

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

October 16, 2016

“Words of Awakening: Here. Thanks. O.”

Naked Spirituality, part 1. Based on the book by Brian McLaren

Exodus 3:1-6

You are in the right place this morning. It doesn't matter if you have been here for decades, or today is the first time you have done this whole “church” thing. Whether you came this morning, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, or if you needed four cups of coffee to jump-start your day, this is the place for you to be. If you are on the top of the world, or you are at the end of your rope, this is the place where God will meet you exactly as you are. I am just the messenger this morning. God is the author.

I invite you to pray with me this morning, and as we do so, I encourage you to pray with your hands open, as a symbol to God that you are ready for whatever he has for you. Let's pray.

Thank you God, for creating us and giving us this day to live. Each moment is a precious gift from you, and we want to use them wisely. Take this moment that we have now, and use it to challenge us, change us, and equip us to make disciples of Jesus Christ who will change the world. We can only do this in your strength, in your power, and with your Holy Spirit. O God, may the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever met someone who said, “I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious”? Or someone who has said to you, “I love Jesus, but I really have a problem with institutional religion”? It seems that a lot of people have become frustrated with the church. It doesn't matter what brand you identify: liberal, conservative,

Religious Right, Liberal Left, or “can’t make up your mind” moderate, a lot of people, pastors included, have found themselves burned out by empty, rules-and-regulations religion and hypocrisy. They are having trouble finding God in all the noise.

Many of us have resorted to putting on a good face and suppressing these thoughts. We cover them up. As an analogy, think about this: a lot of us feel like we have to dress up to come to worship. My father-in-law often tells me, he doesn’t feel right unless he wears a coat and tie to church. Most of us would say, wearing our ordinary, everyday clothes in here would make us feel too insecure, too awkward.

But I want to challenge you with a theme the next four weeks. I want to introduce you to something called, “Naked Spirituality.” No, this is not saying we are going *au natural* for worship this month. Rather, we want to expose false religion for what it is, and get back to the basics of the Christian faith. We want to consider simple faith practices that show us that daily, ordinary spiritual experiences matter more than dramatic, mountain top experiences. We want to strip away the superficiality of religion and focus on spiritual practices that everyone, everywhere can engage to grow in faith. Hey, if it helps you, go ahead and wear t-shirts and jeans next week!

When people search for naked spirituality, they are admitting that science, politics, economics and even organized religion do not have all the answers. They are looking for meaning and sacredness in the universe. They are looking for practical way to nourish that spirituality. They are seeking a vital connection – a connection with God and with the world.

Using a book which I highly recommend, Naked Spirituality by Brian McLaren, we are going to consider simple words - three each week - that will help ground our faith again and help us reclaim authentic Christian faith. Each word embodies a spiritual practice that we can apply in our everyday lives.

The first set of words McLaren gives us are words of Simplicity, or words of Spiritual Awakening. They are “Here”, “Thanks”, and “O”.

Let’s start with “Here.” “Here” is a word that expresses being found. My Dad used to joke that “Tiz” would be a good name for a dog. Then you could go around all day calling, “Here, Tiz! Here, Tiz!” Think about it. The last time you heard someone calling your name, what did you say? (Well, assuming you wanted to be found.) You probably said, “Here I am!”

That’s exactly what Moses said to the Lord on Mt. Horeb. If you don’t know the story, let me fill you in. Moses spent most of his life in hiding. As a baby, his mother hid him in a basket until he was found by Pharaoh’s daughter. He hid in the palace of Pharaoh until he realized he was a Hebrew and needed to be with his people. He hid in the wilderness after he killed an Egyptian overseer. God saw all of this and got Moses’ attention with a burning bush. God called out his name, twice: “Moses! Moses!” At this point, Moses finally stopped hiding and replied, “Here I am.” There was something irresistible about God’s voice. Moses had to turn aside to see this bush. He knew something, someone incredible was present. And what did God ask him to do? Take off his sandals. Let his naked feet touch the holy ground upon which he walked.

Saying “here” starts with us seeking God. I love playing hide and seek with my children. There is an inherent joy in being found. But we forget, God wants to find us, too. To say “Here I am” to God means admitting we are exactly who we

are. No pretenses. No facades. I'm coming to you, God, warts and all. That's a lot different than saying you have to get all dressed up to come to church.

Saying "here" means practicing the presence of God. If you want the \$10,000 seminary word for it, it's called invocation: acknowledging God's presence. Invocation, not to be confused with "On Vacation." God is not on vacation. We don't have to leave him a voice mail. We are not calling God. We are calling our own souls to wake up to God's presence.

To say "here", we have to be authentic. We have to resist procrastination, escapism. We have to be here. It's like when you're having a conversation, and you need someone to look you in the eyes, make sure they are not wondering off, thinking about the football game. I know, I do this a lot. Right, guys? Instead, simply say, "God, I'm here. I'm ready."

McLaren writes, "When I realize that I am here with God our Creator, God our Father, the Lord my Shepherd, I am awakening to the relationships in which I live – as a creature in creation, as a child in a family, as a member of God's flock." (page 36 of Naked Spirituality.)

