

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
"At One with God"
3rd in the series, *Becoming Like Christ*.
John 14 and 17
May 27, 2018

While I was on Iona earlier this month, John Philip Newell taught about a different person from the Celtic tradition most mornings. On the last day he taught about George MacLeod, who was responsible for rebuilding the Abby in the first half of the 20th century and for re-establishing a religious community there.

George MacLeod had been in WWI, and the story goes that he was in in a boxcar full of wounded and dying soldiers coming back from the front, when a profound awareness of Christ's suffering, love, and presence came over him. And right there, in the middle of that carnage, George got down on a knee, prayed, and gave his life to Christ.

It might not surprise you then, that MacLeod was known for being a very direct and to the point kind of person.

From the stories I heard, I'd guess he's an 8 on the enneagram. It came out in the way he'd talk to people. He was known for these certain phrases he would repeat. He'd say them all the time.

For example, he'd come up to a random stranger and rather than introduce himself in the normal way, the first thing he'd do is look you in the eye, reach out his hand, and ask in his direct way, "Are you a pacifist?"

After the first war he became an avid pacifist, even during WWII. You can imagine how unpopular that position was... even more then, than it's now. But George was convinced it was the right position. He'd ask people, "Well, do you think Jesus was wrong? Or do you think he was naïve about violence?"

You can imagine how unsettling he was.

He had another saying: "Matter matters." It was his way of talking about the earth, and the poor, and the physicality of our Christian spirituality. "Christian spirituality," he'd say, "is about getting our teeth into things. Matter matters."

But my favorite saying that he'd repeat over and over again there in the heart of Scottish Presbyterianism was, "Well, are you a Presbyterian or are you a Christian?"

MacLeod didn't mince words. He'd get right to the heart of the matter, convicting even the church of his day, saying things about as directly as you possibly can.

He was known as a great preacher and great Christian leader in his day. And so one day someone asked him what might be the most important question: "How do we get in touch with God?" And he responded in his direct and honest way,

"We can't get out of touch with God.
God is the light in all lights.
God is the life within all lives."

In fact, MacLeod taught “We’ve been given *union* with God,
whether we like it or not,
know it or not,
want it or not.”
We’ve been given *union* with the Divine.

[Pause]

Between the last Supper and the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus has the long teaching and prayer in the Gospel of John. And in these four chapters, Jesus is opening up this same mystery to us.

The disciples though, are having a hard time grasping it... just like we do.
He starts by telling them that he’s leaving them, but not to worry because they know the way... but this is really confusing, and finally Philip puts it out there.

“Jesus, just show us the Father, just show us God, and we will be satisfied.”
He’s saying what we all think from time to time, isn’t he?
Just show us God.
That’s what we want. Just help us to see and to know God.
That’s all we ask. That will be enough.
“Show us the Father and we will be satisfied,” Philip says.

And to everyone’s confusion Jesus says, “You’ve already seen God. I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”

They are in each other. There is a deep union between Jesus and God.
If you’ve seen Jesus, you’ve seen God. This is the mystery at the heart of Christianity.

Jesus is at one with God.
Not only that, but he is awake and present to this profound union between him and the Father.

But here’s the thing, that’s just half of the mystery we’re invited to see... It’s just the tip of the iceberg. It’s Narnia’s wardrobe. It’s simply an opening to something more... something that we’d dare not believe.

For the last several weeks we’ve been talking about how Jesus is the paradigm of what it means to be fully human. He’s the archetype of all of humanity.

Paul calls him the second Adam... because what we glimpse in Jesus is what we are invited to become. In the early church they said, “Jesus is at once the way we must follow and the goal we must reach.” (Yes I’m going to keep repeating that line during this series.)

So we’ve been exploring this idea of becoming *like Christ*. And I’ve said, I’m convinced that this is the primary work of the Church. At the center of our calling is spiritual formation, and spiritual formation is... [I hope some of you can almost quote it by now because I keep repeating myself. But just incase, I’m going to say it again] Spiritual Formation is:
the ongoing journey (it never ends)
of becoming (it’s about who we are, not what we think and do)
like Christ.

And last week I expanded that further. Like Christ: at one with God, enlivened by the Spirit, enacting Shalom. Those are the key qualities of a Christ-consciousness

And it's the first characteristic that the Gospel of John is especially good at helping us to see. Jesus is at one with God... "I am in the Father and the Father is in me," he says.

It's a picture of what's called *divine union*...
or what Julian of Norwich calls "oneing," becoming "one."
"I am in the Father and the Father is in me." They are one.

That's the doorway, the wardrobe, to the greater mystery that is this: ***Just like Jesus, we are being One'd with God.***

"You are in the Father and the Father is in you."
Or as it's put in Colossians 3: "Your life is hidden with Christ in God."

You see, Jesus is a revelation... a revelation, not just about God, but about our deepest nature. And what Jesus is revealing, is that we are already at one with God.

This is our deepest identity.
The problem is we're asleep to it most of the time.

And so we live out all other kinds of identities, or "false selves," the tradition has called it. You know these smaller identities pretty well. They are all around us.

We let our identities be defined by what we accomplish in our lives,
or what neighborhood we live in,
or what our family is like, or how well our children do.

