

Text: Romans 10: 8-13
Title: Dining at the Divine Deli
Date: 02.21.10
Roger Allen Nelson

Last Christmas there was a colorful catchy commercial for the Gap.
Against an all white background stood a sort of a Gap cheerleading-pom-pom-dance-drill-team.
They were hip and handsome young people with a couple cute kids.
They were black and white and Asian and mixed and what not.
They were dressed in torn jeans, boots, flannels, sweaters, and knit caps.
They danced, kicked, jumped, gyrated and created human-pyramid-things.
And, over the top of clapping, stomping, and the jingle of bells they chanted:

*2, 4, 6, 8! 'Tis the time to liberate!
Go Christmas! Go Hanukkah! Go Kwanzaa! Go Solstice!
Go classic tree, go plastic tree, go plant a tree, go without a tree!
(Grunt) You 86 the rules! You do what just feels right!
Happy do whatever you wanna-kah and to all a cheery night!*

Clearly the rhythmic joy was lost in my rendition.

It's just a harmless little holiday commercial designed to sell jeans. I bring it to your attention not to lament the loss of the "reason for the season" and launch a Gap boycott, but because it is a playful symbol of contemporary spirituality.

These sorts of statistics surface everywhere.

65 percent of Americans believe that "many religions can lead to eternal life" ~ including 37 percent of white evangelicals, the group most likely to believe that salvation is theirs alone. 30 percent of Americans call themselves "spiritual, not religious." Those who claim no religious affiliation are the fastest growing segment of the population.

Stephen Prothero, religion professor at Boston University, calls contemporary spirituality "the divine deli." As he puts it:

You're not picking and choosing from different religions, because they're all the same. It isn't about orthodoxy. It's about whatever works. If going to yoga works, great ~ and if going to Catholic mass works, great. And if going to Catholic mass plus the yoga plus the Buddhist retreat works, that's great, too.

Now, my point is not about yoga. I do yoga. I like yoga. The cover story of the new Hope Herald is about yoga at Hope. My point is that contemporary American spirituality is easily and often a utilitarian spirituality. We selectively self-serve from a smorgasbord of beliefs. We dabble and explore and incorporate. We are open-minded, tolerant, and free of the restrictions and requirements of organized religion. We "Eat, Pray, Love." We stitch together a patch work quilt that provides comfort, convenience, and meaning for the self.

I know that is a broad-stroke-gross-generalization ~ an overstatement. It is not spoken in judgment or fear. It is spoken simply as a way in; because I want to consider a Lenten spirituality....

Over against dining at the divine deli is there a spirituality that's rooted in the texts and traditions of Lent? What are the contours of a spirituality that finds its footing in the journey toward Easter morning? Are there practices and a piety for those who know that they are dust and to dust they shall return? Is there something other than "happy do whatever you wanna-kah"?

For these next five weeks we will be exploring a Lenten spirituality. The themes emerge from the lectionary readings for Lent. Those passages will serve as our guide. It will not be the last word on a biblical/reformed/Christian spirituality, but I hope it will give us good grist for the bread of our journey. I hope that it will provide an abundant feast in the cafeteria of contemporary spirituality.

This morning we read Paul writing to the church in Rome that

...there is no difference between Jew and Gentile ~ the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

What marvelous news!

From foxhole or confessional booth, from church pew or flophouse, in dire straits or dipped in honey all we have to do is call out to God and we will be saved.

Oh! There is some requirement of belief or faith ~ after all this is in a section of Romans where Paul is comparing a righteousness that comes by faith over against the absolute failure of a righteousness that comes by law. But, be that as it may, the good news of Lent is that a relationship with God is possible ~ all we have to do is call. God comes at our bidding. God heeds our call.

Without distinction or discrimination,
whoever you are,

wherever you are, in

whatever situation you in,

whenever you are ready,

call on God and he will save. Thanks be to God.

So, maybe the starting place for a Lenten spirituality is our cry to God. And that seems fitting; the popular understanding of Lent is that we give something up. As a barmaid said to me this week, "Jesus gave up his life, the least I can do is give up cheese." Lenten spirituality starts with our cry to God....

We give something up in order to make space for God.

We turn away from something in order to turn toward God.

Less time with Facebook or the Pottery Barn catalogue or watching the Olympics and more time in prayer and repentance and then God will fill in that space. God will be closer. God will be in relationship. God will save. God will answer.

I am certainly not denigrating those disciplines of denial, or dismissing the power of prayer and the need for repentance, but they easily miss the mark. The dilemma with lectionary sermons is that they pick up a paragraph or two in the middle of a much larger text. Consider this....

In Roman's Paul's beginning point is death. In the opening chapters Paul writes that, "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Martin Luther calls "this staccato negation as the very center and kernel of scripture." So, while there may be no difference between Jew and Gentile for all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Likewise...

There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. All are sinners. All are sin.
There is no distinction between me and you. All are sinners. All are sin.
There is no distinction of sin. All sin leads unto death.

That is the beginning point of Paul's letter to the Romans, but it is also the beginning point of Lent. There is no distinction of death. All are dust, and to dust all shall return.

Where are those hip and happy Gap cheerleaders when you need them...

And yet, the story of scripture, the consistent theme that runs throughout all of the Bible, is that God pursues us.

God goes looking for Adam and Eve.
God chooses Abraham.
God seeks out Isaac.
God comes to Mary.
God knocks down Paul.
God breaks-in in Jesus.
God initiates, seeks, pursues, calls....

Before we call God ~ God calls us.
Earlier in Romans, Paul puts it this way:

You see, at the just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

And that, dear friends, is wonderful news!

While we were still indifferent,
while we were still standing in line at the cafeteria,
while we were still dabbling and doubting and distant,
while we were still dusty,
while we were still dead....
God called in Jesus Christ.

That is the beginning of a Lenten spirituality. Before the desire and discipline to give up something so that we might remember something, before all the prayers and beautiful music, before the symbols of dust and darkness and death, before the sublime power of the requiem that the choir will sing on Good Friday, before the glorious mystery of Easter morning ~ God calls us in Jesus Christ.

God calls.
Our response is always secondary.
Our calling back is always in response.

There is beautiful passage at the end of Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia by Dennis Covington. It is a fascinating book as the author wrestles with self and family history in the bizarre subculture of Appalachian snake handlers. The book closes with this image:

It's late afternoon at the lake. The turtles are moving closer to shore. The surface of the water is undisturbed, an expanse of smooth, gray slate. Most of the children in the neighborhood are called home for supper by their mothers. They open the back doors, wipe their hands on their aprons and yell, "Willie!" or "Joel!" or "Ray!" Either that or they use a bell, bolted to the doorframe and loud enough to start the dogs barking in backyards all along the street. But I was always called home by my father, and he didn't do it the customary way. He walked down the alley all the way to the lake. If I was close, I could hear his shoes on the gravel before he came into sight. If was far, I would see him across the surface of the water, emerging out of the shadows and into the gray light. He would stand with his hands the pockets of his windbreaker while he looked for me. This is how he got me to come home. He always came to the place where I was before he called my name.

God comes to us in Jesus.
God calls us.
God invites us to come home to his table.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.