

## SERMON: Spiritocracy

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Scripture:

### **John 3:1-9**

#### The New Birth

<sup>3</sup> There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

<sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus answered and said to Him, “How can these things be?”

Words of wonder meant to guide us Home. Thanks be to God.

Sermon:

Holy One,

May your Holy Spirit come before and after all that may be spoken in this hour so that what is received is that which only you can give. In Christ’s name I pray.  
Amen.

“The world was already perfect before our struggles to make it so.”

These are the words that came to me as I was completing a poem entitled God’s Plan back in 2002. When I wrote them, I was even surprised that this was how

the poem concluded. Most especially because, as I was writing this, I was still in the military in our post 9/11 state of heightened tensions. We were at war. And some people I really cared about were close to the fighting which led me to feel that I should be there too. But, I wasn't. I was here in a battle of my own trying to reconcile an all Loving God with a world that seemed addicted to anxiety and perpetual fear mongering. But what was getting to me the most wasn't simply trying to make sense of why God seemingly allows these things to happen. It was the increasing suspicion that despite my best efforts, I might very well be part of the problem.

When we started this journey a few weeks ago by talking about expressing the image of the invisible God, we discussed how if God is invisible and we are in God's image then the greatest part of who we are must be invisible as well and that the invisible part of us that people cannot see is the story of our becoming. And we acknowledged that unless we reveal ourselves to others, they can only know very little about the reality of who we are. Admittedly, for many of us to reveal what others cannot see means revisiting traumas that we've experienced or perpetuated. And that can be scary. But, on the other side of that revelation is the reconnection with our pretrauma selves.

Then last week, we went a little deeper into the idea of what I called the "aleness gap" and how it is out of that inner emptiness or illusion of aleness that we often suffer and cause suffering. But through true nonjudgmental friendship and acceptance--even from our pets--we can be listened into being. And it is when we are listened into being that we build the capacity to listen others into being as well.

And so now, we are at the place in our conversational journey where we ask ourselves, "So now what?" How do we apply this information to our lives for the betterment of ourselves and others? And what are the consequences if we do nothing with what we're learning?

[Ask folks out loud what the hardest thing is for them about their spiritual practice]

I am going to ask a few of you to be bold and share in one word what the hardest part of putting your spiritual ideals into practice is?

[Holy Spirit]

In a couple of the small groups that I am a part of, we have taken on the subject of evil. What is it? Who is responsible for it? Can there be an end to evil while still leaving room for free will? What does it mean in the Lord's Prayer when we ask of our Creator, "Lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil."? Are there degrees to evil?

Of course these are types of questions that people have been thinking about for as long as there have been people. So, we had no illusions that we were going to solve the question of evil in our time together. But, we did hit on some ideas that I think will serve us in our conversation today.

One of them was an idea I came across a dozen or so years ago when I read the book, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*, by M. Scott Peck. In this book and his most famous book, *The Road Less Traveled*, Peck examines the nature of evil from his psychological perspective and determines that evil is no less than the highest form of laziness.

Now when some people hear this description of evil it generally takes them to one of two places. And inevitably, someone will ask, “But what about Hitler?” or some other figure in history who acquired and subsequently abused their power. “Were they lazy? And even though there’s a general consensus that people like Hitler were evil, people tend to think that it is impossible for someone to be as active as they were and be considered lazy.

But to challenge that notion, I want to invite anyone who might be thinking along these lines to consider the principle of “negative work” in physics.

Negative work is essentially that action which dissipates energy from a system.

And as you would imagine, positive work is that action which contributes energy to a system.

Now, taking this idea and applying it philosophically, for all of the actions that Hitler and other abusers of power have done, would you say that they dissipated energy from the human system or contributed to it?

I know what I think about it. And so, when I read M. Scott Peck’s perspective on evil as being the highest form of laziness, it was very easy for my brain to see highly active abusers of power as perpetrators of evil.

The second place people tend to go when they’ve heard me sharing Peck’s thoughts on evil as laziness, is the self-reflective route. If evil is laziness does that mean I am perpetrating evil when I don’t feel like folding the laundry or I sleep in on a Saturday morning? And, I can see how one’s mind can go there when considering that we live in a society where people are encouraged to wear exhaustion like a badge of honor. But no, putting your socks in the sock drawer without stuffing them into one another does not make you evil. No, rather the evil that Peck is referring to is what he describes as “anti-love”, or laziness carried to its ultimate, extraordinary extreme.

