

““Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.””

Matthew 11:28-30 NASB1995

Today we continue our look at the book, “The Rebirthing of God”, by John Philip Newel. Much of today's talk is straight from the book, so it may sound familiar. Some were also from a newsletter written by Brian Myorka, the Director of Communications of Renovare’, where Pastor Chris is attending a spiritual formation retreat this weekend.

But before we get to Chapter 5, I want to talk about the title. So, after 25 years in corporate world, I find that I am very literal. Abstract

thinking does not come as quickly to me as to academic types, and “The Rebirthing of God” created a knee jerk reaction. It begs follow up questions, such as, can or should God be rebirthed? What about God needs to be rebirthed? I mean, God is perfect. Wouldn't the rebirthing of God be a contradiction of Malachi 3:6 “I, the Lord do not change”? Or Hebrews 3:18 “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow?”.

And then I notice that there's more to the title, there is “Christianity's struggle for New Beginnings”. OK, it's Christianity that needs a new start, but still not feeling really sure about the rebirthing of God part.

I found an explanation for the title in the introduction of the book, and Pastor Chris spoke of it a few weeks ago, when he said that Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century Christian mystic, said most simply, that we are not just made by God, we are made of God.

What does it mean that we are made of God rather than simply by God? In part it means that the wisdom of God is deep within us, the creativity of God is deep within us, and—as a sheer gift of God—the capacity to bring forth what has never been imagined before.... to create. Above all else, Julian says, the love-longings of God are at the heart of our being. So, when our heart love is renewed, when our creativity is renewed, when our ability to love our fellow humans is reborn, then God in us, is reborn.

The early Christian Celts saw God's presence through all of Creation. They maintained that bond with God through communing with nature, prayer, meditation, and poetic use of the imagination and art. They saw, in everything and everyone, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and they were very skilled at seeking encounter with God in the everyday of life." And so, as we come to Chapter 5,

“Reconnecting with Spiritual Practice”, we ask - how can we seek encounter with God in the everyday of our life?

Philip Newell writes that in the last two decades we have seen an increase of interest, in yoga, labyrinth building, and other spiritual practices that speak of a desire to recover ancient practices from the past, that can help us encounter God in the here and now.

Mr. Newell writes that a great modern Christian prophet of restoring balance through the disciplines of spiritual practice was Thomas Merton, who was born 1915. Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk from Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. Through his teachings, Merton did not call us all to be monks, but he invited us all into what he calls a “contemplative orientation” to life.

Merton says, “We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and God is shining through it all the time ... in people and in things and in nature and in events.” But the problem is “We don’t see it.”

There is a worship song called “Amazed”. “You dance over me, while I am unaware. You sing all around, but I never hear the sound”. I was on a music team, and one of the team members had asked if we could put that song in rotation. It surprised me when the worship pastor said, “No, I just can’t sing those words. I hear the sound of God all around me, all the time. In my children’s voices, in the birds, in music. We need to listen for God”. So....a few weeks later, words popped in my head, and I texted, “what if we sing “You sing all around, and and I love to hear the sound?”. They agreed, and I still choose to sing those words... I love to hear the sound. When my family went through a

very dark and difficult time, that same pastor would remind me, “Lish, keep looking for God”.

See, they knew what Merton also tells us; Spiritual practice is about intentionally remembering to see, and may I add, remembering to listen. It is about intentional disciplines, individually and collectively, that enable us to be more aware of the shinings of Divine Presence that are within us and all around us.

Merton does not seek “to know about God” but “to know God.” It is a desire for direct personal experience, a grasp of the heart, a relationship. A desire to be yoked to the Sacred, with yoked being the root of the Sanskrit word yoga.

Reading scripture, devotionals, or praying are not about proving my own idea or concepts of God. For example, at the beginning of this talk –

I used bible verses, taken out of context, to reinforce an idea or theory about God. I could have also used Exodus 32:14 out of context, to prove the opposite – scripture says - “So the Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.” In either case, I am attributing human characteristics to God to explain God. I do it with my dog too. But in this case, I missed the point of the book, which is about a rebirthing of God in us, in order to create change in Christianity.

Merton teaches, and I agree, that I would be better served to use my bible reading time to seek the experience of presence of God, instead of trying to support my own beliefs, or even trying to figure God out at all. Isn't that pretty good advice for any relationship? To just enjoy the presence of a loved one, without expecting them to reflect our own opinions. Newel puts it, “Spiritual Practice is the accessing of something at the heart of life, the

experiencing of God, rather than holding particular beliefs about God”.

In Merton’s teachings, we see a threefold pattern. The first is his belief that spiritual practice serves to help us remember God in us, our own diamond essence.

Merton’s second emphasis is that spiritual practice is about remembering God in others - the diamond essence in everybody and everything else.

So, what is this diamond essence? Merton wrote that the diamond essence is God in us. “It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it, we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun, that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely



... I have no program for this seeing. It is only a given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.”

On March 18, 1958, Thomas Merton was running errands in downtown Louisville when he had an experience that would change his life. He was at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets, as he walked through the shopping district of the city, he was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that he loved everyone around him, “that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness.” He saw the “secret beauty of their heart.” It was as if they were all walking around shining like the sun. “If only we could see each other that way all the time,” he wrote. “There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed.... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.”

This passage became so famous, that the city of Louisville erected a historical plaque in 2008 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Merton's revelation, possibly the only one in the United States marking a mystical experience. The area was re-named Thomas Merton Square because of his Love vision. After Merton's vision, he would write to friend and fellow author, James Baldwin, saying: "I am therefore not completely human until I have found myself in my African and Asian and Indonesian brother because he has the part of humanity which I lack."

