

## **1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

## **Meister Eckhart's sermon "Outward and Inward Morality"**

### **"Superior is the Interior" (Reflections on Meister Eckhart)**

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If you want to join the church, or if you want to learn more about the church, then I'd like to meet with you, I'd like to have lunch with you at noon on the first Sunday of the month. People ask, "Is it difficult to be a member of First United Methodist?" and I say "No, we're not selective. Just look around any Sunday morning." And still, they want to join. People ask, "What's the difference between being a member and just being a visitor?" and I say "The visitors, we treat with absolute respect. The members, we put to work." And still we get new members. And they ask, "What does a Methodist believe?" And I tell them that we are influenced by the quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, and still some want to become members, and I tell them that we have a pluralistic hermeneutic, a variable Christology, and a church ecclesiology that not only permits but encourages debate, and still they want to join. And I tell them how some believe in a future eschatology and some believe in a present eschatology, but whether you believe God's coming to us in the future in a heaven after life, life after death, or whether you believe it is present with us now, we all of us know, whatever we believe about that, there is work for us to do on earth, and we do it. And in spite of the orientation, we do have a church that's growing. Many do join.

See, the reason we're a growing church is not due to the once-a-month membership orientation lecture. But it's because of what happens next, and it's a lot easier to show than it is to tell, and so we take people on a tour. Last Sunday I was taking ten people on a tour, and we had been in the sanctuary, where I can change the color of the organ pipes by flipping a few switches back there. They had seen the Women of Courage mural and

the Women in the Bible quilt and the stained glass panels in the hallway, and we had talked about the youth program and the outreach program and the children's program and the crosswalk service and the senior program and the gifted van that we just got, and the adult classes and the United Methodist Women, on and on, and I pointed to a picture of the Wellington church out there, and I said "This is the Wellington church, and this very day, which was last Sunday, was their first day in their new building. Look at their new building." And somebody said, "That's not the Wellington church, that's the Habitat house." And still they want to join. And they look a lot alike. I might have noticed the bicycle, might not have been in front of the church.

It's easier to show people, sometimes, than to tell them, and I'm going to try to tell you about Meister Eckhart, but I'm going to try to show you as well. He was a priest, a preacher. One of his assignments was Paris, France. He was German. Johannes Meister Eckhart. I'd like to tell you, but then I'd like to kind of show you what he believed. He was a theologian, a mystic, a preacher. He believed in God in such an unusual way. Eckhart's ideas were so different, and the church was concerned and tried to silence him. Put him on trial for heresy. I can tell you what he thought, and I'd like to show you. Basic idea he had, the sacred self. He said, "Where I am, there is God, and where God is, there I am." He didn't just believe that God is with us, he believed that God is in us.

Someone told me a couple of weeks ago, there were some children in the congregation who were talking as I stood up to preach. Some children in the congregation who were talking as I stood up to preach, and one child was heard to say to another, "Is that God up there?" And the other child was heard to answer, "I don't think so, 'cause God would have better hair." According to Eckhart, I am God, or God is in me, bad hair, no hair, gray hair, blond, red, Caucasian, African, Hispanic, the sacred self. God needs us to do what God wants done, and we need God to get it done.

So many putdowns.... I saw this in a newspaper cartoon. A woman with her arms folded said to her husband, "A good husband needs to be strong and caring and sensitive, and you have all but three of those qualities." A church bulletin announced, and we would never do this, "Weight Watchers meeting. It will meet on Tuesday at 7 pm. Please use the large double door in the back of the church." We would never do that. Or the man who had been a Navy Seal who spoke to his grandson's kindergarten class and told them all about the extensive training the Navy Seals have, and the dangerous missions he had been on, and when he finished the hands went up and a little girl on the front row asked the first question, she said, "Can you balance a ball on the end of your nose?"

We may not be able to balance a ball on the end of our nose, and we may have to use the large double door at the back of the building, but God is in us and we are in God. Karen Scalf Linamen, she reflects this in a book she wrote. The title of the book is worth buying the book - *Due to Rising Energy Costs the Light at the End of the Tunnel Has Been Turned Off*. Home Depot, she bought twenty boxes of Pergo laminate. When she got home, she realized they gave her four boxes too many, she didn't pay for. Recently divorced, money was tight, each box was \$24 and she could use the \$96. Turned the four boxes back for an exchange of something else she wanted, or turn it back for a refund,

that's what she could do. \$96, almost a hundred, she could use that. And then she thought to herself, "Have you lost your mind? You don't want four extra boxes. You don't want a hundred bucks you could get by returning them to the store, those boxes. What you want is a clear conscience. What you want is to be a person of integrity. What you want is God's blessing in your life. You aren't going to give all of that up by walking out the door with something that doesn't belong to you." Being honest, hey, that's.... What I was thinking isn't who I am and not who I want to be." So she took it back. The sacred self.

