

*August 28, 2011*

# ***“A Synergy of Mysticism and Mission”***

*Rev. Dr. Sharon Rhodes-Wickett*

# A Synergy of Mysticism and Mission

Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Pent 11A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett

August 28, 2011, Claremont UMC

A hen and a hog were passing by a church one Sunday and stopped to listen for a moment at what the pastor had to say:

"How can we help the poor?" the pastor asked.

The hen said to her friend, "I know what we can do. We can give them a ham-and-egg breakfast!"

Shocked at what he had just heard, the hog protested, saying,

"The breakfast would be only a contribution for you, but for me it would mean total commitment!"

The hen and the hog capture the dilemma Christians face. The word, indeed the *concept* of, sacrifice is almost like speaking another language in our culture. To speak of sacrifice conjures up images of another era, of another people, but certainly, as the hen would say, it does not include me.

During these summer months the stories from the Old Testament have been a semi-continuous history of God calling people to care for and lead God's people. We have met some interesting characters along the way who God called out to serve.

Today we encounter Moses, yes the same one who, as a baby, was put into the river in a basket, in last week's reading. Today's passage describes his experience of God beckoning him to lead the Hebrews out of slavery.

Process theology scholar Bruce Epperly writes about the burning bush: "Moses stays put, and the voice gives him a lesson in theology. The voice announces that it has heard the cries of the Israelite people. God is involved in history, listening and feeling as well as acting. God has been touched by their pain, and is going to respond.

"But, a responding God can't do it alone. Though God has intentionality and power, God needs human companions and followers to accomplish the task. Contrary to unilateral understandings of God's power, this passage describes a divine-human synergy that is essential in achieving God's vision for the world.

"Of course, Moses protests. He knows his history – he is a wanted man in Egypt (he was a murderer, after all) – and he is more than aware of his limitations. Yet, God overlooks his protests.

"Moses is anxious and concerned about his abilities; but God is faithful and will be with Moses as he attempts the impossible.

"Relationship is everything here: God does not reveal *how* God will deliver the Israelites and empower Moses; God simply says, "I will be with you." Like the presence of a parent, soothing a troubled child in the wee hours of the morning, God's presence and care is sufficient to comfort and protect."<sup>i</sup>

Moses wants to know something more concrete about God. After all, if Moses is going out to speak for God, it's reasonable that he would like to know God's name. By whose authority will Moses lead?

You might think of this encounter between Moses and God as a mystical encounter. Moses experiences God's presence, God's call, God's persuasiveness. It moves him to respond, despite all his protests and reasons why he is not worthy.

Unimpressed with protests, titles and qualifications, God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." Tell them 'I AM has sent me to you.'

Each life is touched by God. God calls forth our lives in a personal way. God also companions us on the pilgrimage, intimately knowing and responding to the details of our lives. God's vision is embodied in this creative adventure of call and response throughout cosmic and human history.

The reading from Romans continues in the same chapter as last week where Paul appealed to the church in Rome to not be conformed by this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind. These verses that follow are concrete examples of how the community, the church, live out the transformed life. It is a wonderful list! It merits our regular meditation on it so that it might inform our living.

I think the General Rules of our church, as prescribed by our founder John Wesley, serve as a good summary.

Wesley encouraged his followers to "do no harm; do good; and stay in love with God." He said the way we stay in love with God is by making ourselves available and open to God through worship, prayer, Holy Communion, Bible study, and so on. And that drives our ability to do good.

We open ourselves to a mystical experience of God, which then allows God's energy to empower us to be in mission. By mission, I don't mean cramming Christianity down other people's throats without being in loving relationship. Romans 12 provides a great picture of how we might live, with love and generosity.

And then the reading from Matthew gives us Jesus' view of what it is to serve God's people. Jesus is talking total commitment.

Peter tried to minimize that, he tried to brush it off. Peter said to Jesus, "Now Jesus, you stop talking like that...that's not going to happen... don't say things like that!"

That angered Jesus. Once again, one of Jesus' disciples didn't understand, didn't accept, what it meant to follow Jesus.

Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Such belief is contrary to the world in which we live. You *do* know that don't you?

We live in a world that applauds behavior that promotes self, we succeed in the public eye if live for ourselves and make ourselves very wealthy, and if we accumulate more and more things. But that is not Christian thinking.