We let our identity be defined by
what country we're from,
or how many people we help,
or how smart we are, or how good we can be...
or even things as silly as how many likes we get on Facebook.

Those are certainly part of your experience, but they are not your deepest identity. They make up part of who you are, that part the tradition has called the false self, or your small self, but they aren't the essence of who you are.

But we aren't awake to that most of the time.

Most of the time we're like the snowflake that doesn't recognize it's actually made of water. Its essence is water.

Or like a particular lake or river thinking it is a lake or river,
not recognizing that it is all water.

Or the dew on the grass or the summer rain, thinking it's only dew or rain and not recognizing that it's all water.

They are all made of the same substance.

We are all made of the same substance. We are all of the same essence,

the essence of the divine.

And this is what Jesus reveals to us.

This is what Jesus prays for us to recognize.

So by the time he gets to Chapter 17, Jesus prays for us.

“As you are in me, Father, and I am in you, may they also be in us... I in them, you me, that they may be one.”

Round and round Jesus’ language goes. And I know it’s a bit dizzying and hard to follow. Chuck Hussung coined a term for this passage that I love. He calls it: ***In-each-other-ness***.

That’s a great word, the kind of word only Chuck could create... and it really is the heart of what Jesus is describing. God is in us and around us. We are in God and in one another. Christ is in God, and in us, and we are in Christ.

This is our deepest identity, ***a profound union with the Divine***.

The saints throughout history have played around with this mystery, trying to describe it in the ways they have experienced it.

Teresa of Avila describes an interior castle that each of us has. It’s like a crystal castle or diamond, with seven different layers to the castle. If you’ve studied medieval castles, then you know there were outer walls, then inner walls, and further inner walls.

Each with its own gate.

Each one is another layer of protection. And at the center of the castle is where a King is.

Teresa says that this is what our souls are like. There is an Interior castle with these seven different layers, and at the center, deepest in your being... is God’s own self,
full of light,
radiating out of the center,
illuminating the castle.

And she says that our spiritual journey is like gradually making our way deeper and deeper through each of these gates, to the center of our own being where God’s presence already abides. It’s a journey of discovering the divine union that is already there at the center of your soul.

When she describes that most interior chamber, she uses the language that so many saints and mystics have used... it’s the best language that we have for the experience of divine union, the language of the marriage bed, of consummation.

God gifts “the soul with divine marriage, “ she writes. “He leads her into his own dwelling...The Beloved joins the soul to himself.... The soul enters the innermost chamber... setting her spirit on fire...”¹

It’s a little saucy, isn’t it?

¹ Saint Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Mirabai Starr (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 262–63.

Who ever said Christianity is boring?

This is actually why the tradition has said that sexual intimacy and desire is so sacred. It's the closest thing we have to awakening ourselves to our deep and profound oneness with another.

When we're able to give ourselves over to another person in complete trust, and intimacy, and love, we're actually learning the capacity to give our deepest selves over to God, to open ourselves up to the mysterious presence of God.

In fact, John Donohue says, "The world of sexuality is a sacred world of presence."²

You see, in our sexuality we move into that mysterious place where the boundaries between two people become blurred... and there is a melding of beings.

That's what the scriptures are trying to describe when they say, "*The two become one.*"

In the longing and intimacy of our sexuality, we are opened to the mysterious intimacy and union of our being with God...

a union with God... that we see fully expressed in the life of Jesus.

"As you are in me, Father, and I am in you, may they also be in us," Jesus prays. "I in them, you me, that they may be one," he says.

Or as we heard him say to Philip earlier, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me."

Again and again in the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus describing this deep, intimate union with the Divine at the center of our beings,

and a union with the Divine that encompasses our lives.

It's a oneness with God that Jesus lives from.

And a oneness with God to which we can awaken.

This is what it means to become like Christ.

That's what it looks like to live and operate from our deepest identity,
one that transcends all the small identities and small selves
we tend to cling to and operate from.

God is the very ground of our being.

That's what George MacLeod meant when he so forcefully said,

"We can't get *out* of touch with God.

God is the light in all lights.

God is the life within all lives."

"We've been given *union* with God,
whether we like it or not,
know it or not,
whether we want it or not."

² John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 72.

The journey is to want it and to know it, but that's lifelong work.

But honestly, this is one of the hardest things for us to awaken to... to experience deep in our beings... and to live from. You don't just accept it one day and move on. It's something you're gradually opened up to over a lifetime.

That's why we say spiritual formation is an ongoing journey.

So, as part of that journey, I want to offer you another prayer that I learned from John Philip while at Iona. It's a prayer that he used a handful of times and sparked something deep in my own soul.

I asked him to repeat it for me so I could learn it myself. And when I did, he said that for him, this prayer encompasses it all... the whole of our spiritual journey.

I think he's right... and so I've been praying it most days since I've been home.

So I want to offer it with you, now.

Close your eyes, and pray with me now.

Prayer:

Thou art above us, O God.

Thou art within.

*Thou art in every living thing,
yet contained by no thing.*

Teach us to seek Thee in all that has life,

That we may see Thee as the Light of Life.

Teach us to search for Thee in our own depths,

That we may find Thee in the depths of every living soul.

Amen.

Reflection:

At the heart of the Christian mystery is the idea that humanity is intertwined with the Divine.

~ A.J. Scott