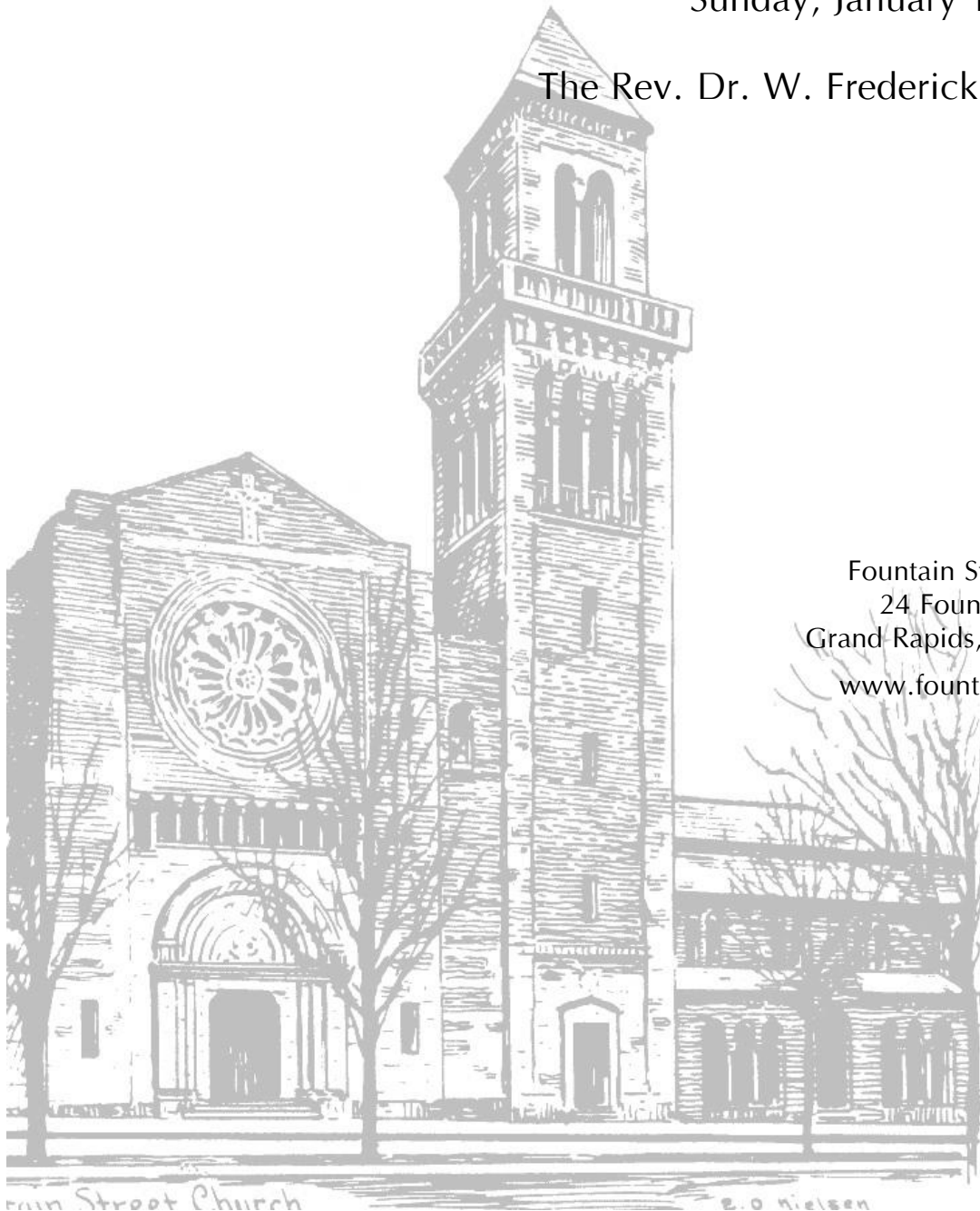


“The Way of Ecstasy”

Sunday, January 18, 2009

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“The Way of Ecstasy”

READINGS

“There are some things in our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence. I never expect to adjust myself to tragic militarism.... I never intend to adjust myself to the inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism... and to the self-defeating method of physical violence.” - *Martin Luther King Jr.*

“Alas, O Lord, to what a state does thou bring those who love thee.” - *Teresa of Avila*

“... something suddenly becomes visible and audible with indescribably definiteness... one hears – one does not seek; one takes – one does not ask who gives... There is an ecstasy... There is feeling one is utterly out of hand...”

- *Friedrich Nietzsche*

“As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’

... My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan
and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me. By day the Lord commands

his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me, a prayer
to the God of my life....”

- Psalm 42

* * * * *

SERMON

What a week lies ahead. Tomorrow is the King holiday, and forty of us from this church will be at the Urban League Breakfast in honor of the occasion. For the last three years I have gone. The first year I was one of two or three from Fountain Street Church. Last year we had ten, but other churches had more. This year, perhaps because I am chair of the Urban league Board now, you are supporting me and my work with them by sending forty folks.

I'd like to think there was yet another reason you were going, more than supporting me or the Urban League; that it is a way to honor the most remarkable presidential inauguration of our age, perhaps ever, when an African-American becomes our president. What could be more fitting, when you think about it? That these two moments are beside each other, the King holiday and the inauguration intensifies each, so that for those like my comrade Walter Brame who have been in the storm so long, they are almost beside themselves with pride and joy.

