

## Bare Essentials September 7, 2008

Often, when Mike and I are going on a trip, he will remind me not to take everything I own with me. “Just take what you really need,” he’ll say. “Take the bare essentials.” He says that because I have a tendency to pack way too much stuff—far more than I usually need, but I rationalize the whole thing by determining that his definition of “bare essentials” and mine are entirely different.

It occurs to me that some of us do the same thing when it comes to our faith—we carry along way too much stuff, far more than we might actually need. So that’s what I want us to think about together this morning. What is absolutely essential to incorporate into our faith in order for it to be real? What is excess baggage? And how do we differentiate between the two?

Now I have to be totally honest and say that this varies from person to person. What is essential for one of us may not be the same for another of us, and that’s OK. If I had to start with a basic, it would be this: that if we want to find our purpose in being and to discover deeper meaning in life, then we will find ourselves on a faith journey. However, each of us has to find our own faith path, and walk our own journey. Yours will not be the same as mine, nor will mine be like yours.

This really came home to me a number of years ago when I was reading and studying a book that took our Myers-Briggs personality types and translated them into four different spirituality types. I really believe that there are far more variations than just four, but for the purposes of the class I was leading, that was a helpful starting place. Anyway, the four types were quite different, and the book included exercises for each spirituality type to try to see if this did resonate with them.

I have to tell you that the results were astounding as each person shared his or her experience of experimenting with one exercise or another. It really opened them up to a deeper spiritual experience, to greater mystery than they said they had experienced before. So, I do believe we each have to follow our own path.

Obviously, not everyone agrees with me. Any of us who have been involved in a church or faith community previously know that sometimes there are certain “givens” that everyone is assumed to profess or possess. From my days of being at St. Luke’s every Sunday morning, I’m aware that during each service, everyone stands to repeat together what is called the creed, which is a statement of beliefs—each phrase beginning with the words “I believe...” and continuing to say what is believed in—God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church, and more.

I would often have conversations with people in the congregation who confessed to me that they felt guilty because they could not say the words they were

being asked to say,—at least not in good faith. They had questions, or didn’t really understand exactly what they were supposedly professing. Was this really essential? Did they have to believe all they were asked to say in order to be there?

It may have been wrong for me to say, but I responded with a “no.” In fact, I conveyed to them my conviction that, because they were skeptical or questioning what was being said, they were really on their journey and taking their faith seriously instead of saying words that lacked meaning for them. I felt they were acting with integrity, and encouraged them to keep asking the questions and exploring what was necessary for them. Nonetheless, the question remained for them and for me as to whether or not these were the essentials necessary to qualify as being Christian.

I’ve had numerous such experiences over the years. Not too long ago, I was speaking in another state, and someone in the audience asked if The Garden required those who attend here to profess Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. You probably can imagine the uproar when I said “no.” And why did I say “no?”

I answered that way because I know that my path has involved a connection with Jesus, but I really believe that there are many spiritual paths, and I don’t want to discredit any other path as being legitimate for those who happen to be on it.

We’ve talked about that here before, and also explored why we don’t actually have “members” of The Garden. There’s one primary reason: as human beings, we are children of God, and thus are already members of God’s family. If you’re here, you’re in—no questions asked. There is no litmus test to pass or hoops through which to jump in order to be here. As Glide Church in San Francisco says each week, “God made you; we love you; you’re welcome here.”

Furthermore, we all come from different backgrounds and have varied faith experiences, or maybe none at all. My hunch is that we share very similar values, but perhaps quite different beliefs. This really comes out when we do our Spiritual Statement workshops, as our statements often reflect that our values are much more alike than we ever imagine, but the beliefs that we’re able to state are far different from one another, and in my view, that’s OK. We aren’t here to tell anybody what to believe, only hopefully to encourage and inspire each of us to be on the journey of discovery.

So, OK, given all that...what are the basic essentials? In fact, you may be saying to yourself, “McCoy, if you say we don’t have to buy into all the creeds or professions of the church, then is there no baseline? Is there nothing on which our faith must be founded?”

My response has to be “Yes there is at least one basic for me, and that is love—the kind of love Jesus talked about—the kind of love that God sheds on each of us.” For me, the Bible passage we have for this morning names the absolute basic ingredient for our spiritual

journey—love. This is the way the passage known as the Great Commandment reads:

One of the religion scholars came up. Hearing the lively exchange of question and answer and seeing how sharp Jesus was in his answers, he put in his question: “Which is most important of all the commandments?”

Jesus answered, “The first in importance is, ‘Listen, Israel. The Lord your God is one, so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy. And here is the second: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ There is no other commandment that ranks with these.”

Let’s think about what Jesus said in bringing these two commandments together. The common thread is love, and love in three ways: of God, of one another, and of ourselves. In other words, it’s all about loving relationships, and our relationship with God is connected to and intertwined with our relationship with our brothers and sisters and with ourselves. The love Jesus is talking about is the kind of love God has for us—the agape kind of love—love that is freely given, not coerced or forced, not obligatory, but totally voluntary. Our response to God is to be of the same kind, for God leaves us free to choose whether or not we will return that love and respond in love.

Probably the best, maybe the only way, we see our capacity to love God in action is by the way we interact with and love one another. If there is something in the way of our relationship with a family member, a co-worker, a friend, then that creates a blockade in our relationship with God. If in one way or another, we are not able to love and affirm ourselves—in a healthy way, then that, too, can create a barrier in our connection with God.

The kind of love that God has for us sounds lofty, and is probably something we can never attain to the fullest, but it seems to me that a big part of our mission in life is to live in as loving a way—which I believe to be the way Jesus lived—as we possibly can. The writer Paul gave what I believe to be the best exposition of what Jesus meant by love in his writing to the Corinthians. You may be familiar with the words, but see and hear them again, and maybe with new eyes:

“Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up, but its faith, hope, and patience never fail...Love is eternal.”

In my mind, if there is any such thing as a litmus test when it comes to the end of our lives, I believe it will be simply “Did we love—did we love God, our neighbors—including everyone, did we love ourselves?” I think that’s the basic essential for life and faith. How about you?

Closing:

Henri Nouwen once said, “The unfathomable mystery of God is that God is a Lover who wants to be

loved.” The only thing I would add is this: God also wants us to love one another as we love ourselves. As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray we can begin to love as we’re created to love.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.