

Get a Life

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
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Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:7-10; John 12:20-25

“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” -- John 12:24-25

This coming September, Fr. Richard Rohr will be speaking in Cleveland. Fr. Rohr is a Franciscan priest who established the Center for Contemplation and Action in Albuquerque in 1986. That center allows people committed to changing the world peacefully to ground themselves and their actions in the deep and nourishing spirituality of the gospels. Fr. Rohr is an authority on the spirituality of men, but his weekend at River’s Edge in Rocky River will be devoted to his book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.

The first half of life, Fr. Rohr says, is discovering, designing, and constructing the container for the second half, which is what you will do with the first half. The second half of your life is why you were created. None of us is created to build the container; we’re created to use the container. Both halves of life are necessary for authentic human existence, but many people don’t realize that. Most people stop living once they’ve completed the container, and they spend the years of the second half of their lives coasting to their grave. These are the folks Jesus referred to when he said, “Let the dead bury their own dead” (Matthew 8:22).

“Who am I? How will I support myself? Who will go with me on the journey?” Those are the questions that we attempt to answer with the first half of life. Those are the container-building questions. But then what? For most of us – for the vast majority of us – we settle. We settle into the answers to those container-building questions and never move beyond them. The answers to those questions – female, mother, teacher, husband, nurse, lawyer, father, partner, grandma, my children – those become our identities, our selves, and most of us want nothing more than to be ourselves. That’s the life we strive for, and in the vast majority of cases, that’s the life we get. For a while. For a little while. For a very little while. And then we die.

Jesus knew that. All the great spiritual and religious teachers have known this. The people with the most penetrating insight into reality have recognized the kind of self most of us strive for and settle for, and the kind of self that’s available to all of us who refuse to settle. The great religious teachers across human history recognize the ordinary self for what it is and especially for what it is not. They have seen both its importance and its insignificance. They know its necessity and its limitations. They encourage its cultivation and insist on its transcendence. The self, for the truly religious, is the place of life’s dramas and the locus of one of life’s central paradoxes, of which there are many. Jesus spoke of the chief of those paradoxes in this morning’s text from the Gospel of John. Here’s what he said: “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep

it for eternal life”(John 12:24-25).

Dying to the isolation of self and rising to the abundance of God. That is life’s chief paradox and it is the central teaching of the Christian faith. In a nutshell, all that we do in this place – all that we read in Scripture, all that we hear preached and sung about, all that we do in service and witness – all of that comes back to this one image: dying to self and rising to God. That is the Easter faith, and it is Easter that makes us Christians.

Now I realize of course that I’m an old fogey when it comes to religion, which is why you should begin thinking about getting a new pastor before too long. I’m very old-fashioned when it comes to religion and spirituality. I still think religion works. Many people today, especially many young people, don’t. They think spirituality works and that religion is a broken-down has-been that’s done more harm than good.

Like I said, I don’t share that opinion. From Fr. Rohr’s book I was reminded that the word religion comes from two Latin words meaning “tie together” or “join again,” *re- ligio* – like our word “ligature.” Religion ties things together again that have been separated – or at least that’s what it’s supposed to do, at its best. Religion brings us back to our true selves, which are rooted not in the isolated grain of wheat, but in that falling to earth and dying that releases our true selves to blossom and flourish in God. That’s how you get a life.

Religion is getting a lot of negative press today. Yesterday, I went downtown to support marriage equality in the state, and it was one of the few rallies for GLBT rights where clergy were actually welcomed and religion wasn’t viewed in entirely negative terms. Two of the speakers at that rally were Joyce and Bob Strommen, parents of a gay son, a lesbian daughter, and two straight daughters, and longtime advocates for equal rights for all people. Joyce and Bob were there to show a less rigid, less ugly, less hurtful side of religion. They made it clear that they are members of the United Church of Christ, that we were the first mainline denomination to ordain an openly gay person, and that we’ve been at the front edge of the movement for marriage equality for a long time. Joyce and Bob were important correctives to religion’s negative public image, and I went down in part to help them.

The words of Jesus in today’s lesson aren’t part of a free-floating spirituality. They are part of that great religion called Christianity, of which I am proud to be a part. I’m not embarrassed to be a Christian, despite the often embarrassing words and actions of my co-religionists. I have biological family members who embarrass me from time to time, so why should my religious family be any different? That old saying about not getting to pick your family is as true of the church as it is of our last names, so we might as well admit that we all won’t agree in big-tent Christianity and we all won’t even like each other.

But that’s okay. We’re not part of the church to like each other. We’re part of the church to get a life – the life offered and promised to us by the head of this church, Jesus Christ. He’s why we’re here, and it’s his life in us we’re striving to live. We’re Christians because, at some deep level, deeper even than we’re able to say, we believe that his life still has the power to make us more than we can be on our own. We can and should do a lot with our minds, with our lips, and with our hands; but we can do so much more when we turn all of those over to him. When people look at you and see Jesus Christ, you haven’t lost anything; you’ve gained everything. You’ve gained eternal life.

Let us pray. Help us, Lord, to become masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take our hands and work through them. Take our minds and think through them. Take our lips and speak through them. And take our hearts, and set them on fire, for Christ’s sake. Amen.