
Over the last couple weeks Christina and I have used our sermon time to express the need for a more authentic existence with God and that the serious work of undertaking a spiritual journey not only enhances ourselves and our ability to work in the world, but may also save our flagging church. After my sermon a couple weeks ago I had a number of folks come up to me and say something to the effect that ‘PPUMC is one of the few places that does take spirituality seriously, and that a call to authentic interaction with God in this place is a bit like preaching to the choir.’ I think that’s true relative to other churches, but other churches are a weak measuring stick – I think we can go beyond the normative church experience and start to push the envelope about what it means to live lives of significance together; to encourage and to empower one another to be radical, unconditional lovers. I don’t think our struggle, here at PPUMC, is about believing that that is possible – I think our struggle is literally finding the time to commit to such an endeavor. Our busyness is, I think generally speaking, our biggest stumbling block. Because make no mistake, a spiritual journey takes time and effort and commitment – in the same way that building a house does, or getting in shape, or learning another language.

One way into this journey, an almost universal first step in all spiritual traditions, is taking time for self-reflection. “Know thyself.” It is in understanding our ‘selves’ that we begin to see where we struggle and where we are strong, and it is with that knowledge that we can begin to find our way. Today, and the next two weeks, I’ll be preaching a sermon series on a particular pattern that may be able to help us understand self-reflection and the journey toward God. This pattern is an ancient one, but shows up repeatedly in different fields of study throughout history – from the philosophy of Plato, to the psychology of Maslow, to the theology of

Kierkegaard and others. It is a simple observation about the human being and that we have three observable modes or series of needs, or challenges, that define much of our behavior and thought. The first, and most simple layer, is the material one. It is the thought and the energy that we put into our physical well being. It deals almost exclusively with things external to our ‘selves,’ we’ll be talking in a minute about what happens when that runs amok. The second is the social sphere, and deals with our interests in being respected and honored and loved – we’ll talk about that more next week. Finally, the third phase is about transcendence, or self-actualization, or religiousness – it’s described in various ways, but it has to do with our ability to be free from social and material enslavement. Not that social or material needs are necessarily bad, they’re not, but rather free from our being controlled by them. At any rate, it’s a little different in that it is our destination and not necessarily something that itself needs to be overcome, as are the first two.

You can see that reflected in our scripture passage today. The temptation of Jesus involves three things – the first two are material: bread and physical safety (the two iconic representations of material well-being: food and safety) and the last one is about power – I’ll give you the kingdoms of the world to rule. Jesus says no to all of them – be gone Devil, I will go my own way. And so he does. And so must we, if we are to follow him.

So let’s take a few minutes this morning and think about that first level, the level of material needs. Kierkegaard called this phase the ‘aesthetic mode,’ referring more to the appreciation of external things, rather than art or beauty as the word tends to be used now. Now, I can’t hope in the next few minutes to do any justice to this topic at all – but I do hope to give you the tip of the iceberg and to pique your interest. There is no

Sunday School today, but I will be holding an adult ed conversation afterwards at the usual time for anyone who is interested in exploring this further.

Of the three modes this is by far the easiest to understand and it is also the easiest to see how it runs amok. It is in the running amok that we are interested – we all have material needs, for we are, in part, physical creatures – but it is rather common and very easy for our material things to get in the way of our spiritual journey. This is why, historically, it is not the wealthy that take Jesus’ message and the spiritual journey seriously, but the poor and those who have little. It’s not so easy to be tempted when you have little to lose.

When we run amok here, Kierkegaard called this being an “asthete,” we tend to give undue significance to material or external things. I’m going to share with you five qualities of a life run amok in this category and by the end I believe you will begin to recognize what I am describing. Now, there are many ways of being an aesthete but there are several features in common so they describe what would be aesthetic ‘way of life.’¹

First, an aesthetic life is a life based on immediacy. The person takes one’s immediate endowments and seeks to gratify them. Now enjoyment is natural but here it dominates and avoids choice. I am what I am, I can’t help my nature, I act spontaneously according to what I am, seeking to find life by gratification.

