world a better place for people - it became a moral obligation to do so. You can't know that you have the capacity to learn about the world and, thereby, enhance life for human beings and then say, I'm not going to do it. By our Jewish and Christian values this would be sin. To fail to learn about the world and then to use that knowledge to improve the world is a sinful thing. Sure, we have the capacity to learn about the world and to use that knowledge in destructive ways that harms humanity, but that is no reason, no excuse, not to learn science and to apply that science in practical ways to make the world a better place.

By our tradition, learning about secular knowledge - about our world, about science - and then applying it through engineering and technology and the sciences of economics and political science and sociology and education - all of that becomes for us, a moral duty. All education is part of our faith.

But, the Buddha was right in this - it is possible for our learning of the world around us to become so disconnected with our humanity that it begins to drive us rather than we driving it.

The preacher who wrote the book of Ecclesiastes says this: "Of the making of many books, there is no end and much learning is a weariness of the flesh." (When I was a campus minister this was my students' favorite text; they asked me to preach on it around finals time.) It is possible for our heads to become too large in proportion to our souls. Then, our secular learning gets disconnected from the purpose and meaning that drives it.

Perhaps because my own heritage is largely German, I have been disturbed most of my adult life by how the Nazi Holocaust could have happened in what, at the time, was the most educated society on the face of the earth. Reinhold Niebuhr used to say that one of the puzzles of the Holocaust was that it happened in Germany, and that Germany had more brains per square head than any place else on the face of the earth. How could such a barbaric, such an awful, such an ugly thing - the execution of six million Jews - perhaps millions of homosexuals - people with physical disabilities - how could this have happened in the most educated nation on the face of the earth.

Rabbi Michael Learner, in his book "Jewish Renewal," says that he thinks what happened was that education of the mind became disconnected from the soul - that the educated population within Germany began to see life merely in terms of economics. Even the churches were primarily concerned about making the world a more prosperous and better place for human beings without attending to the human need for meaning and spirituality.

Michael Lerner suggests that what happened in Nazi Germany was that the educated population began to see people as merely bodies - people as merely bellies to be fed and bodies to be treated. And so, he says, when the God of economics failed, the educated people of Germany had no spirituality - no meaning and purpose to offer people - and so instead, people turned - for meaning and purpose -- to the ancient demonic religions of soil and blood. Those who were of a different blood, of a different race or nationality, became evil -- and could be executed.

Michael Lerner suggested that what happened in Nazi Germany was that the mind became disconnected from the soul. And because the German mind was so well educated it became more demonic than if the nation had been ignorant.

William Stringfellow, the late attorney-theologian, was one of the great influences in my life. After World War II Stringfellow visited Nazi Germany to try to discover what had happened to the church in Germany. The overwhelming majority of churches in Nazi Germany accepted Adolf Hitler as their temporal, worldly leader. They made Hitler the leader of the churches. Only a small group of churches refused to accept Hitler as their head. These churches were known as the Confessing Church and became greatly persecuted in Germany because of their refusal to accept Hitler as the leader of the earthly church.

So William Stringfellow went to Germany to try to figure out why it was that some of the churches could live with Hitler and others refused to do so. This is what he discovered: He discovered that the one difference that he could find between the apostate churches and the confessing churches was that the confessing churches regularly engaged in small group, intimate, interpersonal Bible study. The churches that accepted Hitler as their head were churches where the primary activity was people coming to church on Sunday morning (I hate to admit this) ... their primary characteristic was that people came to church on Sunday morning and they listened to a learned sermon from an educated pastor and then they went home - until they came back the following Sunday. For some reason, in churches where almost the sole experience of spirituality was Sunday morning worship, apparently those churches became apostate easily. But, those churches that placed an emphasis on people coming together in small groups and reading the Bible together and then discussing the meaning of the Bible for their lives - those churches somehow understood that to accept Hitler as their leader would be wrong - and were willing to take the stand to become the Confessing Church.

The one thing that Stringfellow could find - that divided the two groups of churches - was small group, interpersonal Bible study where people read the Bible for themselves and then talked to each other about what it meant in their daily lives.

