

Separate or Accommodate: The Church and Contemporary Spirituality

20th after Pentecost, October 18, 2009

Acts 10

At the annual meeting of BC Conference this year, our opening worship was a creative mix of all kinds of spiritual practices, from singing to clowning to walking meditation. The walking prayer – or “dance” as they called it – was a simple rhythm of three steps forward, one step back – like this (*demonstrate*). The person teaching the practice called it “The Pilgrim Walk”, and made no mention of its place in Christian history – in fact, the impression I got is that she was importing it from some unknown spiritual tradition.

That surprised me, because this same walking pattern was taught to a group of us at Vancouver School of Theology as the “Tripodium” - an ancient way of walking that reflects the doctrine of the Trinity: one step forward for each person of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and one step rocking backward for the unity of the Trinity. This pattern was used on pilgrimage and in walking the labyrinth in the great cathedrals of Europe. It can be used in silence, or with a simple chant, or even with a well-known hymn, since it recreates a simple four beat rhythm (*Joyful, Joyful, Angels we Have Heard on High, Jesus Christ is Risen Today*). It struck me that once again, we found ourselves seemingly borrowing from a tradition other than our own, without realizing that what we had borrowed actually had been ours for centuries. We see this all over the place in the Christian church – this movement back and forth between what’s “in the air” in the spirituality of the culture and what is practised in the Christian church. Just to name some examples: walking the labyrinth, sacred drama, chants, meditation, healing touch, caring clowns, pilgrimage, retreats. All of these practices have moved in an out of the church down through the centuries, into the surrounding culture, and back again.

The same goes for our holiday commemorations. Halloween is coming, and with it, some challenges for Christian people. Some people trace the history of the day right back to the Celts, who celebrated their new year on November 1 – the end of the summer season and the beginning of the darkness and cold of winter. On that day they celebrated Samhain (Sow-in), a harvest festival. By the 800s, with the spread of Christianity through Celtic lands, Samhain had become Christianized as All Saint’s Day or All Hallows’ day – a day to commemorate those who have died for their faith. The evening before was All Hallows’ Eve – Halloween. Remnants of local pagan traditions remained, though, one of them being wearing masks or costumes intended to confuse or frighten away spirits believed to roam the night before All Hallows. Bowls of treats were often left out to appease potentially angry spirits. There was also a tradition of sharing “soul cakes” with the poor, who would then pray for the dead relatives of those who had shared their bounty. All of these traditions and others have blended to make our present traditions around Halloween. What is problematic for the church is the pagan associations that come with the holiday, the over-indulgence and greed involved in the amounts of candy and junk food children accumulate, and the unfortunate associations of the holiday not just with paganism, but with the actual worship and reverence of evil.

These are reasons why some churches actively discourage their members from allowing their children to take part in Halloween festivities – or provide alternative activities that “clean-up” the holiday a bit – like having Biblically-themed costume parties or “safe trick-or-treating” events. (One year I dressed up as Salome with the head of John the Baptist on a platter.) Others have gone the opposite route and used the holiday as an excuse to frighten people into being more wary about the occult and more focused on Christian faith – the most extreme cases being the “Hell Houses” some fundamentalist churches have created. It’s pretty clear, though, that the church’s attempt to transform pagan rituals into Christian practice has been less than 100% successful.

Christianity has always had a bit of a struggle figuring out how much to accommodate to the prevailing values and spirituality of the culture in which it finds itself, and how much to stand apart.

This was the dilemma the early church faced as well. In our Acts story, Peter thought he knew what God required. He came from a tradition that had been called to be set apart from the surrounding cultures – that had preserved its unique traditions, stories and beliefs through centuries of upheaval, war, exile and oppression. Yet God called Peter to break the rules that set him apart from the Gentiles (that's us!) - the rules about what you can eat and what you can't, the rules about whose house you can enter and whose you can't, the rules about who is part of God's people and who is not. Peter realizes that the Spirit of God will blow where she will and act in whom the Spirit chooses. Next week, this story will be taken to its conclusion; but for this week, I think it creates some interesting questions to think about.

All of us, I would guess, know people who come from another one of the world's great religious traditions or spiritual paths. And all of us, probably know people who have adopted various kinds of spiritual practices without claiming allegiance to a particular tradition or path. I have friends and acquaintances of nearly every tradition you can name. And I certainly know people whose Christian path is very different from my own. I have friends who practice Reiki and healing touch – which differ very little from each other, using similar language of energy, chakras, auras, and so on. Yet some would argue that the latter is an authentic part of Christian tradition, and one is not. Lots of us practice yoga – some do it as an element of the Hindu path, many practice it simply as another form of exercise, and many walk a middle road, adopting some, but not all, of the spirituality that comes with the practice.

There are Christians who would argue that Reiki or healing touch or yoga cannot and should not be practised by Christians because they come out of religious or spiritual traditions that differ significantly from Christianity; some of the same people would say “keep your kids away from trick-or-treating, Christmas trees or the Easter bunny”. Yet the people I know who are involved in these apparently non-Christian practices are good people, faithful people, and in many cases, Christian people. So how do you and I judge what is spiritually healthy for us to be associated with, and what is not? How much can we adopt the practices of other spiritual or religious traditions, without losing our centre in Jesus Christ?

What helped Peter recognize the authentic faith of these Gentile converts, was the visible – even audible – presence of the Holy Spirit within them. Some Christians would continue to insist that the more spectacular manifestations of the Spirit must be present in a person for them to be judged a healthy Christian – like speaking in tongues, for example. But other gifts of the Spirit are frequently mentioned in Scripture: things like patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, servant-leadership, prayer, compassion. So for myself, when I feel unsure about the wisdom of incorporating certain practices or beliefs into my own life, I ask myself, “Is the work of the Spirit being revealed in them?” There is a well-known Scripture verse that says, “By their fruits you shall know them”. This applies to practices as well as to people. For myself, for the most part, I try to test a practice against my knowledge of our faith tradition. I am more likely to adopt a practice for myself if it has been a part of Christian spirituality in the past. But on occasion, and not without some caution, I will adopt a practice from another tradition or pathway, if it bears fruit that fits with the signs of the Spirit's presence. The Christian church has been doing this for centuries – in fact, it's one of the reasons the church has survived as long as it has, and spread across cultures and nations.

Many people have remarked on the explosion of interest in spirituality in our culture. Could it be that the Spirit is carving out new pathways to God, or reviving ancient ones? And if this is the case, how will we know? How will we test and see for ourselves what is good and holy, and what is merely catering to our own self-interest and need for continuous novelty and new stimulation? Time, and prayer, knowledge of our own tradition, and discernment together, will all be helpful in making these judgements. I'd encourage you to approach different expressions of spirituality, Christian or otherwise, with curiosity, some caution, openness, and a commitment to continue to walk with Jesus and in community. If you do, I think the experience of exploration will enrich you. May God bless each of us on our journey. Amen.