This is how he sums up his perspective on evil in *The Road Less Traveled*.

“I define evil, then, as the exercise of political power--that is, the imposition of one’s will upon others by overt or covert coercion--in order to avoid extending one’s self for the purpose of nurturing spiritual growth. Ordinary laziness is nonlove; evil is anti-love.”

So I would say that when we are being spiritually lazy, we wouldn’t fall into the evil category. However, I would say that Non-love approaching the evil of anti-love is the laziness that:

- Keeps us from doing the most loving thing in a situation because it would be too much work
- Prevents us from hearing another person’s point of view in a discussion
- Causes us to see where everyone else needs to change but us
- Allows us to use prejudices to gauge people rather than getting to know them for who they are
- Distracts us from becoming a more loving person because we don’t want to put in the work to change
- Makes us work so hard to “fake” being strong because we are too lazy to find true inner strength
- Convinces us that it is okay to trick others into doing what we want them to do for our sole benefit

Of course, I don’t want you to confuse his use of the word political to mean that there is something inherently evil about political power. However, I would agree with Peck that imposing such power, wherever one might have it, with the sole intent of avoiding extending one’s self spiritually is evil. And, it is the cause of way too much harm and trauma in our society.

To put it into perspective, Peck says, “[Evil people] will take any action in their power to protect their own laziness, to preserve the integrity of their sick self. Rather than nurturing others, they will actually destroy others in this cause. If necessary, they will even kill to escape the pain of their own spiritual growth.”

Not to pick on Hitler too much more. But, in this light, I would expect that Peck would say that all of the devastation that proceeded from Hitler’s abuse of political power came out of his incredible need to escape the pain of his own spiritual growth. And given this assumption, I can only conclude that when observed through that same lens, I too would be headed toward evil if I were to try to escape the pain of my own spiritual growth or refuse to nurture it in others. Thus making me a part of the problem at my level of influence. As Edmund Burke said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing.”

Addiction, trauma, and child development expert and the author of *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, Dr. Gabor Mate says that “The attempt to escape from pain, is what creates more pain,” and that “at the core of every addiction is an emptiness based in abject fear. The addict dreads and abhors the present moment; they bend feverishly only toward the next time, the moment when their brain, infused with their drug of choice, will briefly experience itself as liberated from the burden of the past and the fear of the future—the two elements that make the present intolerable.”

The beauty of Dr. Mate’s awareness though is that he makes the point of letting his readers and listeners know that addiction, which he sees as either a trauma response or a reaction to a painful experience, is not only manifest in the use of controlled substances. But also, in any behavior that one does to hide from the pain of being present with one’s inner life and with others even if people are in the room with them. In his work, he employs what he calls “compassionate inquiry” to do what amounts to listening people into being. And in his documentary, *The Wisdom of Trauma*, where you can watch him put this work into practice, he says that beneath the trauma of every addicted person is a perfect person who has not yet had the opportunity to be expressed.

When I heard that, I wondered what kind of society we could experience if more of us could witness others that way.

As I have lifted up many times in other sermons, in the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for God’s kingdom to come and for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are literally asking for God’s Way to take precedence in the working out of our lives. In other words, we are asking to be governed by God--what I am calling a Spiritocracy. Not to be confused with a theocracy which is when the government is run by priests or other religious figures who think that they rule on behalf of God.

Rather, what I mean by a Spiritocracy, is each individual person living as one born of the Spirit--as Jesus said to Nicodemus--or as Paul refers to in Romans 8 where he says that, “The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.”

The word translated as flesh in these writings comes from the Greek word *sarx*, which in this case of this passage I am referring to, could be translated as “human nature apart from divine influence”.

To live in a Spiritocracy is to know that you have no nature apart from the divine influence.

In his 1990 book *Memories & Visions of Paradise*, Richard Heinberg points out that 'Every religion begins with the recognition that human consciousness has been separated from the divine Source, that a former sense of oneness has been lost. Everywhere in religion and myth there is an acknowledgment that we have departed from an original innocence and can return to it only through the resolution of some profound inner discord. The cause of the Fall is described variously as disobedience, as the eating of a forbidden fruit and as spiritual amnesia'.

