

Starting Within Ourselves

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

October 6, 2024

"...but I don't weep, do you?"

Words from the poem "Bluebird" by Charles Bukowski. Also words I said to my husband two decades ago: "I don't cry."

I don't remember what Bart said that day, when I told him I didn't cry; but I do remember what he said when I was crying in his arms not too much later in our relationship. He said, "You've got a river of tears inside of you and they need to find their way back to the ocean." He was right.

What wasn't so clear to me twenty plus years ago is that not only did I have a river of tears inside of me waiting to be released, but I also had sermons galore, and a bright-blue sky bursting with laughter waiting to be shared.

So too did I have a demanding five-year-old inside of me, a persistent preteen, and a sassy young woman as well. I had parts inside of me that held memories too painful to recall, and parts of me with dreams, gifts, and talents waiting to be realized. I had parts who loved writing and other parts who wanted to smoke cigarettes and wear the right blue jeans. I was, and am, a kaleidoscope of goodness and shadows, as are we all.

Over time I have come to know each of these internal parts of me and what each part holds—or held. The more I understand the diversity within me, the more authentic and whole I am in all of my life.

Understanding ourselves as multidimensional is not pathological or imaginary. In fact, it is the opposite. Understanding our own inner world is liberating. It is fascinating and quite fun, but it can also be difficult. We rediscover what ignites our minds, remember the dreams we once had, and return to what matters most to us. In addition to our passions and learning what delights us, we discover parts of ourselves that hold pain or difficult truths. We find the unresolved relationships; the things we have done that we had hoped to forget. We remember the words and actions in our past that both hurt and formed us. We find the shy, disowned

parts who hold shame for things they were not responsible for and who absorbed cultural and familiar expectations that were not true. But in that discovery, we also become free.

Our ministry theme this month is communication, especially communication as it relates to truth. I believe firmly that to communicate well with others, we must have healthy communication within ourselves. How can we appreciate the complexities of another person if we don't understand and appreciate our own complexities? How can we forgive another and yet withhold forgiveness from ourselves?

There are some who say that the things we judge in other people are the things we judge or hide about ourselves. I find this to be mostly true, though I also find it hard not to judge when people act in ways that violate principles and values I hold sacred, such as peace, justice, and equity for all.

More important is the fact that how I treat myself does impact how I treat other people. If you are impatient with others, you can bet you are impatient with yourself. If you are afraid of others' emotions, you are likely afraid of your own emotions too.

Though it doesn't solve the divisions in our country, this self-awareness does help us to respond to those challenges from our best selves. Our blind spots in our self-awareness, including hidden parts of our past or present self, can cause us to act out against others. We might yell at our partner when they are cooking food our estranged mother used to cook because the aroma sets off something in us that we do not realize. We find ourselves bristling and pulling within when someone inadvertently says the words that an unkind coach said to us years ago.

Have you ever found yourself overtaken with emotion or unable to refrain from acting in a certain way? Or do you vacillate between opinions on a decision you have to make? One day feeling certain you should move, for example, and the next day wanting nothing more than to stay put

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where you are? Of course you do; we all do. It's normal.

We are not monolithic creatures, though many of us may have been taught to think we should be. Perhaps this monolithic self-view parallels a belief or disbelief in a monolithic God. I don't know. But think about it: There are hundreds of names for God in different world religions and at least 24 proper names in the Bible. According to one author there are 6,000 names for God if you include the descriptors "I AM" names, the Hebrew names, and the "Who" names/characteristics of God. Hindus believe in many gods, each of whom has 108 names.

We have been arguing about what God is for as long as time, perhaps partially because we have been trying to find one singular definition or expression of God. It only makes sense that we humans also contain multitudes.

In my youth, my only awareness of the inner system was seen in the 1976 movie, *Sybil*, starring Sally Field and Joanne Woodward. Do some of you remember that? I don't know about you, but it fascinated me and my ten-year-old friends. We were all talking about it. It fascinated us, perhaps because we all knew we had different parts of ourselves too, though not to the extent as seen in the movie. *Sybil*; the 1976 series *I, Claudius*; and the 1977 television miniseries *Roots* defined my middle years as a child.

At the age of ten I knew humans were complicated or complex. I knew that abuse was wrong and human resilience was stronger, that government and power were often corrupt and led to evils, and that racism was inhumane and unacceptable. I demanded to know why someone wasn't doing something these atrocities!

I could say I am digressing, but am I? I don't think so.

All of those truths or knowings still live inside of me and guide my life and my ministry. Humans are complicated and complex. Abuse is wrong and human resilience is stronger. Government and power are often corrupt and lead to evils. Racism is inhumane and unacceptable. Why aren't more people doing something about these atrocities?!

Those ten- and eleven-year-old young girls who, in response to those knowings, were determined to help make the world "right," live inside of me. They are some of the guiding lights in my life and my ministry.

But these determined young girls inside of me are not all that guide my life and my ministry. So does the young child who loves and believes in people and the part of me who experiences God in nature and works tirelessly for the Earth.

Do you know your inner ten- and eleven-year-olds? What truths did they know? Are they still part of your guiding lights?

Any part of ourselves that we judge or disown doesn't leave; it hides, often in the shadows.

You know those parts of yourself, don't you? At least some of them? The parts that wonder about God when you're an atheist? Or the parts who come out with things that are improper or crass? It's not just those things that we disown. Some of us disown our joy or our curiosity because we learned to be stoic or smart. Many of us hide our vulnerability because we don't know where it's safe to show it.

Rev. Dr. Jaqui Lewis, one of my mentors, talks about much of this in her book, *Fierce Love*. She describes the need that all of us have for safe and brave spaces—spaces of love where we are greeted and known with empathy, and where we are allowed to let our imagination grow and invite play to return to our lives.

Scientists call this transitional space, the space where we get to be vulnerable, learn, and make mistakes. Transitional space where we can try on and try out, where we can stumble and be met with the same loving eyes by people who say, "I see you."

My friends, we need safe and brave space. We need to be challenged to see our own biases, retrieve the parts of ourselves that we have disowned, and celebrate all of who we are. We need sanctuary where we can be known and know others, where we can imagine what the world could be and let our laughter and creativity help see the way through what often feels impossible.

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We need ourselves—our whole selves—and we need each other.

So, as we depart today may we do so with compassion and curiosity about who we are. May we better understand our inner landscape and communicate honestly and bravely with all that we find there. May we realize, when we see another person, that there is so much more there than may meet the eye. We are kaleidoscopes, brilliant and diverse in all of who we are. May we all learn to embrace and know that kaleidoscope, may we find what we have cast aside, and may we greet it with love.

Amen and Blessed Be.