



Unity Church of Christianity  
Practicing the Presence  
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A good question to ask ourselves around Christmastime and about Christmas itself, I think, is whether or not Christmas for you is objective or subjective? It's a very good question because really objective means, of course, that it's about what's happening outside of you, externally. We experience Christmas as something like an object. It's all the Christmas trees and the lights and the gifts and the nativities and the music and the visitors and the shopping and all of this and the birth of Jesus, and it's an objective historical kind of thing. Subjective really means the whole experience of Christmas gets internalized. It's not just something that's going on external to us and has a lot of pieces external, but it is something that is happening inside of you. It's at a deep soul level you are experiencing Christmas. It touches you. It has meaning for you internally. So you are subjected to feelings that well up inside of you—an internalizing of the story of Christmas. You become the story. You are affected by it. You are subject to it.

And we might remember what the poet once sang along these lines which was, "Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if he's not born in you, thy soul is all forlorn." And what he was talking about there is he saw also the significance of getting beyond just an objective kind of experience of Christmas as a historical something that happened a long time ago, but that this is something that is to be born in you, something that happens inside. So the answer to the

question, “Is Christmas meant to be objective or subjective?” The answer probably is both but with a clarification that it is first to be about that which reminds us of the living Christ within us. It’s about the living Christ within us. And secondary, it’s an outer celebration. Primary is the issue of how does it affect me now? How does this Christmas which comes every year affect me now? And that’s a question to ask each and every year, of course. But as human beings, we are always having to decide whether we are an ego or whether we are a Christ in the making, a Christ by divine design. And then we have to decide which one will really dictate how we are going to show up in the world—the ego or the Christ-self. The ego, of course, always wants to build a self that is separate, and the Christ in us wants us to be who we really are by divine design, that which was made in the image and likeness of the divine. And so Jesus’ message, of course, was about reminding us that we are to be a light in the world and that basically the ego is represented by the basket that wants to come and cover over the light that you are and keep you from being the light of God that is shining in this world.

And so I think it’s in this world that we can so easily lose touch with our divine source. It’s due to the education or let’s say the conditioning over and over of an external world in which we’re pulled out into that which is outside of ourselves so to speak. And we’re taught that we live in a world that is often times a dangerous place and that we have to compete in order to be successful and that there are others out there trying to get us. And so as a result, without realizing it, we actually are into the process of developing and even strengthening an ego which is building a separate self trying to deal with this world. And we often think that building the ego is what it’s about in order to deal with the world. And because this ego suppresses the spiritual self and suppresses this Christ-self, we have to at some point reach a point where we begin to consciously dismantle the ego that we have created and the ego that we have built seemingly thinking that that’s going to allow us to function better in the world.

What Jesus called a liar and the father of lies was really the ego. What Jesus dealt with when we talk about or read about the temptation scripturally was really the ego. There are many references where Jesus is really talking about dismantling the ego and allowing the Christ-self, the spirit of the living God, to emerge and be birthed in you. One of them is the parable of the chief seats. It’s found in the gospel of Luke. It’s about the ego, but before I get to the parable that he shares there, it’s important I think to know what is actually happening prior to his sharing of the parable.

You see, Jesus has been invited to dinner, and he’s been invited to dinner at the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees, and it happens to be on the Sabbath. So he is invited to this house that’s full of Pharisees which he has not necessarily seen eye to eye with. And it’s all of the lawyers and the Pharisees that are there. And Jesus went nevertheless. It happens to be the Sabbath. So when he gets there, the first thing he encounters is there’s a man that comes up to him that wants to be healed. He’s suffering from dropsy. And so here it is. It’s the Sabbath. He’s got all these Pharisees and lawyers around him, and it seems like a setup, you know. So Jesus

looks around at these guys, and he asks the question. He says, “Well, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” And they just gave him a blank look. They kept silent. They were waiting for him to mess up. That was the dogma of the time, but they didn’t want to say that that was.

So Jesus moves into action, and he takes this man, and he heals the man and then releases him and lets him go, and then he turns to those who are gathered around him which were these lawyers and Pharisees, and he says, “Which of you, who having a donkey or an ox that falls into the pit, would not help it out even on a Sabbath?” Again, they were all silent.

So Jesus took the floor again, and that’s when he shared this parable. And so the parable goes like this—and keep in mind that he shared this also in looking at the placement of where people were seated in this gathering of high and mighty Pharisees. Okay?

