

The Journey Inward and the Journey Outward Define Each Other

Micah 6:6-8, Matthew 22:34-40

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Robert Bellah, the most influential sociologist of religion, died about a month ago on August 3. His death prompted me to think about some of his major insights into American life. The one I'm thinking about is the religion he called Sheilaism—ever heard of it? Bellah and some colleagues wrote a best seller in 1985 called *Habits of the Heart*, arguing that religion in America had gone from something public and corporate to something extremely private. A Gallup poll at the time said that 80 percent of Americans believed that “an individual should arrive at his or her religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues. Bellah explored that through many interviews with everyday people.

“Sheila Larson” was the name they made up for a young nurse they interviewed who said I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice...It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.

Bellah said that Sheilaism creates the possibility of as many different American religions as there are people. Even many of the people who show up in the pews, he said, are really Sheilaists who feel that religion is a private matter and that there is no constraint placed on them by the historic church or even by the Bible. I thought of one person who got upset because we suggested that the church needed to help people grow in their spiritual lives. That person said that no person has the right to tell any other person that he needs to grow in his spiritual life, and the community as the whole has no right to tell the individual anything.

I have no doubt that Sheilaism is the dominant religion of Block Island, even if the people who hold that view say that they are “spiritual but not religious.” What they have settled on is “my own little religion” which makes no demands of me. That religion is all about finding inner peace, calming yourself down, become observant, and insulating yourself from the chaos of the world.

Last week I had a conversation with a guest I met through Common Ground Coffeehouse. He came up to me at the Spring Street Gallery and talked to me for a long time. At first he just wanted to thank me for the music at the coffeehouse, but then it became clear that he wanted to evangelize me. He told me that he had grown up Catholic but he had left the church. A few years ago he discovered meditation and was part of a growing group that met every week to meditate. He had found a peace that he had never known through meditation. It was kind of like “I once was blind but now I see.”

I responded by affirming him—saying that mindfulness and inner peace and insight into yourself were all good things. But now it was my turn to evangelize. I could have responded that the Christian idea of meditation as practiced over the centuries is that it is Christ-centered. When we find God inside us, he looks a lot like Jesus. But I didn't think he would accept that idea at all, so I took another tack.

I told him that the Christian way is to balance the inward journey of meditation with the outward journey of justice and mercy. It seems to me that what's missing in a lot of spirituality today is a concern for the world. It's self-centered, without a passion for changing the world. It's

not enough to say that the world is good as it is, or that the purpose of meditation is to help you to accept suffering or come to peaceful acceptance of what is. There's too much evil in the world for that, and most of the suffering in the world is the result of human evil and injustice. The tradition of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus is to seek justice and do acts of mercy, as well as developing a humble spiritual walk with God.

My conversation partner leaned back a little, sipped on his wine, cocked his head and said "That makes sense to me. I'll have to think about that. There does need to be a balance. Thank you for enlightening me." I wish I had that kind of response to my sermons! What I didn't tell him was that secretly I wondered if most Christians—or even most of my church members—would agree with what I said. Maybe I'll find out right after this service ends.

I want to point you to two of the most famous parts of the Bible. The first is one of the most quoted verses in the Old Testament, Micah 6:8—" [God] has told you, human, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?" The prophet Micah is talking to people who are already spiritual in their own eyes, and already religious. They are whining that nothing religious that they do is enough to please God. Micah reminds them of what God really wants—not rituals or offerings, not anything extraordinary or impossible, but justice, mercy, and humility toward God.

The word "require" may throw you off. It doesn't mean require as a teacher requires a 30-page paper. The Hebrew word *darash* often means "seek"; it's used of lovers seeking each other and a shepherd seeking a lost sheep. The question is "What is God seeking?" What does God yearn for? What God wants are not good deeds you can check off on a to-do list. What God wants is a way of life, a set of priorities for every day.

The first is to do justice. That's something you do in the real world. Justice in the Bible doesn't mean fairness or punishing evil doers. It means insuring that everyone has what they need. It means building a community where people share, where the poor are not deprived of their share of what God has given to the whole people. You can't do justice in private. You can't do justice by thinking about it. You can only do it by taking on injustice and making changes in the world. It's an utterly outward activity.

The second thing God wants is that we love mercy—that we value steadfast love and kindness. God is calling us to acts of kindness to people who need our help. God wants us to forgive people who have been bad and need our mercy. He doesn't mean that he wants us to forgive ourselves and be good to ourselves; he's talking about something outside ourselves once again.

The third thing God wants is that we walk humbly with God, and that is the definition of Hebrew spirituality. You could say this is the inward journey. Humble yourself before the high and holy God. Do not make yourself God that you should decide the rules for your own life. Don't set yourself up as the judge of God or of anyone else. But also walk alongside God, with God as your companion—or better, becoming God's companion on God's journey.

