

June 29, 2015

[Note: On June 17, 2015, 9 people were shot and killed at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, SC]

- *God is found in unexpected ways*
- *Praying for enemies*
- *Condemn actions while loving the perpetrator*
- *Condemnation and forgiveness are the two sides of judgment*
- *No separation in the realm of Spirit*

The God to whom all direct their prayers is a part of each of your lives. God's presence takes on many names and has many characters. The presence of God is not just the Spirit Center to whom you pray. That presence is experienced through your interactions with friends, family, contemporaries, associates, colleagues—yes, even total strangers. Think for a moment of some incident in your life where you found God's presence in a stranger. It may have been a smile, a touch, a helping hand, some words of encouragement, a comfort, compassion. You experience God and God speaks to you through many different channels of life.

Your interaction with God does not mean achieving some level of academic knowledge. Interacting with God and the presence of God through life all around you is unpredictable, spontaneous, and always loving. You cannot program your lives in a way that provides a discreet understanding of God at a particular place or time. One finds God most poignantly in unexpected ways. You may not be thinking of God specifically and yet be deeply moved by the beauty of a sunrise or sunset or touched by someone else whom you meet or encounter. God is not seen specifically and only in a place of worship, for God is all around. The Spirit Center belongs to all that comes into your awareness.

The Spirit of God is part of your dreams as well as the object of your prayers. Many groups who identify themselves as being religious make the assumption that only certain few are capable of either speaking to God or hearing God's response. That relationship to God may have meaning for some and therefore be valid for them, yet the truth of your interacting with God is seen most clearly in how you interact with others and others interact with you. Life is filled with these interactions, planned and unplanned, yet every encounter with all human beings contains a kernel of truth that those whose paths you encounter are every bit a part of the God you seek to know.

Certainly you experience many events in your lives that heighten your awareness of differences—differences culturally, differences behaviorally, differences

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psychologically, emotionally. Those differences that assault your daily lives have no ultimate truth. There is no meaning to those differences. The only truth, the only meaning that merits your attention is that you share in God's creation. You are all the same. No individual is better than another. Likewise, no individual is below another.

In recent events that have unfolded, you are only too aware of the injustice that one can inflict on another. But the individual who creates the suffering and is responsible for the loss is in no way in a lower station of life than you. You are each a part, an unconscious part but nevertheless a part, of the life of one who may be a stranger to you yet whose actions have a profound impact on your lives.

You have often heard that it is important to pray for your enemies. Praying for the enemy, however that is defined, does not mean looking down upon the enemy from some high position and with benevolence offering a prayer on behalf of another. Praying for the enemy ultimately means seeing yourself and recognizing that you and another have so much more in common than the differences that are made evident by the actions of that other person. When you pray for another in that you see yourself in another, you are not condoning the actions but you are affirming the spirit.

All people are accompanied by spirit. Many deny its existence. Many proceed through life committed to a rejection of spirit. But that in no way reduces the impact of spirit presence. Spirit is present, the soul is present because and only because all are loved. The presence of spirit is simply a manifestation of God's love. What kind of love is God's love? It is a love that is nonjudgmental, a love that is totally consuming, a love that uplifts, affirms, supports, enlightens. That kind of love is experienced by all at one level or another. God's love therefore is an example of what each of you should strive to become. There is a wide gap between where you are on your path and where you wish to be, but that is as it should be. Were it not God's intention, reality would be vastly different.

If your principles of life are contrary to what you observe, stand up and be counted. Be willing to speak out for what truth is as you currently understand it, but in speaking out, such expression is never appropriate through pride or judgment. It is only offered through love. If you are in great disagreement with what others have done in their lives, it is fine to express that disagreement. It is fine to feel a kind of dread or a suffocating conviction that there is an accident about to happen. There is no sin, as you might call it, to feeling anger about wrongs that you see around you, for those feelings serve as guideposts helping you to chart and negotiate your own paths.

In opposing the behavior of others, affirm, nevertheless, their equal favor in God's eyes. The individual who has never killed another is favored no more than one who is responsible for vast suffering and grief, because both lives contain the same

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spiritual values. Both lives are therefore sacred, despite what they may do. The penal system in society is always to point out what is contrary to current understandings, but those understandings change. And it is to be understood also that human beings change, change in perception as well as intention. The differences you observe between your own sense of morality and the behavior of another may be great and seemingly irreconcilable within your own society, but remember what your society embraces now is not what it embraced in the recent past, and it is not what shall be embraced in the future.

Society is a dynamic collection of energies, and these energies increase in perception, increase in understanding. You cannot fully condemn another. You can condemn behavior but never the person. You can condemn what society does but not what it can become. You can condemn prejudice and yet learn to love the one who acts out of prejudice. You can condemn as intolerable what another chooses to forgive. Condemnation and forgiveness are two sides of the same issue. That issue is judgment. That issue is a separation of another from you. There is no place for separation within the realm of Spirit. There is only separation when individuals are preoccupied with what separates and not what unites.

It is a difficult lesson to learn to be whole, for being whole is not merely the belief in God as some abstract energy of love. To be whole requires that you see the wholeness. Seeing the wholeness at some level, you cannot any longer deny God's Spirit is a part of your lives because of that wholeness. The importance of love is relevant because it reflects the wholeness we speak of. It is understandable and perfectly normal to hold resentments and anger and bitterness. That is part of being human, but God's presence allows you to transcend those feelings, allows you to accept those feelings as part of your journey, because in denying them, you are denying a part of your spiritual journey.

Don't continue through life denying either others or your own feelings. Embrace others. Embrace the feelings you may have even when they are not positive or supporting. Experience those feelings and then let them go, for you are not directed in life by those feelings. Rather, you direct your lives to take what comes that brings pain or anxiety, and then let it go, keeping your vision on the potential for good, the power of reconciliation, and the overwhelming grace of love.

We bless you with that loving grace, that loving presence. We bless you in your accepting your own seeming shortcomings. We bless you as you struggle to move ahead toward the center of all creation.

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Each of you is so fortunate to have a vision of reality that is broad and growing in its inclusiveness. Embrace your neighbors with tolerance, compassion, understanding, and a sense of identity that says you are your neighbor and your neighbor is you.

We, your guides, are a part of who you are, and you are a part of who we are. We share the blessing of seeing one another in ourselves. Be open to seeing God in yourselves, and be open to seeing yourselves in God.

Amen.