It goes like this. So, he told a parable to those who were invited when he noted how they chose the best places, saying to them, “When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place lest one more honorable than you be invited by him, and he who invited you and him come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this man.’ And then you begin with shame and embarrassment to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place so that when he who invited comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, go up higher.’ Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

So Jesus is warning really about the dynamic of the ego and the ways of the ego. The ego always wants to build a self that is separate, that is superior, “I am above,” and thinks—kind of gloats about oneself so to speak who thinks that he deserves to sit in the highest of places, superior to others. And you know that Jesus always was teaching equality—that we are one in this world—that we are all of divine design, and that was the perception that he taught and wanted for all of us to have. And so we must reach a point where we begin to dismantle the ego that we have created, that we have built, and that the world seems to encourage. And humility is important. That’s what Jesus was talking about here—humbling the self, humbling the ego self that we all have, and it’s being in touch with that. Our greatest obstacle to a healthy relationship with God is our ego. You see, it prevents us from recognizing and developing our true self and living from our true self—our spiritual essence at the core, our divine design.

And so our journey back to a reconnection with our spiritual design really has to do with nurturing and caring for this part of ourselves—our spiritual self—that often is no more than a babe that is like in a cradle—and that we have to begin to nurture and care for so that it might grow and build in this world. There’s something at work that for all of us is called the *Guru principle*, and I’m not necessarily talking about what people always think of Guru—is like somebody from the east who is outside yourself that you go and bow down to as a teacher and who is telling you how to live your life or helping you. That’s not always necessarily a Guru. Actually, the word

*Guru* translates from Sanskrit. I believe it is that it translates, “That which dispels the darkness.” And so it actually refers to then an interior awareness or presence in an individual that works through books and dreams and inanimate objects as well as people. It’s all of those things.

So in our outer journey, what we’re saying is that essentially our biggest enemy, if we have one, would be this ego that edges God out. It masquerades as the core of us. It masquerades as that core and essence and prevents us from recognizing then our true self, our spiritual self, that which is really anointed of the image and likeness of God. And even the apostle Paul spoke to this in a verse in Galatians that you can find. And what he says is, “It is not I but Christ who lives in me.” And what he was saying is it’s not an I that is separate—a separate self—but it is Christ that lives in me, and he’s trying to make that distinction and make that affirmation and live from that place.

All of us have a perspective on our world, and that perspective is constructed really by our world of senses and the constructs of our separate mind, and both are illusory or of illusionary type. They’re merely surface phenomenon and in a constant state of change. But below that—below that surface phenomenon and world of senses in which we’re taking in our perspective—below that lies this permanent level of existence. It’s the infinite reality of the divine, and it is the ego’s function to make you identify with this illusory, illusionary physical world and keeps you out of touch with this underlying reality and this underlying sense of who you really are—your true self.

So it’s a very, very cunning dynamic that goes on. Even when you make spiritual progress, even when you have a sense that you have moved ahead spiritually and deepened yourself, the ego is going to take responsibility for that. You have to be very careful for that. And all of a sudden, you develop feelings of spiritual superiority. “Oh, man, am I spiritual now! Oh, man, I am full of it!” And it can become spiritual arrogance. It can be spiritual pride. It’s a very subtle thing.

One of the mantras of the ego is, “I need this now. I want what I want when I want it. I want it now.” And we have a lot of that going on in us or at least we need to notice that. And actually denying the ego what it wants can help us become aware of its presence and aware of its need to control and all of its self interests.

And so our spiritual disciplines are of course important—of prayer and meditation and practicing the presence, connecting with others spiritually who are on the path. It’s all important. But beyond that is a need for something that we would call a radical, radical surrender. Surrender is basically to give up your personal will, and it’s allowing it to dissolve itself on into this power that we call God that is at the core of us. And so it’s learning to trust this interior presence of spirit. It is surrendering our control so to speak and the desire that we have to control everything. And surrendering that to this presence and the spirit that then out of doing so and surrendering, tends to dismantle or deconstruct the ego. The more that we surrender and are into that process,

the quieter the ego becomes. Even when we think that we have shattered the ego, it reassembles itself. It regenerates itself because we live in this 3-dimensional world and so much of the world is living from their ego that we slip back into the things that are being mirrored to us or modeled all around us or ways that other people are showing up. All of a sudden, we're back there again, and it's a very subtle thing. Even enlightened people have not killed the ego. They all have some ego too. Do not be fooled. It's just a more transparent ego in which the Christ-self or the higher self is able to shine through.

