

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

November 6, 2016

## **Words that Deepen Faith: “Behold” “Yes” [...]**

*Naked Spirituality, part 4. Based on the book by Brian McLaren*

### Call to Worship – Psalm 46:8-11

*Come and see what the Lord has done,  
the desolations he has brought on the earth.*

<sup>9</sup> *He makes wars cease  
to the ends of the earth.*

*He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.*

<sup>10</sup> *He says, “Be still, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth.”*

<sup>11</sup> *The Lord Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

### Scripture: John 21:1-25

Take a deep breath. Now exhale. Enjoy the feeling of your lungs stretching. Today is a time for noticing – noticing things around you, people around you. My hope today is that through this message you will become more aware of God’s presence than you have ever been before. So take a good look around you. We are all here together, and God is in our midst. Let us not forget that.

Would you pray with me? “Lord Almighty, you have made the heavens and the earth and each and every one of us. You know us inside and out. You love us,

despite our pride, our failures, our mistakes. We desperately want to know your love in our church, in our community, and in our world. So take this morning and use it to teach us. Fill us with your Holy Spirit to guide all our thoughts, words, and deeds. We ask this for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.”

Naked Spirituality. It’s a funny term, a provocative term. Unlike the fake, boastful, “ultra-religious” rhetoric that really doesn’t move people any closer to God, Naked Spirituality is simple, vulnerable, and available to all. The last three weeks we have been following Brian McLaren’s book to take a good look at our own relationship with God and try to eliminate the pretense and the facades, and replace them with authenticity. We have talked about presence, gratefulness, joy, confession, weakness, intercession, doubt and unanswered questions. We’ve spent a lot of time together, wondering, asking, and considering. I may have given you a lot to think about.

As the last part of the series, today is different. I’m not trying today to give you something to think about. I want you to do the opposite. Let go of your thoughts, your worries, and your calculations. Today, we are going to talk about meditation and contemplation.

The first word for today is “Behold.” Think of taking something into your hands to hold it. A flower. A special rock. A piece of jewelry. A newborn baby. You hold it, you notice it. To *behold* is to notice something that maybe you missed before.

Friday my family got to behold nature in a special way. We went to Lake Louise camp to try out a tree climbing apparatus – it was a system of ropes and knots that allowed us to climb about 40 feet up a huge maple tree. We seriously

looked like a bunch of monkeys! But the perspective from the top of the tree was so different, so new, we just had to stop climbing and watch the forest around us.

We have all seen trees before. But the guide helped us see them in a new way. Beholding is like that. It takes help from someone to notice what we missed. In the Bible, John the Baptizer says, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” (John 1:29 NKJV) John helped the first disciples “see” Jesus. This was not some ordinary Jew, walking the countryside. This was the Savior. John said “Behold” twice (also in John 1:36), and as a result the disciples starting following Jesus.

“What you look for determines what you see. What you focus on determines what you miss.” (McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, 194). When we meditate, we pause our normal activity long enough to notice what was hidden in plain sight, like a poem, a scripture, a word, a sunset, a tree, a forest, a person.

Meditation is not easy in our busy world. There are too many distractions, too much routine that dulls our senses. As our family was walking at Deadman’s Hill in Alba this weekend, our children kept running ahead on the trail and then playing hide and seek. But sometimes it was hard to find them, because we were walking down the trail, not expecting to see them. We were just doing what we were supposed to do – one foot in front of the other, following the path. But our kids weren’t on the path, so unless we stopped and intentionally looked for them, we missed them.

We need to stop getting stuck in a rut. We need to stop analyzing and start beholding. We need a new perspective. We need to see the big picture, the complete, the whole. This doesn’t mean glossing over any flaws or mistakes. We take it all in, and behold the beauty.

Through beholding, we learn what these verses means:

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:16 – “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.”

John 9:25 – “I was blind, but now I see.”

Through beholding, we begin to see how God sees us, and as a result, our image of God himself is transformed. God is not the analyzer, looking at us with a critical eye. God truly sees our whole selves. And through our beholding, we realize that God is bigger than anything we have previously understood.

(McLaren, Naked Spirituality, 198).

Take another deep breath and exhale. As you breathe in, simply think, “Lord Jesus.” As you exhale, simply think, “Yes.”

This is our second word. Yes. It represents our desire to “join God in God’s work in the world.” (McLaren, Naked Spirituality, 209) After all that we have beheld, we wish to be a partner in God’s movement. This call is a commission – literally, “with mission.” And it requires compassion – literally, “with passion.” To say “yes” to God is to open ourselves to passionately fulfill God’s mission for us.

Sometimes we think we can do this mission work on our own, without partnering with God. We try to make the life of faith just another business. We try to base our self-worth in our actions instead of our being. “Check the boxes: Go to church. Give. Read your bible. Get the religious to-do list done.” This resembles what the disciple Peter tried to do.