To deny ourselves is to reject the values of a culture that says take care of "number one" and to hell with everyone else. There is much in our culture that says just that.

Jesus calls us to make a different witness. People are finding that bigger houses, huge portfolios, fabulous cars; do not in fact, give deep joy and satisfaction. They are things. Things don't give.

I read an article by a doctor who describes the total commitment he and his family are making. He writes, "For fifteen years, I've worked as a physician with the inner-city poor in Washington D. C. as part of a small Christian community. Our work is grounded in the understanding that God calls us to care for and move into solidarity with those who have been— for whatever reason--excluded from society.

"Several times a month, I travel to talk about our work--mostly to medical students or groups. Their questions have become predictable and troubling. Increasingly I feel like a visitor from another time. 'Dr. Hilfiker, what do your wife and children think about your living in the city and working with very poor people?' The underlying assumption seems to be that I must have dragged my family kicking and

screaming into the urban jungle. (If anyone did the dragging, it was my wife Marja, and our children's lives have been greatly enriched.)

“Dr. Hilfiker, you're obviously an extraordinary person.’ [They really say that!] ‘You've been able to give up a doctor's salary to work with the poor. But you certainly can't expect most young doctors to be able to do what you've done.’

“This perception of my extraordinary sacrifice persists even though I've mentioned in my talk that Marja's and my combined income puts us well above the median income in this country, and I've made clear that we reap the benefits of community and meaningful vocations in ways most people only dream of. Try as I might, I cannot seem to undermine the perception of our sainthood.

“‘Dr. Hilfiker, I really want to do work like yours. That's why I came to medical school. But now I'm not sure I could give up all the other stuff. I've really become attached to our lifestyle. Besides, with the debts I'm racking up, I don't know how to do anything like what you've done. I feel like I'm getting lost.’

“Forty years ago, doctors assumed they had a responsibility to serve poor people. For the most part, they accepted that responsibility gratefully. Many thousands of doctors did work similar to mine, and no one thought to remark much upon it. But today, doctors (or, for that matter, any affluent people) who voluntarily move into solidarity with the poor are considered "saints," while those who sacrifice perhaps more for careers in politics, the arts, or business are considered "normal."

“Some fundamental set of societal values has shifted, co-opting the ways in which we think. Today, we have trouble understanding service, sharing, justice, and equality, not because we are worse people than forty years ago, but because, over the last generation, we've unwittingly transformed capitalism into a religion.”

He then develops a case for how unwittingly we as a society have blurred the lines between an economic system and our belief system. We who are Christians have not been clear, at least not publicly, about the Christian vocation, which is decidedly different. He concludes with these thoughts:

“Western society hungers for values deeper than those it has. Even people who do not call themselves spiritual, sense that something is desperately askew.

“The founders of capitalism never intended it to be a moral theory. Yet because its assumptions have been so deeply enculturated within us, it now operates that way, and we have lost the intellectual and spiritual tools to defend what we know.

“These are powerful, challenging times in which to speak the Word. Biblical values--spreading the love and forgiveness of the gospel, moving into solidarity with the poor, and caring for the earth--are a gift from God. Those values can anchor us.”<sup>ii</sup>

The life to which Jesus calls us, as a whole community, is that we care for the good and well-being of all. Contrary to our culture, we aren't asking

“What's in it for me?”

We ask, “What's in it *from* me?”

God is present with us and companions us on this journey called life. God is well accustomed to people who have all kinds of reasons why they can't respond to God's beckon to walk the way of love and justice.

God seeks our open hearts and minds. God seeks that spark of synergy that anchors our lives in friendship with God.

Yes, we are asked to give up our lives, and by so doing find our lives in God. You might give up your time and energy to organize and help the whole church family do justice with the poor. You might give

up artistic talent that could make a Sunday School project come alive for young people. You might give up your natural ability to teach, and guide others on the path of faith and service. You might give up financial resources to strengthen the community's ministry. You might give up your talent with details, to do some tedious jobs that make it better for everyone. You might help us learn ways to live more simply for the sake of the planet.

God empowers and equips us when we say Yes.

God transforms our little efforts into bigger impact than we could possibly imagine.

Because I AM calls us.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.processandfaith.org](http://www.processandfaith.org)

<sup>ii</sup> information about his interesting life and his further thoughts can be found at <http://www.davidhilfiker.com> first published in *The Other Side*