

Rev. Stephan Papa
 Rev. Barbara Palmer
 April 6, 2014

Sermon: "An Altar in the World"

Barbara Brown Taylor is an amazing woman with a brilliant mind and a quirky sense of humor, particularly about herself. You'll recognize that humor come through this morning. Barbara is an Episcopal priest, from the liberal and progressive side of Christianity; she is now a professor of World Religions; she is a brilliant writer ("An Altar in the World" is her 12th book that jumped to the New York Times best seller list soon after it was published); she's my mentor, and sweetest of all, she's my friend.

We met in the late 1990's and together made our way through a number of courses in Spiritual Formation at Columbia Seminary.

There are 6 copies of "An Altar in the World" that will be available for purchase after the service, should you choose to explore her writing further. If you do purchase a book, it's important that you understand something about Barbara's theology and her frequent use of the word "God."

She uses the word in two contexts. First, she uses it within the cultural context of ancient Israel, where the people understood Deity something like a super human being who resided with outer deities up there – like most ancient cultures.

However she also uses the word "God" within the context of the modern world of the Hubble Telescope and Quantum physics.'

The following words reflect her own contemporary understanding of Deity:

reading from The Luminous Web

You will hear both voices coming through the text. *Stephan?*

This is an inspirational book. I love it because of its theology and its philosophy of religion. Barbara Brown Taylor presents a unifying theology; she makes no separation between the sacred and the secular; she says there is no spirituality apart from bodily experience on earth indicating this at the beginning of her book with a poem from Saint Irenaeus titled: "Capable Flesh": "The tender flesh itself/ will be found one day/ --quite surprisingly—to be capable of receiving,/ and yes, full/ capable of embracing/ the searing energies of God./ Go figure. Fear not./ For even at its beginning/ the humble clay received/ God's art, whereby/ one part became the eye,/ another the ear, and yet/ another this impetuous hand./ Therefore, the flesh/ is not to be excluded/ from the wisdom and the power/ that now and ever animates/ all things. His life-giving/ agency is made perfect,/ we are told in weakness--/ made perfect in the flesh."

Barbara Brown Taylor was disappointed in the way Christianity was originally presented to her because it taught her to "fear the world." She writes, "The church taught me that only God was worthy of my love, and that only the Bible could teach me about God... I was asked to choose between God and the world" (p. 11). But, fortunately, she writes, the Bible also taught her "another way of approaching God, a way that trusts the union of spirit and flesh as much as it trusts the world to be a place of encounter with God" (p. 12).

She invites us to see the divine depth in everyday life. She says there is a divine red X mark right under our feet, right where we are is "An Altar in the World," a place to see the divine depth in everything. Developing spirituality isn't confined to church she says; it can be done anytime and anywhere by paying attention.

Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to do that. Instead of arguing about religious words, she invites us to focus on our experience and to develop our spirituality so that we might become more fully human, which is the same as becoming more fully divine.

She presents twelve spiritual practices; they are creative and comforting; they are not esoteric, nor physically challenging; they do not strain your credulity; they are reasonable, practical, accessible. She calls her practices “exercises in being human.” As she has invited us on a journey through “A Geography of Faith,” so Barbara Palmer and I invite you on a journey of spiritual exploration as we share with you our favorite chapters.

Barbara, what were your two favorite practices? Barbara on reverence and Sabbath, then Barbara and then Stephan on Groundedness.

My first favorite chapter is “*Reverence, The Practice of Paying Attention.*”

Barbara describes reverence as the recognition of something greater than the self, something that doesn’t yield to breezy explanations – things like birth – death – sex – nature – love – truth.

When we’re reverent we stand in awe of something. When we’re reverent we notice one another as human beings and treat each other humanely. When we’re reverent we notice the natural world and treat it respectfully. Barbara reminds us, after all, that we are just “guests” on this planet.

She observes that Reverence for creation comes fairly easily for most of us.

However, Reverence toward people is a whole other story, especially if those people intrude on our personal space.

She confesses that it’s easier to care about humankind in general than to care about certain particular human beings. Like particular people who use their cell phones anywhere and any time; like particular people who act boorishly on the interstate and flip her the bird for trying to pass them in rush-hour traffic.

But then she suggests paying attention to people as human beings rather than as obstacles is a way to begin turning things around.

