

## 1 Sermon, September 26, 2010

Texts: John 3:1-21, Song of Solomon 2:1-13

Title: "Honoring the Mystic in You"

What if you could have direct access to unlimited love, any time you wanted it, and you could, just by wishing it, be filled with a joy that made you radiant?

Is that a compelling vision for you?

If it is, you have a lot of the mystic in you.

Mysticism has been part of the Christian faith from the very beginning. The apostle Paul talked about an experience he had of a vision of heaven, of "being caught up to the third heaven," and seeing there things too great and amazing to talk about.

**Mysticism** is the pursuit of union with God, through direct experience, intuition or insight. Christian mysticism centers on the habitual practice of deep prayer (i.e. meditation, contemplation) involving the person of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The goal of the mystic is that there be no separation between you and God, and you dwell in a perpetual delight.

Now, even the greatest mystics in Christian history have not been able to have that feeling, that sense of being connected, *all* the time. It is a sometimes thing, a goal, a hope.

For me, mystical experiences are rare, but wow! They are beautiful. They are experiences of peace, of *knowing* God's grace is all around me.

My mystical experiences have often been after a period of deep sadness, or a time of struggle for direction, and then things just seem to settle into place. Thank you, God!

Those mystic moments don't come very often, maybe because I don't fully trust those feelings.

I am the son and grandson of scientists, and my worldview is very empirical. I try to test and measure things for the truth. Similar to John Wesley, I try to test things against what other things I know, and see if they seem to fit.

## 2 Sermon, September 26, 2010

So, today, I want you to think about what place the mystical might have in your life.

Mysticism may seem a little strange to you, but I invite you to consider that the separation between the physical and the spiritual is not all that great.

In some sense, mystical experiences are a prelude to heaven, a foretaste of what God has in store for us.

### 2. Mystics have used many images for love

Let's look at the Song of Solomon, or the Song of Songs. Many people have found it to be a bit embarrassing to read, because the Song of Solomon is definitely a love poem, and it speaks about physical, carnal love – even if it is in a poetic way.

The reason the Song of Songs is in the Bible is because those who put together the Bible looked at it mystically. It was seen as a parable of union between God and God's people.

"I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens. Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste. He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love. Strengthen me with raisins, refresh me with apples, for I am faint with love. His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me. Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires. Listen! My lover! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice. My lover spoke and said to me, "Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me. See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land. The fig-tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance. Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me." Song of Solomon 2:1-13, NIV.

When you read the Song of Songs, you can imagine yourself as loved by God with that kind of intensity. You can imagine God claiming you as the beloved, the one whom God regards as beautiful. That vision of beauty can be very reassuring.

### 3 Sermon, September 26, 2010

The Song of Songs points us to a reality – the reality of God’s love, which is not a logical construct. God’s love is not a matter for logical debate. Instead, it is something to revel in, something to rejoice in, something to perceive emotionally.

And so it is, too, in the reading from the Gospel of John, which so many people approach logically, but is really meant to defy our logic, and crank up our spiritual imagination.

Just think about the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Nicodemus came by night because he was afraid of his reputation (very practical and logical).

Jesus, who received him, is the light of the world (which transcends logic).

Nicodemus started the conversation with flattery (a very practical way of acting with ordinary people), and started with a logical presupposition: “You could not work these miracles, unless God were with you.”

Jesus replied with a statement that transcends logic: “I tell you for certain that you must be born from above before you can see God’s kingdom!”

Nicodemus misunderstood the phrase “born from above,” and thinks Jesus means “born again.” So, trying to make practical and logical sense of what Jesus was saying, he asked, “How can a grown man ever be born a second time?”

And Jesus answered, in a mystical way, “I tell you for certain that before you can get into God’s kingdom, you must be born not only by water, but by the Spirit. (This is spiritual, not practical.)

“Humans give life to their children. Yet only God’s Spirit can change you into a child of God.” (Aha! Born from above means a kind of new state of being that is connected more deeply to God.)

