

**“Nourishing Spirituality”**

**Psalm 63.1–8 and Isaiah 55.1–9**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 7 March 2010**

People my age and younger tend to talk more about “spirituality” than folks in the Silent generation or the World War II generation, and even those in the earlier part of the Baby Boom. Spirituality is seen as a term that is free from the culture entanglements of religion. And to be sure, organized religion is culture-bound.

Seriously, what other organization would choose its head honcho by locking a bunch of 70- & 80-year-old men in a room and telling them to stay inside and send up a puff of white smoke when they were done? And what other organization would have their local leader chant something to them in ancient Greek and ask them to chant it back responsively? (*Kyrie eleison...*) Ad what organization would insist that every male child had to have a sensitive piece of his anatomy removed 8 days after his birth...without anesthetic? Religion is culture-bound.

Last month the Pew Research Center published an interesting study of the religious and spiritual lives of millennials (those born since 1980). According to the study, “Fully 1 in 4 of the millennial generation...are unaffiliated with any faith. Indeed, millennials are significantly more unaffiliated than Generation Xers were at a comparable point in their life cycle ... and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults.”<sup>1</sup>

But, also of interest is that millennials pray more frequently as young adults than Gen Xers or Boomers did when they were in their 20s. There are a lot of interesting observations in the study, and I’d like to share just a few with you:

- Millennials are less likely to take the Bible literally than older generations, and this is even true among evangelical Christians.
- Millennials in mainline churches are more likely than older people to believe in heaven, hell, an afterlife, miracles, angels, and demons.
- Most millennials – even evangelicals – believe that there is more than one path both to the interpretation of their own religion and to an afterlife.
- The majority of millennials in every sector except evangelical Christians think that homosexuality should be accepted in society. (72% of young Catholics think that!)
- Millennials are not afraid of the word, “liberal,” and 67% “prefer bigger government” and “more services.”

Now, you might say that organized religion is facing a threat as our most active members age and die...who will take their place? To be sure, the church will change – it always has changed! – but I think the Pew survey is actually hopeful news for liberal churches like ours. Why do I think that? Lined up against some of what the survey lays out, we compare favorably.

1. We don’t have a rigid set of doctrine, and we ensure that our members have the freedom of individual biblical interpretation.
2. Most of us at Plymouth (and in churches like ours) believe that we have a wonderful path toward the divine and that our gateway is Jesus...but we acknowledge that ours is not the **only** path.
3. We are Open and Affirming – welcoming LGBT folks into the **full life** of the church. And our denomination has been Open and Affirming for 25 years!

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, “Religion among the Millennials,” February 2010.

4. We are probably more active in social justice work than any mainline denomination, so ours is an engaged faith.

The challenge for us – and this goes back to my sermon on “inviting” three weeks ago – is to let people know who we are and what we stand for, and I’d say that need is especially acute for young adults. I don’t know about you, but I think that Plymouth is too marvelous a gift not to share! We have so much to share!



The classic work about the religious sociology of the Baby Boom is *A Generation of Seekers*, by Wade Clark Roof, who talks about the Boomers as the first generation to really break out of the religious mold of their parents and try to find spiritual nurture in different traditions and places. In a sense, I think that seeking is a part of every generation, and that Roof’s sobriquet also accurately describes Gen X and the millennial generation.

Most of us have an inner hunger for connection with something bigger than ourselves or our clan, something bigger than our community or nation... perhaps something bigger than all of creation. That hunger is the way I think of spirituality. The 17th century French mathematician, Blaise Pascal, wrote, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God.”

We often sense a hunger, but in many cases we try to fill the void with something other than God. Maybe it’s an addiction to something that is essentially good, but consumed in an out-of-balance way: food, sex, alcohol, or work. It explains why 12-step groups are so popular. The one addiction that is prevalent (but often undiagnosed) in our culture, though, is consumerism. We are addicted to buying “stuff” in the vain hope that it will satisfy our hunger. But, rather than filling us, it often leaves us wanting even more. “Why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and you labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” It’s amazing that these words were recorded 2,800 years ago... and we’re still struggling with them!

If we feel a God-shaped vacuum within ourselves, we have spiritual hunger, which can be particularly acute in some people. The question is what are you going to feed your soul: Fritos or whole wheat bread? There is a lot of spiritual junk food on the market!

The so-called “prosperity gospel” – whose basic message is that if I lead a virtuous life, I will become financially prosperous – is the spiritual equivalent of Doritos.