Moses wasn't the only one whom God called to. God called to Abraham, Jacob, Paul, Gideon, Mary. Jesus called to his disciples. Imagine for a moment what it would be like to have God call your name. Your full name. "Eric Max Falker." Would you respond, "Here I am"? That's the first step to awakening our spirituality.

After we find God and are found by God, we can turn our thoughts to the next simple word, "Thanks." Resting securely in God's presence, we can open up our eyes to see all that God has given us, and we can be grateful. Saying "Thanks" is engaging in the practice of appreciation or gratefulness.

Let me ask you a question, again from McLaren's book. How much would you spend if you knew you were going blind and you could recover your sight? Millions of dollars? Sure. What if you were going to lose your hearing? An arm? A leg? How much would you pay? Well, the truth is, you have all those things now, which makes you richer than a millionaire.

In the book, there is a great quote. "It's not how much you have that brings happiness; it's how much you appreciate however much or little you have." (page 50 in Naked Spirituality, taken from Joseph Pieper.)

Expand that thought for a moment. Consider all of your possessions. Consider your family. Your house. Your job. The clean air you breathe. The beautiful sunrise and sunset. The whole world. Your place in God's family. The list goes on. With each thought, you can assume an attitude of gratitude.

Paul tells us in 1st Thessalonians 5:18, we are to give thanks in all circumstances. Note, he does not say for all circumstances. The truth is, we experience grief, loss, hurt, and pain. Even some of those things I listed earlier, you might not have them now. But you can give thanks for what you did have.

There is a Hebrew word, dayenu, that means "it would have been enough." A Jewish song carries this refrain. They sing it at the Passover meal. Here are some of the lines.

"If God had brought us out of Egypt..." dayenu, it would have been enough.

"If God had led us through on dry land..."

"If He had fed us manna...."

It would have been enough. They would have been content. But God did more than that. He brought them out of slavery to the Promised Land, to

freedom. Each step of the way, the Israelites could say, "Thank you. It would have been enough."

Being grateful means saying to God each day, "What you give me is enough." As a spiritual practice, try uttering "thanks" at the end of every sentence. "For my family, Lord, thanks. For my life, Lord, thanks. For the sunrise, Lord, thanks." This is simple faith. This is appreciation.

So we practice presence with God. And we practice gratefulness. McLaren has one more word for us. The shortest word. "O."

You know this word. It's a word of exclamation. Watching TV, you see a tackle. "O, that must have hurt!" "O, that was a great catch!" On the travel channel, "O, we should go there for vacation next year!" It's a word of surprise. "O, I didn't see you there!" "O, you scared me."

But mostly, "O" is a word of jubilation. Think of all these songs:

[sung] O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing.

O Come All Ye Faithful.

O What Fun It Is To Ride In A One Horse Open Sleigh.

"O" expresses delight and surprise. "O" is a word for practicing joy.

I was struck by an observation McLaren wrote in his book. He said that the greatest expressions of joy in worship he has ever seen have been in third world countries, especially in Africa. When he joined them in worship, meeting under a tent in the hot sun, with a 5-watt keyboard, a dusty floor, a stage held together with duct tape...their worship lasted for three hours. No screens, no lights, no AC, no stadium seating. Just the people giving their all.

McLaren asks a hard question. "Why are the most blessed often the most restrained in their worship, and why are those who have the least in terms of

health, wealth, and safety the most ready to make a joyful noise unto the Lord?” (page 65, Naked Spirituality.) At a conference I once attended, another pastor offered this answer. He said, “In America, you believe in God. In Africa, you depend on God.” (Steve Fitzhugh, National Youth Workers Convention, St. Louis, 2003.)

It’s hard to find naked spirituality in our modern society. Even our church architecture works against us. Pews are a very late addition to church architecture, added in Middle Ages to restrain dancing that broke out in worship occasionally. (Barbara Ehrenreich in Naked Spirituality, page 65.)

But we can know that joy. We can shout that “O”. We can know the love and joy of Christ, as Paul writes in Ephesians 3:14-19:

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name....I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Three simple words, three simple practices. 1)“Here” – Be present. 2)“Thanks” – be grateful. 3)“O” – be joyful. That’s where real faith starts. That’s where naked spirituality meets true religion.

Practical ideas from McLaren to awaken your faith:

1. “Give God the first greeting every morning.”
2. “Give God the first thanks at every meal.”
3. “Give God the first response to every pleasure.”
4. “Give God the first consideration in your weekly schedule.”
5. “Make God the first supervisor or customer for all work.”
6. “Give God the first part of every paycheck.”
7. “Give God the joy of your creativity.”

Memory verse

Psalm 63:1 “O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; my soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”

Reflection questions

1. Do you ever get burned out on religion? Why do you think that happens?
2. What disappoints you about how Christianity is currently practiced in our world? What excites you?
3. When have you hidden from God? When have you sought God?
4. How often do you give thanks to God? For what do you thank him?
5. Describe a moment in your life when you felt real joy. What is connected to God? Did you thank God for it?
6. What practice would you like to apply to your life to awaken your spirituality?