There's a guy named Russill Paul who is an author. He has also spent many years as a Benedictine monk. He has incorporated some of the disciplines of Yoga and Hinduism into his Christian disciplines as a Benedictine monk. Anyway, he writes about the importance of dismantling the ego and speaks of radical surrender and how important that is, and he also says something else that's very important—what he calls *sanctity*. And what he means by *sanctity*—it's another word for holiness and sacredness, okay. So Russill Paul—he says, “We are all called to be mystics.” In other words, we are all called to be into the mystery of God—the mystery of this divine. We're all invited to know this hidden divinity that resides and lives in us and to know about it as it lives in others and in all of creation. And he says that the path of sanctity demands that one go further. In addition to knowing the divine that is within, you're also to seek to embody the divine in your life in the world. He says that sanctity is mysticism in action. He says, “While mysticism is akin to making love to the divine, sanctity is doing the divine will in all things.” It's an effort to behave like God at all times in all places—behave like God would have you be. That's not an easy thing, I know, but this is what he's talking about. And it means actually being loving in the face of evil, kind to those who express hate, to be detached from wealth and worldly power and its significance and importance, passionate to those who are unspiritual. It means to serve others. It means to reach out to the homeless, the hungry, the underprivileged, to put other's needs ahead of your own. To do these things means that you are manifesting a kind of love that is a divine love that limits and quiets the ego.

This same author advocates, “For many, it is necessary to go through a dark night of the soul.” Okay, now I'm not saying that it's necessary for all of you to do that, but he points out that many saints and mystics down through history went through a dark night of the soul, and out of that they emerged into this deepening that silenced the ego, and something new was born. And he says that, of course, common to the dark night of the soul is like a depression and a feeling that God has rejected you or deserted you at least. It is a crisis of faith, and it all leads to a period of purification—intense purification—and with it a surrendering of one's will. It's kind of like you totally surrender, “Okay, God,” and allowing the divine to extract all that was old, all that was limiting, all that you needed to release and let go of so that there's an authentic relationship that is born.

And so the author actually tells of his own dark night of the soul that he went through. After about a year and a half of all this spiritual progress and all these spiritual disciplines that he had

been going through, he went through the canonical procedures of officially becoming a Benedictine monk. “But suddenly,” he said, “nothing seemed to work.” And he had this great emptiness that began to fill his soul. And he said he did not want to meditate or pray or chant because the practices no longer produced results. And he said his spiritual ego had previously swollen with pride because he was a Benedictine monk, and now he said that same part of him was judging itself viciously. And so it left him with a spiritual barrenness.

I share this not, again, to say that one needs to go through a dark night of the soul, but the fact of the matter is probably many people here have gone through that. Some may even be in it now. And in the event that you ever fall into one, this would be helpful to know that it’s actually a purification process. He emerged, he said, in stages. He finally asked his mentor—his spiritual mentor—about his situation and what it was that his mentor did in the way of practices that he used that helped him because he always seemed to be so spiritually together and centered and radiant. And so his mentor said that his primary spiritual practice was—not only during meditation but throughout the day—was to practice the presence of God. That was his main primary way. He recommended a book, and the book was called *The Practice of The Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. And I found that interesting because I’ve known about that book for 30 years, and it’s interesting how far and broadly read and known it is.

But anyway, that book—Brother Lawrence is an interesting person. He was born around 1610 in France. As a young man, he fought in the Thirty Years’ War, and he sustained a near fatal injury there to his spinal cord, and as a result, it left him a bit crippled and in chronic pain. Well after the war, he had always been drawn to a spiritual life even from his youth. So after the war, he dedicated himself to God. And one of the first things that he did was to go into the wilderness living like one of the early desert mystics, and he just was alone in solitude with himself, and then eventually he did enter a monastery and work in the monastery in Paris. But during this time, Brother Lawrence discovered and then followed this pure, uncomplicated way to live continually in God’s presence. And he explains in his book how to continually walk and commune with God and not from the head, but it has to be a heart connection, he says. He said that all of the—I found this interesting—all of the physical and mental disciplines were useless unless they enabled a person to arrive at union with God by means of love. It’s all about union connection through love. And he said he felt it was foolish to think that the times of prayer ought to differ from the rest of the times of your life. And so after times of prayer, he still continued talking with God, praising God, thanking God intensely, and he did this all day long. And he said that this led to a life of continual joy.