Second, it’s a life that lacks continuity, that is, something that holds it all together and makes it a single life. Because the aesthete is forever seeking some form of gratification. It may be crude, it may be refined, but

¹ The following items describing the “aesthete” are from notes taken in the course “Prolegomena to Theology” by Dr. Diogenes Allen, professor at Princeton Seminary. The substance of this argument can be read in Dr. Allen’s book *Three Outsiders*.

it's a life that moves from one thing to another to another to another and avoids commitment to anything. Nothing is more horrible to an aesthete than commitment because than you're tied down, and what you're tied down to might lose its charm or interest and one wants gratification and fun and thrills. So it's a life made up of episodes, episodes of gratification – it's not a life that makes up a theme. You can compare it to beads on a string, the life is just a bit of string with episodes like individual beads strung along it which have no real relationship with one another.

Third, it's a life based on what is accidental. If a person happens to have a talent like a good voice, athletic skill, brains, good looks, and builds a life on one of these – than their happiness is based on an accident – the accident of having one of those things. And it also depends on the accident of keeping those things, and a life based on an accident can be swept away by an accident. For example, what happens when you lose your good looks and think about how desperate some people are, both men and women, but particularly women, who's life in our society is so based upon their looks and that desperate effort to hold of the years – but it slips away, no matter what you do. Or a voice, you had a great voice, but you lost that voice and now where are you? Or a promising athlete and an injury and you can't go on anymore. Or brainpower, and all you have to do is have a stroke and where is that brain now? An accident has taken away the basis for your existence. So then a life that is based on accidents can be lost by an accident and that identity ceases to be.

Fourth, an aesthete judges everything on the basis of it being interesting. That's the bottom line category, that spans an attitude toward all things and events – either it interests me or it doesn't interest me. That's the way the world is divided up, those two categories, that's all that matters.

The issue of whether it's true or false, honorable or good, despicable – doesn't matter, it's only a question of whether it interests me or it doesn't interest me. The aesthete wants to be fascinated, wants to be thrilled, wants the extraordinary, wants to be excited, wants to be turned-on, wants to be entertained – now, of course all of us want these things – but here they DOMINATE a life.

Fifth, the aesthete is more concerned with the external – there's more concern with the environment changing than with changing oneself. The aesthetes attitude is something like this, “my troubles would be over if only I had a better job or if my wife were more understanding or if I just had a bit of luck.” The success of life depends on others on circumstances around you being what you want them to be. Not on what happens within your own life, it's the outside that needs to be arranged properly and if it isn't – gripe, gripe, gripe, gripe. The success of life is defined by what is external. For me to be what I am depends on what happens outside of me.

Now if you think what I am describing here is simply a teenager – then you'd be about right. We have all been aesthetes in our lives, the question is whether or not we ever move out of that mode of existence on our spiritual journey to something else. It is of course possible to never move out of it though – and I bet every one of us in this room knows someone beyond adolescents who identify with the qualities of an aesthete. If you don't, go find a tabloid to read and you'll see adults reveling in an aesthetic lifestyle. I'm not sharing this so that we can become judges of one another – God loves us all – but rather so that we may recognize patterns in ourselves, in our own self-examinations.

The problem with being an aesthete is that ultimately, it is a profoundly unhappy life. The constant looming threat of boredom drives the

aesthete to ever find new things, new ways of being excited and thrilled.

The constant avoidance of commitment threatens and severs relationships that are no longer ‘useful.’ The threat of losing those accidents upon which our life is built drives us to ever more radical and destructive behavior toward ourselves and those around us. In the end, an aesthetic existence is a life where we cover our pain and anxiety with the morphine of novelty and titillation.

“No,” said Jesus. “There’s more to life than bread.” Or, in my case, chocolate. When we begin to feel the anxiety that comes from a life lived aesthetically – either by the loss of our accidental quality that our life was built on, or by the fatigue that comes from chasing novelty – we become motivated to find another way to live. Another way of seeing the world. We reach that place by embracing commitment and responsibility, even if it is boring, even if it sacrifices our sense of control. We turn to values that are inward, rather than external. Next week, we will explore that phase – one that is likely far more familiar to many of us – but one that is, in the end, just as uncomfortable and pushes us on to something more.