

Shifting Spiritualities

May 3, 2015

John 6:35

This morning's Scripture reading is a single verse. You may recognize it as something I say from the Table on the first Sunday of the month.

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Ever Present One, help us hear your Still Speaking Voice and encourage us to respond in faith. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

I come this morning with a history lesson; it is a lesson in the shifting nature of American spirituality since the 1950s. Don't worry. This isn't a doom and gloom account of the decline of Christianity or an attempt to idealize an earlier era. Instead, it is an effort to help give names to changes almost everyone here has lived through.

Robert Wuthnow, an esteemed sociologist who has taught for many years at Princeton where he also serves as the Director of their Center for the Study of Religion¹, wrote a book at the close of the twentieth century exploring spirituality in America since the 1950s.²

He suggests the dominant spirituality in our country back in the 1950s was a spirituality of dwelling. Church was at the center of society. In many places, churches were literally at the center of town. They were one of three pillars of stability along with small town life, and Americanism.³

This was the height of church building and expansion projects. These larger spaces were needed because increasing percentages of Americans were joining local churches.

People went to church – they traveled to a specific sacred place to encounter the divine. This is what a spirituality of dwelling is all about; it emphasizes habitation.

¹ Robert Wuthnow. CV. <http://www.princeton.edu/sociology/faculty/wuthnow/wuthnow_cv.pdf>

² Robert Wuthnow. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (University of California Press, 1998).

³ *Ibid.*, p.27

The sacred space was intentionally different from other spaces. In worship the liturgy sought to connect Christians not only to God but also to other worshippers across the ages. Clergy attire clearly differentiated them from everyone else. Parishioners wore their Sunday finest.

Church became a spiritual home. Increasingly churches offered activities beyond worship. These gave people a reason to come to church several days a week.⁴

Then came the 1960s – a decade of change. Everything in church life that people assumed was constant started to change; Christian theologians declared that God was dead, and the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council opened worship to parishioners in ways many had never imagined. At the same time the civil rights movement led to significant changes in the larger culture.

The 1960s and 1970s were an era when social structures and religious perspectives were questioned openly and often. This was a time when people were experiencing new freedoms. These shifts contributed to a shift from a spirituality of dwelling to a spirituality of seeking.

In keeping with the way people navigated this new world, this new form of spirituality emphasized negotiation. Individuals actively searched for sacred moments as means of reinforcing their conviction that the divine exists. These moments, however, tended to be short lived and infrequent, which led to more seeking.

When it comes to worship, seeker-oriented spirituality often led to a more casual overall experience with a blurring of the boundaries between the liturgy and everyday life. Some clergy dressed just like their parishioners and many worshippers no longer felt a need to dress up for church.

A spirituality of seeking tended toward an emphasis on special appearances of the divine or any type of miraculous means of confirming that the one we believe in still interacts with people in the present.⁵ These included a new interest in near death experiences, a fascination with angels, and a focus on the inner self that led to a more therapeutic or even self-help emphasis.

This was also a time when postmodernism was becoming more mainstream; experience began to trump objective knowledge as the

⁴ Ibid, p.34

⁵ Ibid., p.139

preferred way of making sense of the world around us. While this emphasis didn't fade, the world changed significantly as we moved from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century. During the time of Y2K and 9/11 we were starting to shift from a spirituality of seeking to a spirituality of practicing.

In place of the seeking that led to a consumer approach to the many spiritual options available in the marketplace, a spirituality of practicing demands more of the individual practitioner. It calls upon adherents to adopt a "more orderly, disciplined and focused approach to the sacred."⁶ For Christians this leads to a rediscovery of spiritual practices – something often referred to as spiritual disciplines.

With this new type of spirituality, religious institutions - including churches – are facilitators that equip and empower people to go out into the wider world and do God's work.⁷ The role of clergy shifts yet again; they seek to model the practices, and to call upon people to live out their faith by practicing it any and everywhere life takes them.

Practicing can take many shapes. Since I don't have time to explore several, I will focus on the one dominant among young adults as a way of suggesting what may be mainstream for most in the near term future. In a more recent book dedicated entirely to understanding how 20 and 30 somethings are shaping the future of American religion, Wuthnow labels their dominant approach tinkering.⁸

A spirituality of tinkering is necessarily an eclectic approach. Tinkerers are open to cobbling together resources or ideas from whatever sources they may encounter. Spiritual tinkerers tend to be incredibly resourceful.⁹ They are pragmatic, focused, and able to navigate a world in which everything is always changing.

American spirituality is alive and well, and it will continue to evolve. Here within our community of faith, we have people representing all of Wuthnow's approaches.

Whether you approach spirituality primary through dwelling or seeking or practicing or tinkering you are valued here and you are welcome at the Table.
Amen.

⁶ Ibid., p.196

⁷ Ibid., p.17

⁸ Robert Wuthnow. *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 12.

⁹ Ibid., p.14