She relates a winsome story of going to the grocery store, carefully selecting some perfect Portobello mushrooms and having a young bagger put them in the bottom of the bag and then carelessly throw cans of beans on top.

Fortunately, she has a second opportunity with similar mushrooms and the same bag boy. This time she pays attention to his awkwardly painful adolescence and the fact that he doesn’t know and doesn’t care anything about mushrooms, as she gently coaches him on how to bag her lovely Portobellos.

In another example of paying attention, she relates a life-lesson learned while driving several miles on a frigid day behind a truck loaded with chickens, on their way to you-know-where. As they drive in tandem, clouds of white feathers pour out of the truck onto her car. During that drive, somehow the feathers take on new meaning, as she learns to pay attention to the chickens as living creatures.

Unexpectedly, she becomes aware of the undeniable connection between those birds, and that boneless chicken breast sitting on her dinner plate.

She recounts, “While I haven’t stopped eating chicken meat, I have begun cooking [it]and eating [it] with unprecedented reverence.”

She concludes so beautifully,

The practice of paying attention is as simple as looking twice at people and things you might easily ignore.

Like all the other practices in this book, paying attention requires no equipment, no special clothes, no green fees or personal trainers. . . . All you need is a body on this earth willing to notice where it is, trusting that even something as small as a hazelnut or a peppercorn can become an altar in this world.

Barbara Brown Taylor maintains that if *reverence* is the forgotten virtue, then surely *busyness* is the counterfeit virtue.

And so for my second chapter I've chosen the one on keeping a Sabbath, the one against non-stop busyness, and FOR the Practice of Saying "NO."

When I read those words "The Practice of Saying No," I thought, "Of course! I have to choose this practice." When Stephan and I talked about it, he said he knew lots of people who say No. I don't know those people!!!

Barbara reminds us that we all live in such a "can do" culture where the ability to do many things at high speed is not only admirable, but it's also the mark of a really successful person."

Is it possible that we've all been duped by our culture into believing that to STOP is not only impossible, but highly UNDESIRABLE?

Does anyone in this room remember STOP?

I mean not only stopping our bodies, but also stopping our brains from rehearsing that ever-present to-do list.

In considering how dangerously fatigued we are as a nation, Barbara suggests some of us are so tired that we can't tell the difference between relaxation and narcolepsy, because as soon as we settle into a comfortable spot, we nod off.

She also adds, "If it happens while you are reading this book, please, don't think a thing about it."

How does Barbara Brown Taylor know these things?

Because she confesses to being one of these people herself.

And how does she recommend we remedy this situation?

She looks back to the Hebrew Bible for inspiration and instruction. The 4th commandment states:

"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
Six days you shall labor and do all your work,
but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God:
you shall not do any work."

Isn't it interesting that even in the ancient world, people had to be instructed to stop working?

Barbara explains that Conservative Jews still make every effort to observe the Sabbath, which one theologian calls a "palace in time."

She wonders, "Why are we so reluctant to enter [into such an inviting palace]?" Perhaps it's because we're not sure we can handle it.

She says, "Anyone who practices Sabbath for even an afternoon suffers a little spell of Sabbath sickness. Try it and you too will be amazed by how quickly your welcome rest begins to feel something closer to a bad cold."

And she wonders what we all wonder, how will I ever catch up after taking a whole day off?

This is a question that haunts all of us. However, the only remedy is to just do it.

Try it on for an hour, try it on any day of the week, but commit to try something small and see what happens from there.

It would do us all good to practice saying “No” to others and to that relentless, nagging voice inside our heads.

Because if think we’ll finally rest when all the work is done, we need to remember that ALL THE WORK WILL NEVER BE DONE.

As a spiritual practice, first notice the two verbs in the first line of the 4th Commandment:

“Remember the Sabbath” – you did that, you’re HERE this morning. followed by: “Keep it HOLY.” As a challenge to take with you: I’m inviting each person here this morning to practice the second verb and say “NO” to one have-to during the rest of this day. Try saying ‘NO’ to one thing: something electronic in favor of rest; NO to going to the grocery store; NO to that voice in our head, and choose a nap instead. Choose sitting outside and watching the birds; Choose lying on the floor and watching the ceiling fan go round and round. Just STOP for an hour and give your body and your mind a brief rest. Today. Who knows, you might even like it!!!!

Next we look at the chapter entitled, “*Groundedness*, “the Practice of Walking on the Earth.” Stephan and I have both worked on this one together.