Merton would cringe at the thought of becoming a tourist attraction, but both he and James Baldwin might be pleased to know that Walnut Street has since been named Muhammad Ali Boulevard, after another of Louisville's most famous activists.

The real problem, says Newell, most of the time, is that unlike Merton, we are not falling in love with the heart of one another, we are not falling in love with the heart of other nations, we are not falling in love with the heart of other species. We are blind to their secret beauty; thus, we fail even to be tempted to love them. Seeking relationship with God through Spiritual practice, helps to increase our ability to see God in others.

Merton's third emphasis in spiritual practice focuses on accessing the diamond essence in order to be strong for the work of transformation in the world. This involves dying to the way in which the ego wants to be the center. Renovare' reminds us, "When the *spiritual* journey is my own self-improvement project, the major product will be an ego that is in even more control than before the journey began."

Jesus said, it is a fact that a grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die before it can grow and produce much more wheat. If it never dies, it will never be more than a single seed. Newell writes that through practices, “Our seed-force of strength for change in the world will multiply, by accessing the innermost ground of our being. That is where true strength is to be found, not in the limited strength of the ego, but in the strength of the heart.”

So, we must lose our ego, our self in order to access everything in God. It means facing the worst in us in order to discover the best. But this does not mean that we have to hate ourselves. We are loved children in the family of God. To hate ourselves is to waste Christ sacrifice – ““For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

John 3:16 NASB1995

It's not a question of how much we are loved, I am loved by God perfectly but if I value my own voice above others, then I might not hear God's voice, I only hear my own.

Facing the worst in ourselves also does not require us to demean the self in others, or in other races, classes, and genders. Quite the opposite. It means we respect the self and nurture the self in ourselves and in others. An example of facing our worst and respecting others came in 2016, when an apology was issued at the annual convention of the Alaska Federation of Natives, from The Presbyterian Church USA, to all Native Americans abused, mistreated or diminished through church schools and boarding schools or otherwise.

The press blip says - An expression of sorrow for long-ago wrongs was delivered in person at the AFN convention by the Rev. Curt Karns, of the Presbytery of the Yukon. "To those individuals

who were physically, sexually and emotionally abused as students of the Indian boarding schools in which the (Presbyterian Church USA) was involved, we offer you our most sincere apology. You did nothing wrong; you were and are the victims of evil acts that cannot under any circumstances be justified or excused," In apologizing, he said, "We Presbyterians arrogantly thought that Western European culture and cultural expressions were necessary parts of the gospel of Christ," "We tried to make you be like us, and, in so doing, we helped to diminish the sacred vision that made you who you are. Thus, we demonstrated that we did not fully understand the gospel we were trying to preach." Out of that apology came healing for some, but also seeds of change. Local churches followed with formal apologies, and some have gifted back the land and buildings to local tribal governments.

So, we turn to spiritual practices to help us encounter God in ourselves, in others, and to move into new lands of awareness and wisdom. But there is that word “practice”. Practicing anything takes time. Modern life compels us to rush. Sometimes, the activities that sustain us, are the first to go when we get crunched for time. And I get it, the mortgage or rent has to be paid, the kids have to be fed, commitments were made. But making time for the activities that contribute to spiritual growth has little to do with being selfish and everything to do with well-being. When we prioritize a relationship with God and Jesus, we ensure that we are nurtured, and then we can nurture others. Just like the oxygen on a plane – we put our own masks on first, so we can then help others.

Merton says we may not want to be seen as beginners in spiritual practice, quote “But let us be convinced of the fact that we will never be anything else but beginners, all our life!”

I'm human. I know when I begin to meditate or pray, sometimes my mind takes me off to the races. My back starts to bother me. There's an itch on my nose. (It's okay to scratch), My phone buzzes. Gotta look at that text...maybe it's God, right? Yes, I'm pretty sure I am the worst in the world at doing this meditating stuff. Why do I keep trying?

Because, God's grace is with me and in my prayer and meditation. To try to pray is to pray. And practice at anything makes it easier. And by practicing, I have found my own rhythm.

Newell writes, "It was Roland, a monk on Iona, who taught us that there are two types of prayer. One, he said, is the dozing pussycat prayer, purring by the warm fire of God's presence. The other is the yappy dog prayer, scratching at the door of heaven, imploring



God's help in our lives. Maybe we need both. But contemplative prayer, Merton said, "is essentially a listening in silence, an expectancy." It is always very simple "often making use of no words and no thoughts at all.

Renovare compares it to a trust fall. "Solitude and silence are a trust fall. It is an act of faith to fall from the so-called steady ground of our own work and words and believe Jesus will catch us in the silence and set us back upright, hopefully with a little more confidence in His strength and grace."

Thomas Merton died suddenly and unexpectedly on December 10, 1968, at the age of fifty-three. The book says, "We don't know what he was thinking at the last moment, but we do know that in his lifetime he had come to believe that precisely at the point of dying to the ego, of dying to the self, we encounter God's fullness. It is when the ego lets go of

having to be in control that we can receive the universe's gifts most fully. The important work of spiritual practice is to access that fullness now, for the sake of one another, and for the world.”

### Let Us Pray

Our Lord, guide us on our spiritual journeys, so that we may grow closer, and deepen our faith in You. Grant us trust in Your divine plan.

Let us call upon the Holy Spirit to transform us into the people you have called us to be, Your light and love into the world. Let us call upon the Holy Spirit to give us vision to see and love the Diamond Essence in every part of Your creation. Thank You for Your grace and mercy that never fails, and for the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