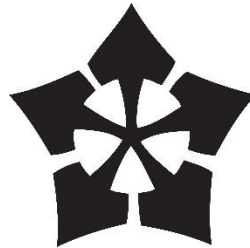
Wouldn't it be something if we Christians were really known for justice, mercy, and humility? Can you imagine if the sign in front of the church said "Harbor Church: Justice, Mercy, Humility"? That's almost the opposite of what outsiders think of us. They think Christians stand for injustice for women and gays and atheists and Muslims. They think we are judgmental rather than merciful. And the last thing they see in the church is humility; they see us as people who claim to have all the answers. That's our reputation, not what we really stand for—but that's because we haven't been clear and consistent about what we stand for.

The other text I want you to look at is even more familiar than Micah 6:8. It's what we call "The Great Commandment," found in Matthew 22:37-39 and in two other gospels. Jesus quotes two Hebrew scripture verses and puts them together. The first is the verse from Deuteronomy that Jewish men recited every day of their lives, what is called the *Shema* (from the Hebrew word for "hear"). It goes "Hear O Israel, the Lord is your God, the Lord alone. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." But Jesus yokes that together with a second command which is, he says, like it. That is the command "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says that those two go together, and everything in the books of the law and the prophets hangs on those two commands, which together Christians call "The Great Commandment." One is the inward part of faith—loving God with heart and soul and strength, but paired with it is the outward part of faith—loving your neighbor in the same way that you already take care of your own needs. In First John and in James you find the two pushed together: you can't love God and not love your neighbor, you can't say you believe in God and not put your faith into action. If you just do the inward part and not the outward part, you are a liar. There is no inward part, because if you really knew God you would love the world the way God does.

Scot McKnight, a New Testament scholar, wrote a book called *The Jesus Creed* which argued that Jesus intentionally joined the traditional Shema creed about loving God to the second command to love your neighbor. Scot thinks that Jesus taught his disciples to say the two commands together every day as a creed, just as traditionally Jews said the Shema, with both love of God and love of neighbor being interpreted by the way Jesus lived his life.

One way that people talk about that combination is to say that there is a vertical dimension to the Christian life and a horizontal dimension to the Christian life. We love God and we love our neighbors. You could even say that the cross pictures that with a vertical line and a horizontal line.

But I'd rather talk about the inward journey and the outward journey. We don't think so much of God as "up there" as "in here," and we certainly don't go "up" to find God—we go down deep inside ourselves to find God and find our love for God. That's why I've put this image in the bulletin, with inward arrows and outward arrows:



Only someone who grew up Southern Baptist would recognize that as the logo of Baptist Campus Ministries, with which I served for a decade. It was derived from a book by Elizabeth O'Connor of the Church of the Savior in Washington DC—a book called *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*. (I discovered this week that the Church of the Savior has a nice devotional website called inwardoutward.org.) In the days when the Southern Baptist leadership was more moderate in its theology, it was considered important that their campus ministry was balanced—not just all about inward spiritual growth, but also about outward mission, evangelism, and social ministry. Eventually they assigned a program to each of the five inward arrows and each of the five outward arrows.

But I think the symbol itself reminds us of something deeper: that the journey inward is defined by the journey outward, and the journey outward is defined by the journey inward. Look

at the logo. The inward arrows could not exist without the outward arrows, and vice versa. If you tried to do the outward journey all by itself, it would take a completely different shape.

Some spiritual teachers talk about a rhythm between these two movements, as if you take turns being introverted and extroverted. I prefer to call it balance. You need both at the same time, because they define each other.

You have to go inward. I don't want to disparage meditation or prayer or self-awareness. God is "in here" because we are made in the image of God, and because God's Spirit is speaking to us even before we know Christ, and third because Jesus' life invades our life when we believe in him and his life-force is deep in the center of the self. Simultaneously, that contact with the pained heart of God, pained by sin and the suffering in the world, and our contact with Jesus' compassion and love-energy, drives us *outward* into the world. And the two basic forms that takes are those spelled out by Micah—doing justice and loving mercy—that is, working to bring about justice in the world and doing particular acts of compassion. Both are ways we love God and both are ways we love our neighbors.

My journey inward is shaped by my knowledge of God's passion for justice and God's mercy to everyone. It can't ever be narcissistic or cut off from the world that God loves so much that he sent his Son, that he did not withhold his only Son but gave him up for us. My journey outward is shaped by my experience of God's love and holiness in a deeply mystical way. My fighting for justice is tempered by my awareness of my own sin and by my awareness of God's mercy to me. If I work for justice and do kind things, I do both with humility, because I know how unworthy I was of God's love. :

Here's what I want you to do today as you look at the inward-outward logo: ask yourself if you are on an inward journey or an outward journey or both. If you are trying to do the outward acts of mercy and working to set the world right as Jesus wants you to, but you are not engaged in the inward journey of finding God deep in yourself in quietness and prayer and love for God, your arrows are going to fall short. You're going to run out of steam. You'll just be a do-gooder rather than a Christian. On the other hand, if you are trying to do the inward acts of believing and praying and growing spiritually, but you are not engaged in serving God in the world and working for the justice that reflects his kingdom's values, then you are going to run out of steam, too. If you are not concerned for the world, you will not find God, because God is all about the world; God is all about justice and mercy and how they get lived out in individuals and in communities and nations. You can't reach inside and find God unless you are reaching out to find your neighbor. I hope you will commit yourself today to do both.