Let me start by saying I think stories are wonderful teachers and that Barbara Brown Taylor is an expert story-teller.

Two stories are particularly meaningful to me from this chapter.

The first one comes from Southern France and a place called Plum Village.

Plum Village is the monastic home of the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. Walking meditation is an important spiritual practice at Plum Village and the monks do it with incredible concentration and intensity. Visitors are invited to join the monks in their meditative walks.

If someone arrives in a wheelchair or unable to walk well, that person is invited to participate in the meditation by focusing intently on the movement of just one of the monks.

It has been reported that the identification can be so powerful that many who are restricted from walking themselves, come away from the experience as renewed as the monks they followed.

And my favorite story in this chapter is Barbara’s first experience time walking a Labyrinth.

If anyone isn’t familiar with the labyrinth it is a walking meditation and it can symbolize nothing at all or it can be a kind of journey, perhaps to one’s interior space. The walking itself is the important part.

The labyrinth is not a maze. A maze is meant to confuse the walker. A labyrinth challenges, but does not confuse because it has a destination.

There is only one path and a walker enters on the path and exists the same way, but in reverse. It’s an ancient practice dating back thousands of years and it has enjoyed an amazing comeback in the last 20 years.

Barbara had intended for years to walk a labyrinth, but it never happened until one day she encountered a labyrinth laid out in a pine grove, outlined with stones.

Picture it: she takes a breath, says a prayer, and steps onto the labyrinth expecting an amazing spiritual experience.

Immediately, she finds herself annoyed at following a set path. And why can't she step over the stones and go directly to the center? And who has time for all these switchbacks?

However, her exit from the center produces a totally different affect. Without a destination, she begins to notice things like pine scent and sun warmth. She confesses that time slowed down and she was amazed at the beauty of being present to the walk itself,

She concludes, "The labyrinth may be a set path, but it does not offer a set experience. Instead it offers a door that anyone may go through, to discover realities that meet each person where each most needs to be met."

So much for the joys of a particular kind of walking on the earth.....! Stephan?

I also found the chapter on groundedness, "The Practice of Walking on the Earth" to be valuable. It demonstrates that a simple activity such as walking, when done with mindfulness, can provide a deeply spiritual experience, connecting us to nature, to the very ground of our being, literally. Walking mindfully encourages us to slow down, to notice what is going on inside ourselves and in the world around us; it can enable us to put the various parts of life into perspective, and can be an empowering experience.

The poet, Wallace Stevens, wrote that "The truth depends upon a walk around a lake," and that is exactly what Barbara Brown Taylor and her husband find one night attending a conference in the wild woods of North Carolina. They leave behind the buildings and start walking around a lake, but it gets so dark they cannot see where they are going; they can no longer see the lake; they are in a tunnel of trees and it is pitch black; sight does them no good, but their other senses seem more acute; for example, they could hear and sense the bushes on either side without ever touching them; this enabled them to proceed down the path until they reached a landmark and made their way back to their conference center. We can be transformed, feel renewed joy and purpose, by the simple act of walking, skiing, doing the dishes, if we focus our awareness and faith.

Barbara concludes this chapter on walking saying, "'Done properly, the spiritual practice of going barefoot can...wake you up to your own place in the world.... It can lead you to love God with your whole self, and your neighbor as yourself, without leaving your backyard. Just do it, and the doing will teach you what you need to live. Or keep your shoes on, if you wish. As long as you are on the earth and you know it, you are where you are supposed to be. You have everything you need to ground yourself in God" (p 68), or I would add, in goodness.

Now let me tell you about a few other practices I really liked. The first is her chapter on going into the wilderness titled: "The Practice of Getting Lost." She begins this section talking about the cows with whom she shares her land. Though they have a hundred acres at their disposal, they do not wander around them; rather they have worn narrow paths to their favorite places and line up single file and follow them. It is easier that way, no surprises. She admits to doing the same thing; she drives the same way every day to work or to the store.

This chapter was particularly relevant to me because I do the same things too. I eat the same cereal for breakfast most every day; drive the same way to work-out, the airport, or to the store. I go to the same grocery store, though I am disappointed with it, because it is convenient, because I know where things are there. I am a creature of habit, routine; it is easier and safer that way. And then along comes Barbara Brown

Taylor recommending taking new routes, even getting lost intentionally, so as to learn new things about yourself and the world around you, and doing this as a spiritual practice.

