

Exploring Progressive Christianity 2
Stillness is the Key, God is Not a Christian, Being Peace
July 28, 2024
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We live in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, which is north of Tulsa. Let's imagine for a minute that the sacred purpose of life in Bartlesville is to get to Tulsa. To help people do this, we gather a group of people, and together, we determine the best route from Bartlesville to Tulsa. We decide it is best to take Highway 75 South. So, we write that down in our Sacred Book. Of course, the directions would specify which exits to take if a person wanted to go downtown or if they wanted to go to one of the hospitals or the airport.

The Sacred Book would include routes for travelers who encounter icy roads or a traffic accident. And of course, there would be alternate directions for people, like me, who would rather ride a bike to Tulsa. 75 South isn't a great bike route. The one thing all the routes would have in common, though, is that they all include going south. So, we write it all down in our Sacred Book.

But what about the folks who live in Okmulgee? Okmulgeans, it turns out, have the same sacred purpose as Bartians, to get to Tulsa. But they need to travel north, not south to get to Tulsa. If people who live in Okmulgee pick up our Sacred Book and understand it as *the one and only* Sacred Book, they will open it up and promptly drive south on 75. They will be in Texas before they know it, passing through many Oklahoma towns on their way and none of them will be Tulsa.

For those of us who live in Bartlesville, the Sacred Book is very helpful and will help us fulfill our sacred purpose of getting to Tulsa, but it won't do a thing to help our neighbors in Okmulgee fulfill their sacred purpose. They will need to look elsewhere. They will need to take another route or path to get to Tulsa. The people in Pryor will need another route. The people in Stillwater will need yet another.

The Progressive Christianity Core Value #2 allows us to explore what we believe about different paths to our sacred purpose, which, it turns out, is not to get to Tulsa. Here, again, is Core Value #2:

Progressive Christians "Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness, Oneness and Unity of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom, including Earth, in our spiritual journey."

This Core Value celebrates that there are many spiritual paths. Each path is unique, each has its own beliefs and rituals, and many have their own sacred book. This Core Value reminds us that other traditions offer wisdom we can use on our journeys. The more we learn about other paths to the Sacred, the easier it is to see, that while our paths are unique, the sacred purpose of all human beings is the same.

Our texts this morning are from several traditions. The first is printed in your bulletin at the top of the right side:

“All that you behold, that which comprises both god and man, is one---we are the parts of one great body.” Seneca

Seneca was a Stoic philosopher of ancient Rome. His work is considered one of the most important bodies of material related to Stoicism. The ancient Stoics considered themselves the heirs of the moral philosophy of Socrates and the natural philosophy of Heraclitus of Ephesus. Stoicism has had a lasting impact on the history of thought, influencing the development of Christian morality and theology, and modern philosophy. Stoicism can be broadly explained in three essential beliefs: (1) that virtue is sufficient for happiness, (2) that other so-called goods should be regarded with indifference, and (3) that the world is providentially ordered by God.

After centuries of relative neglect, Seneca’s philosophy has been rediscovered in the last few decades. In part, this renewed interest is the result of a reexamination of Roman culture. It is also driven by a fuller understanding of Greek Hellenistic philosophy and by recent developments in contemporary ethics, including a renewed interest in the theory of emotions, roles, relationships, and the fellowship of all human beings.¹ A close reading of his work would allow us to see the relevance of Seneca’s work to our concerns today. This quote from Seneca highlights the Stoic belief in the connectedness of all of creation. We are one.

Staying with Stoicism for a moment, modern Stoic and author Ryan Holiday tells a story about astronaut Edgar Mitchell. In Holiday’s book, *Stillness Is the Key*, he wrote, “In 1971, the astronaut Edgar Mitchell was launched into space. From 239,000 miles up, he stared down at the tiny blue marble that is our planet and felt something wash over him. It was, he said later, ‘an instant global consciousness, a people orientation, an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world, and a compulsion to do something about it.’”