If you know any of Peter’s story, you know he was a brash man. It seems like he was always trying to “one-up” the other disciples. Jesus walks on water, and while the other disciples are terrified, Peter steps out of the boat to prove his faithfulness – and he nearly drowns until Jesus rescues him. (Matthew 14:22-33)

Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and then tries to convince Jesus not to die on the cross, to which Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan.” (Matthew 16:13-28) In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter cuts off a slave’s ear trying to defend Jesus, and Jesus rebukes Peter and heals the slave. (John 18:10-11, Luke 22:47-51)

Peter was always trying to impress Jesus, instead of relaxing, beholding, and simply saying yes. McLaren ironically notes that “Peter...inaugurated two long-standing Christian traditions [in the Garden of Gethsemane]: ...religious violence and...behaving in a manner completely inconsistent with Jesus himself.” (Naked Spirituality, 214)

Most infamously, Peter declared at the Last Supper that he would follow Jesus to death, but Jesus predicted Peter’s threefold denial. (Luke 22:31-34, John 18) It is after this denial that we find Peter in the boat, one more time, trying to prove himself. (John 21) After the miraculous catch of fish, he leaps out of the boat and hauls the net ashore by himself. Still trying to do it all himself. “Look at me, Jesus!”

Jesus knew how to redeem Peter from his pride. Jesus started by building a charcoal fire on the beach, the same type of fire that was present in the courtyard where Peter denied Jesus three times. Surely the smell of the fire would have evoked bitter memories in Peter. (McLaren, Naked Spirituality, 215). Jesus broke bread with the disciples on the beach, the same way he did at the Last Supper when Peter first made his boast. In the midst of this bitter reminder of his failure, Jesus asked Peter the most important question ever.

“Do you love me?” To overcome the threefold denial, Jesus gave Peter three chances to answer his question, “Do you love me?” with a yes. And Peter said yes, three times.

What is interesting, though, is that Peter never answered the last command Jesus gave him. “Follow me.” Instead of saying, “Yes, Lord, of course,” Peter asked a weird question. “What about him?” and pointed to the disciple John. The gospel has an open ending, a cliff-hanger. Would Peter follow Jesus? And by association, would we? How would we answer Jesus’ call?

You see, Jesus asked Peter to follow him, to love the one he had denied, and join him in mission that would lead to suffering and death. (McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, 216) McLaren puts it this way: “A pious, devotional *yes* is easy to say...[But would] you say *yes* to love, *yes* to service, *yes* to risk, suffering, and even death [for the sake of Jesus]?” That’s a much more difficult question to answer, and maybe it shouldn’t surprise us that Peter’s answer isn’t recorded in his words gospel of John.

When Jesus invites you to “Follow me,” do you say yes? The other three gospels start with the invitation, “Follow me,” but the gospel of John ends with it. (McLaren *Naked Spirituality*, 218) And if we are noticing, the gospel ends with Peter’s silence, which leads us to our last word. Here it is.

*[...] appears on the screen.*

You all said that last word in unison! It’s not actually a word, it is silence. Silence is critical for deepening faith. Silence is the necessary space between notes on a piece of music, between songs at a concert. It is the empty stage before the dancer begins to dance, the empty canvas before the painter begins to paint. Silence is, as McLaren puts it, “being at rest with God with no words at all.”

This, out of all the practices of Naked Spirituality and true faith, is the most neglected. There is a story about Mother Teresa. A reporter once asked her, “What do you say to God when you pray?” She replied, “Mostly, I just listen.” “Oh, well, what does God say to you?” Her answer: “Mostly, he just listens.” (McLaren, Naked Spirituality, 223)

Have you ever approached prayer that way? Stopping just to listen to God, listening to you? Instead of being Peter and trying to do everything, we need to listen to these words:

**Psalm 127:1-2**

Unless the LORD builds the house,  
the builders labor in vain.  
Unless the LORD watches over the city,  
the guards stand watch in vain.  
<sup>2</sup>In vain you rise early  
and stay up late,  
toiling for food to eat—  
for he grants sleep to those he loves.

**Isaiah 30:15**

“This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says:  
“In repentance and rest is your salvation,  
in quietness and trust is your strength,  
but you would have none of it.”

**John 15:5**

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

These verses are the hardest to accept because they require us to do nothing, and to do it well. This is McLaren’s final point. Contemplation, mediation, and silence – these are not duties; these are gifts, opportunities.

(Naked Spirituality, 224) We live in a world that is desperate for results. You are constantly told you have to prove yourself, show that you are worth something, show that you can do it all so that people will look up to you. This attitude makes our failures so devastating. When we fall, we feel worthless.

So I have great news for you. Meditation only requires that you do nothing, and I think that is something we can all be good at. To grow our faith, we have to find those times of quiet, calm and stillness and guard them fiercely. I was particularly struck by this quote: “There will always be unfinished business to attend to – at some point, you simply need to let it go.” (McLaren, Naked Spirituality, 232)

Maybe this line of thinking will radically change how you relate to God. But if you remember only one thing this Sunday, it is this: your worth is not based on what you do, it is based in who you are. “You are already loved, already accepted, without doing anything....You are loved because God is love.” (McLaren, Naked Spirituality, 232)

I pray that you will find the times to behold what God is doing, to say yes to his call, and to spend times in silence, listening to God listening to you.

Memory verse:

*“Be still, and know that I am God;*

*I will be exalted among the nations,*

*I will be exalted in the earth.” – Psalm 46:10*

Reflection questions:

1. How often do you take time to be still and appreciate the beauty of creation?



2. Have you ever felt that your self-worth is based in activity? Whom are you trying to impress?
3. When has God asked you, “Do you love me?” Have you said yes?
4. How often do you practice meditation or contemplation? Where do you do this?
5. What would it take to practice simple, naked spirituality in your life, to slow down and “listen for God listening to you”? Who could help you do this?