A Spirituality Vignette

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In my senior year of college, there were two concepts that I had decided would guide my job search: lived theology and embodied solidarity. I had learned that the term “theology” literally means “to speak of God,” which meant to me that I am always speaking of God, and that the way I live communicates more clearly who I believe God is than any combination of carefully selected words ever could. I wanted to find a job that would speak to the human-loving, justice-seeking, freedom-bringing, diversity-celebrating God that I had come to know while studying Christianity and Anthropology.

And thus came the next realization-that the actual spaces that my body had inhabited up until graduation had made me limited in knowledge, ignorant of much, and fearful of difference. To understand and be changed by those who my academic papers said that I valued, I needed to make choices to go to those places and be among those people. To put my body where my mouth was, if you will.

Or even more importantly, to put my body where my God was.

And that is how I ended up at L’Arche Portland. A place where among our 8 housemates we celebrated birthdays of 24, 51, and 87 years on this earth. Some of us used wheelchairs, had diagnoses like Down syndrome or cerebral palsy, and received Medicare or Medicaid. Others of us were caregivers, NPR listeners, and had college degrees. To accommodate everyone, our dinners were vegan, gluten-free, low fat, and low sugar, but somehow always included dessert. We came from all over the country, and at times even had a volunteer from Germany in our midst.

I loved my dinner table at L’Arche. We were so different, with the structures of society communicating that we shouldn’t have been together, and yet we were a family and all called the same house our home.

For me, that was the exact kind of living theology and embodied solidarity that I was hoping to grow from. It didn’t come naturally, though.

Turns out spirituality in community is far different from individual spirituality.

I spent two years in L’Arche Portland after graduating from a fairly conservative private Christian college near Chicago. L’Arche Portland is a spiritual community with Catholic roots, and joining that community provided my first opportunity to participate in a dynamic that was not “secular,” but also was not “religious” as I had known it. I was rather uncomfortable with the ambiguity of L’Arche spirituality for a while.

A great example of this is my journey with after dinner prayer.

Each night after dinner at Neahkahnie House, we would light a candle, ring a meditation bell, spend a moment in silence, then hold a time for prayer. Our prayers varied each night from singing “This Little Light of Mine” to sharing something we were grateful for, to reading an excerpt from a book. For my first year or so at L’Arche, while I enjoyed these prayer times, they mostly felt like a formality- often the core members, those who have intellectual disabilities, did not seem to pay attention to the prayer, or they would go on tangents about whatever they wanted to talk about as assistants tried to stay on topic. I wondered if they even had faith in God or a desire to pray. I saw after dinner prayer as a nice thing that we did, but did not know it to affect me or enhance my spirituality in any significant way. Church, books, podcasts, and nuanced conversations were how I sought spiritual growth.

Throughout my two years in that home, however, I began walking through questions regarding my faith as I came to understand God in new ways. As I worked through the new depth in my faith, I grew tired and apathetic toward the habits that had previously directed my spirituality. During this time, after dinner prayer became one of the only explicit spiritual practices that remained. What was once an unnecessary, unhelpful ritual to me became a foundational liturgy that grounded me as my faith developed. I also began to pay attention to and hear my housemates as they participated in the prayer in ways that were authentic to themselves, rather than focusing on how their participation in prayer differed from my own.

While my 87 year old housemate, Rodney, often said whatever he wanted, made jokes, and seemed generally detached from the content of the prayer, his contribution was essential. His routine was to ring the meditative bell, and he rang it not in one long, peaceful drone, but more like a school bell, followed by a shrug as he talked over the rest of the table’s moment of silence. When sharing a person we wanted to pray for, he would faithfully pray for one of his two closest friends, Susan and David Perry, who he lovingly refers to as “The Nun” and “Ms. Kerry.” When we chose to sing he would suddenly throw his hands up with purpose and conduct the table as he tapped his foot, singing his own medley of songs. He would always crack himself up by blowing equal parts air and spit to put out the electric candle that we would shut off after making him attempt blowing it out a few times.

Rodney’s approach to prayer looked different from my own, but I was clearly mistaken to then assume that it did not serve a purpose, or that it was not sacred.

As proud as I was of the diversity at my dinner table and the opportunities it offered me to live out my values, it took me a long time to realize that the true gift is in not only who is invited to sit at your dinner table, but who is *participating* at the table.

In a community with a value of spirituality, who is there space for? Who is welcome to bring their whole selves and influence the dynamic of the table?

What I came to learn is that spirituality in community means leaning into difference, and finding the sacredness in ordinary life and human connection.

As Rodney and I took part in after dinner prayer together, eventually we found a fluid place where there was enough room for both of our expressions of prayer- each bringing our gifts, intentions, and needs to the same candle, and that holding his hand and joining him to say “A-MAN” did more to shape me than I will ever understand.

I think Richard Rohr said it well when he said “Jesus did not come to found a separate or new religion as much as he came to present a universal message of vulnerability and unity that is necessary for all religions, the human soul, and the earth’s survival. By very definition, vulnerability and unity do not compete or dominate. The Cosmic Christ is no threat to anything but separateness, illusion, and the imperial ego.”

May we all spend this year learning how to turn from the things that cause us to compete with or try to dominate one another, and instead turn toward creating the table at which we would all like to eat dinner and pray.