And with that, we're going to take a break for this message - I'm going to ask Jan Catrell to come up and to talk for a minute or two this morning about our program of interpersonal Bible Study here at Foundry called Disciple Bible Study, but I do want to say this is not the end of the sermon - I will be back after this brief message....

JAN CATRELL: So, I'm the commercial break. My name is Jan Catrell and I come to you today as a student, not a teacher, of Christian Education. I want to highlight for you three educational opportunities that are available for you at Foundry this fall. The reason I was asked to do this was because I took Disciple I last year - Disciple I undertakes to read the Bible from the beginning to the end and I really

enjoyed doing that, but what happened was that I got much more out of it than I thought I would. Not only did we read the Bible, but we did it in a very nurturing environment - and so I came away with knowledge about the Bible but also the warm relationships that developed within the group. So Disciple I is one of your options. The second option is Disciple II - now Disciple II you have to be a graduate of Disciple I to take, but you don't read the whole Bible - you just read Genesis, Exodus and Luke, Acts but it's done in the same format as Disciple I. The third course is Christian Believers in which, in the same format, you learn about the large concepts and tenets of the universal Christian Church. So, over the course of several months, you'll be looking at concepts of sin and grace, salvation and redemption in that kind of a group context. All of these courses require you to make a commitment of about 30 some weeks that begin in September and go until May. In that context, you'll get that kind of group and study you are looking for. So, I encourage you - if you are looking for something that you can really get your teeth into, prayerfully consider taking one of these courses. As they say on Public Television, it's time well spent.

Thank you Jan. The Disciple Bible Study programs are not the only Bible Studies happening in this church, the Gay Lesbian Group right now is engaged in a Bible Study, there are other shorter term courses - but I do want to suggest that those of us who seek to be followers of Jesus Christ should not go in our lives, too long, without being part of an interpersonal Bible Study group in which we read the Bible for ourselves and then explore with other people, the meaning for our lives. Who can say for sure, but William Stringfellow believes that if personal Bible Study in small groups had been the norm for the church in Germany, that the Holocaust could not have happened.

Richard Selzer is a surgeon and physician at Yale Hospital and Yale Medical School. A number of years ago Yeshe Dhonden, the personal physician to the Dalai Lama was traveling through the United States. Selzer got together a group of surgeons and physicians from Yale and asked Yeshe Dhonden to diagnose a patient in Yale Hospital so that they could see how eastern Buddhist medicine works.

When Yeshe Dhonden entered the room, he stood there for ten minutes without saying or doing anything - just feeling the vibrations of the room. Richard Selzer said that the North American physicians were about ready to go crazy by the time the ten minutes was over. Then, when that was over, Yeshe Dhonden held the patient's wrist in his hand and found her pulse and then he closed his eyes and felt her pulse. He stood there for over half an hour doing nothing but feeling her pulse.

Watching Yeshe Dhonden, Selzer said that he suddenly realized that after palpating more than a hundred thousand pulses, it occurred to him that he had never really *felt* one. Selzer said he began becoming envious. He wasn't envious of the Buddhist physician, he was envious of the patient - because, he said, in all of his life, no one had ever attended to him so intensely and with such care.

I was fascinated as I was searching the Bible to look for verses about studying and learning to see the contrast between Ecclesiastes and Matthew in the lessons we read this morning. "Much learning can become a weariness" Ecclesiastes says. And then Jesus says, "You who are weary, learn of me and find rest for your souls."

Much learning can become a weariness. There is a lot that we can learn from books, but there are some things that we can't. There are some things that we can learn only by looking to Jesus and by looking inside ourselves.

I had a phone call from a friend a few days ago asking me what I was reading these days and I rattled off two or three books. Then, I said to him, "You know, I really find myself reading less and less and spending more and more time just staring into space."

So as we learn about the world around us, let us also not forget to look inside, into space, into inner space.

Let us not forget to look to Jesus.

The really hard questions - Who am I? - What does my life mean? - What do I really care about? - What am I really willing to give myself for? - We won't find answers to these questions in a book. We find them by coming to Jesus and learning of him.