Jesus goes on: “Don’t be surprised when I say that you must be born from above. Only God’s Spirit gives new life. The Spirit is like the wind that blows wherever it wants to. You can hear the wind, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going.”

#### 4 Sermon, September 26, 2010

(The mystical is always surprising.)

Practical Nicodemus asked, "How can this be?"

Mystical Jesus replied: How can you be a teacher of Israel and not know these things? . . . If you don't believe when I talk to you about things on earth, how can you possibly believe if I talk to you about things in heaven?

(Jesus was talking about something that leads toward heaven!)

Then Jesus spoke the most quoted verse in scripture: "God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them!

(Here Jesus tells a truth of great importance, but so so universal that it's hard to get a handle on it. It's very important, but not logical or practical.)

Then Jesus spoke about the light. Remember that Nicodemus came at night, but Jesus is the light. Jesus said: "The light has come into the world, and people who do evil things are judged guilty because they love the dark more than the light. People who do evil hate the light and won't come to the light, because it clearly shows what they have done. But everyone who lives by the truth will come to the light, because they want others to know that God is really the one doing what they do.

Do you hear any step 1, step 2 . . . here? How do you go about loving light? You can't put your arms around it! You can't capture it! Loving light is a mystical thing. It is very hard to describe, but it is very beautiful.

Evelyn Underhill wrote a book about a hundred years ago that is still the most important book about mysticism. She wrote that the business and method of mysticism is love. You can't write a business plan for it. You can't define it. You can only describe it and experience it. And you can't control when or how you're going to experience it.

Underhill wrote: "It remains a paradox of the mystics that the passivity at which they appear to aim is really a state of the most intense activity: more, that where it is wholly absent no great creative action can take place. In it, the superficial self compels itself to be still, in

## 5 Sermon, September 26, 2010

order that it may liberate another more deep-seated power which is, in the ecstasy of the contemplative genius, raised to the highest pitch of efficiency.

*Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* by Evelyn Underhill (Public Domain)

Seminaries used to teach that sermons should have a poem in them. There's a reason for that. Poetry gets us closer to a mystic experience. Poetry accesses that part of our minds that can love God more easily.

Much praise music is meant to take the place of poetry, in exercising our spirits rather than our minds; our emotions, rather than our thoughts.

So, today I'd like to close with a poem by Edwin Markham, who died in 1940, before I was born. Still his words bring a certain mysticism to non-mystics like me. This one is titled: "A Prayer."

Teach me, Father, how to go  
Softly as the grasses grow;  
Hush my soul to meet the shock  
Of the wild world as a rock;  
But my spirit, propt with power,  
Make as simple as a flower.  
Let the dry heart fill its cup,  
Like a poppy looking up;  
Let life lightly wear her crown  
Like a poppy looking down,  
When its heart is filled with dew,  
And its life begins anew.

Do you hear the mystic impulse, to be simple, united with God as is God's creation?

I invite you to pursue the mystic impulse, to discover it in scripture, and to read some of the spiritual classics by people like Thomas Merton, Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, Brother Lawrence, or Frank Laubach.

There is a mystic somewhere in you, that desires to unite with God and find the beauty that is within you.

Thanks be to God!

6 **Sermon, September 26, 2010**

**This Earth Is A Bow** by St. John of the Cross

You let my sufferings cease, for there was no one who could cure them.

Now let my eyes behold your face for you are our only love.

My spirit's body is rising near – this earth a bow that shot me;  
now lift me into your arms as something precious that you dropped.

My only suffering, from this day forth, will be your divine beauty,  
and you will constantly cure my blessed sight each time you bring your  
face so near to mine and call me bride.

Do not be sad, my old friends; look, these wings are finally stretched and  
laughing.

Our souls are rising near to you - this earth a bow that shot us;  
now lift me into your arms, dear God, like something precious that you  
dropped.