Holiday continues, “So far away, the squabbles of the earth suddenly seemed petty. The differences between nations and races fell away, the false urgency of trivial problems disappeared. What was left was a sense of connectedness and compassion for everyone and everything. All Mitchell could think of, when he looked at the planet from the quiet, weightless cabin of his spaceship, was grabbing every politician by the neck and pulling them up there to point and say, ‘Look at that you son of a bitch.’ Not that he was angry. On the contrary, he was the calmest and most serene he had ever been. He wanted them---the leaders, the people who are supposed to work on behalf of their fellow citizens---to have the same realization he was having: the realization that we are all one, that we are all in this together, and that this fact is the only thing that truly matters.”² We are one.

¹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/seneca/>, accessed 7/26/24.

² Holiday, Ryan, *Stillness Is the Key*, (London: Profile Books, 2019), 157-58.

Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Buddhist monk, peace activist, author, poet and teacher, would most certainly agree with these Stoics. In his 1987 book, *Being Peace*, he wrote about the letters he received at the monastery in France from people in refugee camps in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The letters were from “boat people.” He told this story,

“There are many young girls, boat people, who are raped by sea pirates...One day we received a letter telling us about a young girl on a small boat who was raped by a Thai pirate. She was only twelve, and she jumped into the ocean and drowned herself. When you first learn of something like that, you get angry at the pirate. You naturally take the side of the girl. As you look more deeply you will see it differently. If you take the side of the girl, then it is easy. You have only to take a gun and shoot the pirate. But we cannot do that.

In my meditation, I saw that if I had been born in the village of the pirate and raised in the same conditions as he was, I am now the pirate. There is a great likelihood that I would become a pirate. I cannot condemn myself so easily. In my meditation, I saw that many babies are born along the Gulf of Siam, hundreds every day, and if we educators, social workers, politicians, and others do not do something about the situation, in twenty-five years a number of them will become sea pirates. That is certain. If you or I were born today in those fishing villages, we might become sea pirates in twenty-five years. If you take a gun and shoot the pirate, you shoot all of us, because all of us are to some extent responsible for this state of affairs.”³ We are one.

Just as Thich Nhat Hanh would agree with the Stoics, so would Archbishop Desmond Tutu agree with him. Tutu was a Christian. He was a South African Anglican Bishop and human rights activist. He wrote and spoke often about the concept of Ubuntu. In his essay titled, “Ubuntu: On the Nature of Human Community,” included in his book *God is Not a Christian*, he wrote,

“In our African...worldview, we have something called *ubuntu*...“A person is a person through other persons.” We need other human beings for us to learn how to be human, for none of us comes fully formed into the world. We would not know how to talk, to walk, to think, to eat as human beings unless we learned how to do these things from other human beings. For us, the solitary human being is a contradiction in terms.

Ubuntu is the essence of being human. It speaks of how my humanity is caught up and bound up inextricably with yours. It says, not as Descartes did, “I think, therefore I am” but rather, “I am because I belong.” I need other human beings in order to be human. The completely self-sufficient human being is subhuman. I can be me only if you are fully you. I am because we are, for we are made for togetherness, for family. We are made for complementarity. We are created for a delicate network of relationships, of

³ Hanh, Thich Nhat, *Being Peace*, (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987), 61-2.

interdependence with our fellow human beings, with the rest of creation. I have gifts that you don't have, and you have gifts that I don't have. We are different in order to know our need of each other. To be human is to be dependent."⁴ We are one.

These examples from Stoicism, Buddhism, and Christianity illustrate that we are not one because we believe the same things, but because we are alive and, as human beings, we have the same sacred purpose: to see that all of life is connected and for our actions to reflect the truth, that we are all part of what is Sacred. And what is really beautiful is that each of our paths will guide us to do that differently.