I have mixed feelings about Joel Osteen, who leads the nation’s largest church and has a major television ministry. I like that his message is unabashedly positive, and I think that is the reason for his success. But, I do wonder about any minister of the gospel who doesn’t “afflict the comfortable” as well as “comfort the afflicted.”

Outside of the Christian household, the spiritual junk food is pretty darned unhealthy, too. How many of you have read *The Secret* or seen the video version? It’s kind of like a non-Christian version of Norman Vincent Peale’s “power of positive thinking” on steroids. *The Secret* talks about the so-called “Law of Attraction”...if you can focus all of your mental energy on anything, it can be yours. Here is a quote: “The Secret gives you anything you want: happiness, health, and wealth.”

There are some problems here. First, it’s all about me! I need... I want... I deserve... Second, it assumes that you are not living in a third-world country with no economic resources. Third, the converse is that if you don’t have happiness, health, and

wealth, that somehow it's your own fault. Is it Garrett Karp's fault that he has Hodgkin's Lymphoma as a teenager? Of course not!

Here is another quotation: "Your job is to declare what you would like to have from the Catalogue of the Universe. If cash is one of them, say how much you would like to have. 'I would like to have twenty-five thousand dollars, unexpected income, within thirty days.'" <sup>2</sup> It's easy to write this stuff off, but somehow it warranted two episodes of "Oprah" and it was on the *New York Times* bestseller list. I have to say that *The Secret* is not just spiritual junk food, it's spiritually carcinogenic, and it would be taken off the market if there was a spiritual Food and Drug Administration.

Okay, if all of that is the spiritual equivalent of junk food, what is the spiritual analog of whole-wheat bread? Of course, since you're worshipping at Plymouth, you must be under the impression that this is spiritual Whole Foods (kidding!). What is it that is nurturing to your spirit? The answer will be different for various people, and that is wonderful! Some of us find spiritual connection in music, while for others it is in silent contemplation. Some of us think of our minds as being the primary organ of spiritual discernment, while for others it is our emotions. Some of us think of the Bible as a treasure trove of spiritual wisdom and for others the sacrament of communion is what feeds our souls most directly. Some of us find connection with the sacred through acts of service and witnessing for justice and peace, while others find God through fellowship with their fellow travelers on Christ's path. Some of us are enriched by rediscovering ancient Christian traditions like *lectio divina* or chant, while others among us are using a new DVD series like "Nooma" or "Living the Questions" to delve into the great spiritual questions in contemporary faith. Some of us are in small groups to explore Celtic Christianity, while others are in small groups to explore healing and wholeness.

I guess that I've made it pretty clear that there is not a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all spirituality at Plymouth. There are so many ways to approach the sacred that all of them cannot be right for everyone. Maybe you have more of a spiritual tossed salad at your disposal than nice, whole wheat bread!

"O God, you are my God, I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you as in a dry and weary land where there is not water." So, how do you slake your sense of spiritual thirst? It's a good question to ask during the introspective season of Lent. All of us go through dry spells in our spiritual lives, when God is not as obviously present as we would like. And I would imagine that there are some of us going through that kind of drought right now.

If you are, I have a few no-nonsense suggestions: keep at it... whatever you're doing, even if it's just showing up for worship on Sunday, keep at it. Try reading Luke's gospel with us at Plymouth. Sharon is doing some cool blogging about the readings, and you can find them via Plymouth's Facebook page, and I'm posing a few challenges in my weekly YouTube video. Join a small group. If your prayer life (Did you know you had a prayer life?) need recharging, find a book of prayers or daily reading by someone like Philip Newell or Joyce Rupp and spend time with them in your intention to connect with the Spirit.

Connecting is important: connecting to God, connecting to self, connecting to others. A critical aspect of engaged spirituality is moving beyond our ego and ourselves. When we search to fill that God-shaped vacuum within us, we ultimately find that it takes some hard work, some intention, to build relationship with God, self, and other.

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<sup>2</sup> Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret*. (NY: Atria, 2006) p. 101.

One of the most dramatic, and for me haunting, lines in modern literature comes as a refrain in E.M. Forster's novel, *Howards End*, and it speaks volumes about our search for spiritual nutrition. The sentence contains two words: "Only connect." Spirituality is not about *having*; it is about *connecting*. That is our task, our challenge, and our joy in spiritual seeking: *only connect*. My prayer for you this morning is that you will connect with God in this place and beyond it, and that we can be companions, sharing bread along the way.

Amen.