I used to like to watch the show, "Touched By an Angel." It had such a popular appeal, at least to me. It reminded us we're good. We are somebody, and God is invested in us. And that line would be often repeated, I just loved it, how one of the angels would say, "God wants you to fall on your knees and take your future back while you still have a chance." The sacred self is where it starts. A reminder that God is in us. A conscience that reminds us, or an insight on a dark night, or a line in a book that says "God don't make no junk." It's an awareness of who we are, and what's going on in our sacred self.

Paul discovered it. He wrote, "I am the least of all the apostles, unfit to be called apostle, because I persecuted the church, but by the grace of God I am what I am, and God's grace has not been in vain." The sacred self is where it begins, but the next step is such a logical one. It's the holy humanity, not just with me, but also with you and all of us. We have to be on the lookout for the holy humanity and see people that way. Lois Striker had a friend, Crawford Flanders, a preacher, first five years of his ministry he had a plaque on his desk that said, "Win the world for Christ." The next five years, he had a sign that read, "Win five people for Christ." The last years of his ministry, he had a plaque on his desk that said, "Don't lose too many."

A pastor or a parishioner or the people in the world, the ones we can't convert to the way we think, are the ones we don't need to abandon because they have other thoughts. The people who take exception to our most precious propositions may be telling us a truth, that our truth needs to hear, and the bad actors and the sad losers and the lost and the lonely, God is in them, wholly human. I read through the trial. You know, they put Meister Eckhart on trial for heresy. I read through the transcript of the trial, the questions that they asked him and the answers that he gave. And nowhere in any of that did he separate himself from his basic idea that God is in them. He never separated himself from the idea that the God he worshiped is in the accusers who were trying to kick him out of the church.

When we first moved to Colorado, I was a youth pastor in a church in Denver. We had lots of Iliff students who would come to that church, and one of them was some bizarre character whose name was Martin. Martin liked to bring his go-kart and race it around the church parking lot. One evening in early August, it was hot and muggy and the outreach committee met, and I was meeting with them, and the windows were open and we didn't have air conditioning, and so we put a block of ice in a bucket and a fan behind it to blow cool air on us, and Martin was racing his go-kart with his loud engine outside the room where we met. Zoom, it would go by when we were in the middle... Zoom, it would go by again. Harriet was a saint, an absolute saint, never a bad thought or word about

anybody, and she and all of us were getting annoyed with Martin and the go-kart, and she spoke for all of us when she offered advice. She said, "Let's stretch out a wire, about neck-high."

Martin was a pastor in the Rocky Mountain Conference, and he was always a problem. Any church he ever got, it just was a problem, and our bishop got him sent to Illinois, to one of the Illinois conference, and I'll tell you what, there was great celebration when we got rid of him. There was. Three weeks ago at this church we had a visitor who walked up to me and said, "I'm a friend of Martin D\_\_\_, and he told me that you owed him fifty dollars." And I said, "You can tell Martin that I don't owe him anything. What ever happened to him anyway?" I knew it couldn't be good. I forgot holy humanity, God in all of us, even in Martin. And the man said, "He's retired now, he was my pastor. He was a wonderful pastor. Had a great ministry. He's retired now, but he does a lot of good still."

Frederick Buechner said, "In God's holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a pocket handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints. Some of them don't look that way." Two of our church members had their pictures on the front page of the *New York Times* this week. They are Republicans. They went to the caucus. I'm not, but I was proud of them and glad to see them. Ed McMahon wrote a book about his best friend, Johnny Carson. At the end of the book he wrote of all the memories, no moment was sweeter than that night that Elizabeth Taylor was on the show. On that night, Johnny and Elizabeth were talking about astrology. "What's your sign?" he asked her. "I'm a Pisces," she replied. "I married a Pisces," he said. "I'm sure you did," she replied. When Johnny stopped laughing, he asked, "Do you have any new projects you want to talk about?" "No" Elizabeth said, "an old project. You. I just want to thank you for the many years of marvelous entertainment you've given people." The holy humanity. God in Johnny Carson.

Tony Campolo, he heard about this duck lady, she was on the campus where he taught, a woman who quacked like a duck. It was a mental disorder, and people laughed at her. One day as he was standing at a light she came up behind him, quacking. He said, "I don't know why I did it, but I turned and looked into her eyes. I didn't look at her, I looked into her. I looked into her with all the spiritual energy that was in me. I felt myself reading through her eyes to the depths of her being, and in some mystical way I connected with her soul, and there was a oneness between us, and I felt it. We were one in spirit, and I sensed myself loving her. And to my surprise, I sensed that she was loving me back. She stopped quacking. She had never been known to stop quacking before that, but she stopped. And then she looked at the trees and the sky, and she said, slowly, with an air of wonder, "It's beautiful. It's beautiful. It's really beautiful." And the light changed, and someone bumped her, and her head snapped ever so slightly, and she fell back into her previous schizophrenic condition and started quacking again. And I've wondered to myself, what might have happened if I had been able to love her just a little longer. What if we had remained transfixed for just a minute or two more? Could her deliverance have been more lasting?" Holy humanity. Transformation, the holy in each person, and when they snap at us or quack at us, maybe it's because they're hurting, and it's a pain they can't reach. Or when they act out or act up, it could be it's a cry for help or a call for attention.