Toward the end of Thich Nhat Hanh's, *Being Peace*, he talks about his hope for American Buddhism and his belief that American Buddhism will be a new kind of Buddhism. He writes, "Buddhism is not one. The teaching of Buddhism is many. When Buddhism enters one country, that country always acquires a new form of Buddhism...the Chinese have their own Buddha, Tibetans have their own Buddha, and also the teaching is different. The teaching of Buddhism in this country is different from in other countries. Buddhism, in order to be Buddhism, must be suitable, appropriate to the psychology and the culture of the society it serves."⁵

We don't talk much about that in our churches. We don't talk about the need for spirituality to match the context, but this way of understanding spirituality gets at the heart of today's Core Value. It does not require us to change what we believe about following Jesus' ways and what that calls us to. It encourages us to recognize that Jesus wasn't the only teacher with truth and wisdom to share. There are teachers everywhere. I mentioned last week that I imagine that each of these Core Values answers a question. This one answers the question, "Do we/Can we find wisdom from teachers other than Jesus?"

There is wisdom everywhere: in other spiritual, philosophical, and religious traditions, children's books, bee hives, gardens, life stories, and in every human being and creature with whom we share this planet. Life shows us that we are all connected. We are one. We just talk about it differently.

In his book *Universal Christ*, Franciscan Priest, Richard Rohr describes the nature of all Being in three virtues: love, hope, and faithfulness. He writes, "...love is always hopeful and faithful, hope is always loving and faithful, and faith is always loving and hopeful. They are the very nature of God and thus of all Being. Such wholeness is personified in the cosmos as Christ, and in human history as Jesus."

He writes further, "No one religion will ever encompass the depth of such faith. No ethnicity has a monopoly on hope. No nationality can control or limit this Flow of such universal love."

⁴ Tutu, Desmond, "Ubuntu: On the Nature of Human Community," in *God is Not a Christian*, (Rider: 2011), eBook.

⁵ Hanh, 84.

Author and journalist Jon Hochschartner reflecting on Rohr's idea of the Universalist Christ wrote this in an essay for Progressive Christianity, "What if Christ is a name for the transcendent within of every 'thing' in the universe?" He recalls Rohr's words, "What if Christ is a name for the immense spaciousness of all true Love? What if Christ refers to an infinite horizon that pulls us from within and pulls us forward too? What if Christ is another name for everything — in its fullness?" Hochschartner continues, "My favorite spiritual author is a Hindu perennialist named Eknath Easwaran. He talks about 'the Christ within,' a phrase he uses interchangeably with Krishna...When Easwaran talks about Christ in this way, it seems clear he's not talking about a first-century preacher subject to the prejudices of time and place, but, rather, something else." That something else is the Oneness in each of us. We are one.

This truth, taught all over the world, in all times and places, ought to impact not only how we treat each other, but how we understand inclusion, especially as we move into the next season of being the Church. From its beginning, DCC has been an inclusive spiritual community. In the last 7 ½ years, we have worked hard to make sure the Bartlesville community knows that this church is a place of welcome for all who love and seek to be loved. A lot of the welcome we have had the privilege of practicing has been wide welcome to the Queer Community and we have seen the ways in which that has made our church fuller and richer. We have welcomed so many amazing people who believe different things, and who come because they want to be part of our sacred purpose. That purpose is rooted in love, and we know that it is love that connects us to each other and to the Sacred.

In the coming season, as we consider what is next for DCC, I strongly believe if we want to bring about the world of hope we talk about, a world where hunger and homelessness are part of the past, a world where everyone has access to healthcare, where children are safe in their schools, and all the life we share this planet with flourishes, we will need to continue to expand our welcome. Today's Core Value helps us imagine that we will welcome people who are comfortable identifying themselves as Christians and the ones who are most comfortable using different words, like atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, Unitarian Universalist, humanist, and just plain human being. And we will see what Love can do when we work together for the world we imagine. We will see what Love can do when we behave as if we believe we are one. We are better together, Dear Ones.