Recently, I quoted Richard Rohr who said, "Knowing our true identity as sons and daughters of God can save us thousands of dollars in psychotherapy. Knowing that everyone else is a child of God— and treating them as such—can save the world!"

I haven't had a chance to talk to him about it. But, if someone were to ask me what the mentality of one who is governed by a Spiritocracy was, I would point them to that statement because to the citizens of the Spiritocracy, their primary service to their community is to remember their true identity and then in any way they to invite others into that remembrance. So if M. Scott Peck is right that evil actions are ultimately the result of trying to escape the pain of spiritual growth, then remembering our true identity and reminding others of theirs would be the essence of overcoming evil with good as we have been instructed in Romans 12:21.

In the two sermons leading up to this one, I shared with you all my Father's awareness that he arrived to as he was approaching death. He called it "becoming a we". When he first mentioned it to me, I was on the phone with him standing over the stove stirring a pot of macaroni.

Usually, I called him because he had this idea in his head that the children were supposed to call the parents. And for the parents to have to call the children outside of emergency situations was somehow embarrassing. But, this time he did call me. So, when I saw his number, I thought it was my stepmom calling to tell me that he had gotten worse. But instead, it was him sounding more excited than I may have ever heard him. And he was calling me for a sanity check.

For weeks now, he could barely get out of bed. Which for a workaholic like my father, was torture. In fact, he had admitted to me once that he kept active to avoid thinking. The man could not sit still. But life had forced him to now. And so he thought and thought and thought until he arrived at this idea that all of the trauma he had suffered and all of the trauma he perpetuated had the illusion of "apartness" or separation as its root.

He said that when he realized this all of a sudden everything about his life made sense to him. But at the same time he thought that if he said what he was thinking out loud he might sound crazy. So, he figured he'd share it with me first since I always thought about these kinds of things.

What he didn't know was that right before he called, I felt this feeling come over me as if he had walked in the kitchen and was standing behind me. I had never felt anything like it in my life. It was his presence. Throughout my life, our relationship was largely characterized by his absence--often even when he was in the same room. But somehow, I felt this wave of closeness that spanned the 1500 mile physical distance between us and then he called.

"'He, She, We'. That's what I would call the book I will write if I survive this cancer. Because even the loneliest person in the world comes from 'a We'. I was thinking about it. If I was left in the woods as a child and I survived somehow without having ever remembered seeing another human, I could tell myself that I was alone. But even then I would be wrong. I had to come from somewhere. I had to come from someone who was with another someone. I had to come from 'We'. I think that this has something to do with God saying, "Let us make man and woman in OUR image. Everything comes from "We". Does that sound crazy?"

I assured him that it didn't sound crazy at all and that it probably was the sanest thing I ever heard him say. Which we laughed about.

"Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

Unless God is WITH him

Unless God is WITH US

Unless God is WITH YOU

In the farewell discourses John's gospel--the last lessons Jesus shares before his betrayal--in chapter 15:5,6 it says, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you *are* the branches. Those who abide in Me, and I in them, bear much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

Abiding is the deepest expression of being with. It is manifest love and it is the enduring posture of the citizens of the Spiritocracy. It is out of this abiding that every good and perfect gift comes.

"The world was already perfect before our struggles to make it so."

Since writing that line, I have been on a journey to understand what that means. I think I'm finally starting to get it.

The first line of that same poem is, "It started in the beginning and it ended in the beginning."

I invite you to consider the possibility that as citizens of the Spiritocracy, our work here is to make contact with the beginning--the world that was already perfect before our struggle to make it so and live it into the present moment with God and the rest of Creation.

[Holy Spirit]

A couple of years ago one of our moderators, Charley Rastle shared a poem by David Whyte entitled, "What to Remember When Waking" as their opening for church council. I will share a portion of it as we prepare our hearts for Communion. It says:

What you can plan is too small for you to live.  
What you can live wholeheartedly will make plans enough  
for the vitality hidden in your sleep.

To be human is to become visible  
while carrying what is hidden as a gift to others.  
To remember the other world in this world  
is to live in your true inheritance.

You are not a troubled guest on this earth,  
you are not an accident amidst other accidents  
you were invited from another and greater night  
than the one from which you have just emerged.