Holy humanity. Paul believed it. Good news, Christ died for all of us, for each of us, the sacred self, the holy human race.

Finally, magic moments. Before Meister Eckhart died, a group of friends said to him, "Since you're going to leave us, could you give us one final word?" And he said, "I will give you a rule which is the stronghold of all I've ever said. It often happens that what seems trivial to us is more important to God than we think is important. Therefore we ought to take everything God puts on us, everything, not comparing or wondering which is more important or higher or best. We only simply follow where God leads, to do what we are most inclined to do, repeatedly admonished where we are most admonished, encouraged, or drawn to go." If God is the sacred self, and if God is the holy human race, than God is lurking in the moments, in the moments that are magic, and they all are.

Did you get the story of the bagpiper on your computer this week? I did. Hired by the mortuary, asked to play his pipes at a graveside service for a homeless man who had no friends or family. Not familiar with the familiar with the back woods, he found the place, but he was late. The gravediggers were eating their lunch. He looked down. It appeared that the casket was in place. He stood up and put his pipes together and he began to play "Amazing Grace." The workers put down their lunches and the pipes played and the gravediggers began to weep. All of them wept, and the bagpiper put everything into it. He just threw everything into it. And when it was over, he packed up and he headed for the car. His heart was full, his head was low, and that's when he heard it. One of the men said to another of the men, as they leaned against their shovels and pondered, "I never have seen anything like that before, and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years." It was a moment, and it was magic, and when you think about it, what is more magic than for a group of workers to pause and think about the importance of what they do?

Three months it happened. It was time to go back home and to show an ailing stepfather his new great-grandson, and so we went, the two of us, our daughter, her eleven month old son. In a nursing home on the way up, the nursing homes are now made to look like cruise ships so the patrons can live in style. Outside the windows the parking lot was newly completed, paved, and the black asphalt had newly painted yellow lines, and there was a sign up that said, "Visitors Only." Not so many visitors to this place, there could have been more and should have been more. An eleven month old baby takes center stage at a nursing home, and on the way out, an old man who had tennis shoes unblemished, too clean, and a zip-up sweatsuit, it all matched, and he reached out, and the baby reached out. "Come to me," he said, and I stood there and let it happen. I could have stopped it, but I let it happen, what kind of grandfather am I? I should have said no, I should have said, "You might drop him, we don't know you," but the baby smiled and reached out and the old man reached in. It was a moment. It could have ended badly. As I think about it, the old man's face lit up, and all at once he didn't look so old, and he never looked particularly a threat. And he thanked us. It was like we had given him a million dollars. Well, in fact, we had. We gave him a moment with life, reminding him of the continuity. That there is death, and diminishment, but there is life and birth.

If we have ever said to ourselves, "Now, that was a waste of time," or "That was an hour, or an evening, that I'll never get back," we will have to ask ourselves, "What did we miss?" There are no wasted hours, just wasted moments, because we didn't see them when God was there and when we wished we hadn't been.

When a little girl came home from school and announced how she had learned to make babies, her mother thought, "Maybe I ought to visit there and check out the curriculum of the second grade class," until the little girl said, "You make babies by changing the Y to I, and adding ES." It was a moment, and not like it had been expected to be. Moments that are magic are never the ones we expect. Paul writes about the moments when the risen Christ appeared. First to Cephas, and then to the twelve, and then to 500 brothers and sister, and then to James and to all the apostles, and finally, lastly, to Paul. Twenty years after the crucifixion, Christ appeared to Paul. In a moment, to him, while he was holding coats and witnessing a homicide. And the implication is clear. Next, it could be to you. He could live and come again. Keep your eyes open for God, and your ears ready for the magic moments when God is here.

Johannes Meister Eckhart, preacher, theologian, teacher. They thought he was wrong. They put him on trial because he said there is sacredness in the self, God is in all of us. Because he said there is holiness in humanity, God is in each of us and all of us. Because he said there is magic in every moment, God is in the world. They put him on trial for thinking that way. Two hundred years later, somebody found his sermon notes and his lecture notes, and so they published them. Four hundred years after that, in a church in Fort Collins, you have heard a preacher talk about his theology, and they put him on trial for heresy. Was he right?