When we do something new, go a new way, our consciousness is raised; we learn new things about ourselves, others, and life, like the fact that we can be lost in the wilderness and survive, that there is strength within us and surrounding us holding us with care. And she says let's admit the times in our lives that changed us for the better were our wilderness times, when we felt lost, like after a divorce, or illness (p 78). So let's go bravely where we have not tread before; let's choose to get lost sometimes, knowing it might lead to our spiritual growth. She concludes this chapter with these words, "You can get lost on your way home. You can get lost looking for love. You can get lost between jobs. You can get lost looking for God. However it happens, take heart. Others before you have found a way in the wilderness, where there are as many angels as there are wild beasts, and plenty of other lost people too. All it takes is one of them to find you. All it takes is you to find one of them."

And this leads me to another chapter; this one on community, which she calls "The Practice of Encountering Others." As she points out the value in taking new routes in our lives, so she encourages us to encounter strangers. She quotes the Hebrew Bible, which commands us one time to "love our neighbor as ourselves," which is challenging enough, but even more, it exhorts us to "love the stranger" thirty-six times (p 97). Why? Because being self-absorbed is the main impediment to living a life of meaning (p 91); because truly encountering another person allows us to escape our small selves and glimpse the wholeness (pp. 93-92). Why? Because we are all strangers. She quotes Miroslav Volf saying, "It may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference (p 99). We do pretty well with that within our TRUU community, but our challenge is to widen our circle of love and respect to include more strangers.

She suggests we begin by treating with respect the store check-out clerk, or as I suggested a few months ago, restaurant workers. They are real people with real lives, feelings, hopes, not just means to our ends. Barbara Brown Taylor writes of encountering others that, "The moment I turn that person into a character in my own story, the encounter is over. I have stopped being a human being and have become a fiction writer instead" (p 102).

Barbara Brown Taylor is not a fiction writer; she writes honestly about reality, religion, and spirituality; she writes to bring out the best in us; she is a blessing; so, I will end by mentioning the wisdom I found in her chapter on "The Practice of Pronouncing Blessings." Pronouncing blessings encourages us to be mindful, aware, and reverent; she suggests we practice starting with simple things and gives the following illustration: "Start with anything you like. Even a stick on the ground will do. The first thing to do is to pay attention to it. Did you make the stick? No, you did not. The stick has its own story. If you have the time to figure out what kind of tree it came from, that would be a start to showing the stick some respect. It is only "a stick" in the same way that you are "a human," after all. There is more to both of you than that. Is it on the ground because it is old or because it suffered a mishap? Has it been lying there for a long time or did it just land? ...What purpose did this stick serve? Did a bird sit on it? Did it bear leaves that sheltered the ground from the hottest summer sun? At the very least, it participated in the deep mystery of drawing water from the ground, defying the law of gravity to deliver moisture to its leaves. How does a stick do that...? ...This is no less than the artery of a tree that you are holding in your hand. Its tissue has come from the

sun and from the earth. Put it back where you found it and it will turn back into earth again. Dust to dust and ashes to ashes. Will you say a blessing first? No one will hear you, so you may say whatever you like. “Bless you, stick, for being you.” “Blessed are you, o stick, for turning dirt and sun into wood.” “Blessed are you, Lord God, for using this stick to stop me in my tracks.” And blessed are you, Barbara Brown Taylor, for stopping me in my tracks and helping me to appreciate them.

Barbara, what did you like about this chapter?

I really appreciated this chapter because it challenges me to take the practice of “reverence” another step. Putting words with people and things I revere, even silent words, adds a deeper dimension to reverence. If everything really is *holy now* as Jimmy sang earlier, and I do believe everything is holy, then all these people things deserve to be acknowledged. A blessing does that.

I find that another benefit to offering a silent blessing is when I react negatively to someone. It’s difficult to criticize a person and bless them in the same breath.

However, my favorite challenge in this chapter is to recall that the key to blessing any body or any thing is acknowledging that they beat me to it. . . . that they’ve blessed me first – that they’ve touched my heart in some way first.

And so, I say, “Bless you, Barbara Brown Taylor, for teaching me all of us these important life lessons.

And Bless you Stephan, for inviting me on this wonderful joint adventure into “An Altar in the World.”

Stephan invites people to bless anyone else in the room in any way that they wish.