And from one of his letters, he said this. He writes, “I worshiped him as often as I could, keeping my mind on his holy presence recalling it as often as I found it wandered from him. I made this my business not only at the appointed times of prayer but all the time, every hour, every minute, even in the height of my work. I drove from my mind everything that interrupted my thoughts of

God. And over time, by often repeating these acts, they became habitual, and the presence of God becomes quite natural to us.” So there’s this wonderful, divine intimacy that he had.

So our friend, Paul—back to the Benedictine monk. He’s in the midst now of a dark night of the soul. We can’t leave him there. And he is now reminded that he had forgotten that the very essence of spiritual life is all about being in a living relationship with spirit, and he said that he had become so engrossed in learning to control the mind, to control breath, to control the body, and all these different disciplines that he had forgotten to seek the divine as a person, as a being whom he could interact with. And so he had to admit that he had lost this mystery of God within the framework of his own consciousness. And so he took a copy of the book, *Practice the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence, and he went to his hermitage to spend some time in solitude. And so from the time he woke up in the morning to the time that he fell asleep at night, he was practicing the presence of God. Whenever he looked outside, he would look at the trees and the sky and the earth and the river, and he tried to sense the presence of God there—the entity that had formed all of these creations and fashioned them, and he conversed with the divine throughout the day. And he said, to be honest, he didn’t feel much. So he continued with great determination. He did this for weeks with a true desire to know God, and he said that the dark night of the soul grew darker.

And then one evening, he attended an evening with his other monks, and they were reading from Scripture which was the passage having to do with Moses and apparently the burning bush. And he said, “Something had approached Moses without his even asking for it, and it had communicated itself to him.” And so Paul, our friend, realized he wanted to know God as God was, and this just boiled up in him. He went home, got to his hut, sat on his bed, and begged God to reveal himself to him. He begged. He pleaded. He beseeched. He nagged. He just intensely wanted and asked with all of his being. He finally fell asleep, and in the morning, he was a bit upset with God. But as he was brushing his teeth in the bathroom, he said he could feel some energy building up like on the floor of the bathroom. And he could feel it rising in his ankles, in his shins, in his knees, and he said he could feel it as though it was filling the whole bathroom as one being completely occupied by some sort of presence he said. And he looked outside, and he realized that the entire grounds outside the ashram there were being filled with this energy, and he said the forest and the trees and the river and the sky and the clouds—he said everything he looked at was pulsating and vibrating and shimmering with this same energy. And all of a sudden, he was hit with a force that wasn’t just an energy, but he said it was like—it had an otherness about it—a being-ness that had the intent on communicating with him. And when he got hit with that force—that energy—he said he began to weep profusely, and he said he wept for days. And during this course of time, whenever he looked into the eyes of another person, he said the brightness of the light that emerged and came streaming, blinded him. He couldn’t continue to look at the eyes of an individual. He said when he would look at the eyes of a child, he said the light streaming from the child was 10 times that of any other. This lasted for weeks in him,

and he was given this powerful experience of the divine, and he realized that when we choose the divine above all else, the divine returns the gesture.

And so he was given a glimpse into this ultimate reality, some other reality, and it had transformed him and given him a new perspective. And he described that new perspective as—used an analogy from Zen to explain it. He said, “At first the river is a river, and the tree is a tree,” and that’s our learned perception from conventional education growing up in the world. But next, the river is not a river and the tree is not a tree because you no longer take the outward form for granted, and you put all your observations under scrutiny of spiritual awareness that has been living in you, and it’s like you put it under a spiritual microscope now, and you get a glimpse into the inner structure and the hidden workings of the universe. And he said, “Then finally, the river is a river once again, and the tree is a tree once again, except now you are experiencing both the river and the tree through new eyes and a transformed vision.”

My hope for you and for me and for all of us is that we might move to this deeper place where we are able to see and experience Christmas with new eyes. And what was once dominated by perhaps an objective kind of external experience is transformed into a subjective, internal experience whereby you experience truly the Christ being born in you, that you are given a new perspective through radical surrender, through sanctity, practicing the presence of God, and the dismantling of the ego, you will come to experience a Christmas that is profoundly deeper than anything you have known before.

God bless you and Merry Christmas.