Many folks will be preaching about the confluence of Dr. King and President Obama today. We all know and revere the moral leadership of Dr. King. What I wish to examine, however, is his spiritual leadership. Whence came his dream? Why did he work and die for it? I submit that he had an experience of intimacy with God that took him outside himself, forever changing him, rendering him maladjusted to this world, an experience that was ecstatic. This is what we, the sensible practical spiritual folks, need to understand if we are to be spiritually whole.

Ecstasy literally means to be beside or outside oneself. There are many forms of it, from rapturous love to drug-induced delirium, but what they all have is the sense of being in profound communion with something larger and more meaningful than yourself. This month I have been describing four different spiritualities as described by Corinne Ware, a psychologist and seminary professor who wrote a book called *Discover Your Spiritual Type*. For those who have not been here, or don't remember, she uses research in psychology to suggest we all tend to prefer either an emotional or an intellectual approach to spirituality. That's one axis on her map. We also tend to prefer a more concrete or abstract idea of that spirituality, which is the other axis. Putting them together yields a circle divided into four quadrants, of which I have spoken about two so far, the intellectual forms.

Today is about the most difficult spirituality for folks like us, because it is emotional and relates to religion very concretely. God is not just an idea because emotions are about relationships. The whole purpose of this spirituality is to know God personally, emotionally. Yes, I am talking about "holy rollers" and Pentecostals and all those folks who wave their hands or shout or tell you how they have accepted Jesus as their personal lord and savior.

We certainly aren't like that, to be sure. But not without cost. I'll repeat the old joke about the elder woman of color who decided to visit the old downtown First Church. You know the sort of place, solemn and almost museum-like in its ambience. The preacher began and it was not long before she spoke up. "Amen." People looked around. Another minute or two passed and there came another comment, "Help him Lord." More turned heads. An usher, sensing the discomfort of the other worshippers, approached her gently. "Is there anything wrong, ma'am?" "No, young man," she replied. "I just got religion." To which he replied, "Oh we don't do that here."

As I have said all month, a person or a church that can only express its religion in one way has two problems. First, it leaves out all those who share its values but not its expression. Second, it can come to identify spiritual style with religious substance and make that its real religion. That's why Professor Ware believes we need to cultivate all the different spiritualities in some way, lest we become spiritual snobs who are essentially idolaters, people who worship the image not the reality of their faith.

So that must mean I am telling you we need to sway with the music or dance in the aisles or babble in heavenly tongues, right? No. It does mean we ought to be careful about dismissing it as something beneath us or not dignified or not liberal. I know liberal churches that clap in time, sing lustily, occasionally shout and move, and otherwise let their whole bodies get involved. I also know churches that do this because they think they ought to, not because they mean it. Emotional expressiveness is not proof one is ecstatic or religious, and being quiet and serene can be part of genuine religious ecstasy. Anyone who has seen Bernini's almost indecent statue of Teresa of Avila in ecstasy knows her intensely spiritual ecstasies were intensely private. And who could have told from his other writings how ecstatic Friedrich Nietzsche was.

Of course, the psalms predate them both, and *Psalms 42* explains why this spirituality is so powerful:

"As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?
... My soul is cast down within me...
Deep calls to deep..."

Even skeptical liberals understand this longing for communion with something greater. We all feel it in nature or during a concert or when we feel deep love or profound grief. Something deep inside us calls out to be heard. Deep calls unto deep. *Abyssus abyssum invocat* says the Latin version. אֶל-תְּהוֹם-תְּהוֹם קוֹרֵא. It says in the original Hebrew. "Tehom" is related to the word in *Genesis 1* that means formless and void. We hunger for meaning, from the very depths quite literally. We want not just to know but to be connected in a way that permeates mind and heart, body and spirit. We long to be filled, and when we get it, how can we not respond with heart as well as mind, with body as well as spirit.

What I am saying is that even we need a faith that fills us in every sense. Ecstasy is in our spirit as well. But we cannot do this if we withhold ourselves in return. Thinking is not enough. Contemplation is not enough. Even moral action is not enough. We cannot touch the really real and the profoundly true with just our minds, just our thoughts, just our convictions. Our hearts must be there, even if they break. Our hopes must be there, even if they are to be dashed. Our deeds must be there, even when they are outlandish. That's what Teresa is talking about, you see. "Alas, O Lord, to what a state does thou bring those who love thee." Those whose deep calls out to be touched deeply will lose themselves in a way, the feeling "one is utterly out of hand," as Nietzsche said.

Perhaps the best way for liberals like us to get at this is to remember the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel at night. Like him, we grab hold of this thing called religion and throw it to the ground and make it confess. "Who are you, what are you?" we say. But the angel keeps wrestling, and won't give up. We try harder, throw ourselves into it measure for measure. The night goes on, and alone in the dark with the angel we struggle. And then, as dawn approaches and we begin to see some glimmer of a shape, some hint of what the truth is, the angel dislocates our hip and escapes.

The way of ecstasy is costly. Because the really real is stronger than any of us, you will come up lame for the experience. I know, because it has happened to me. Once you have seen, known, felt the deep truth you know how far you are from it most of the time. It leaves you maladjusted compared to everyone else.

A few people took me aside recently and gently chastised me for being so self-deprecating in sermons recently. But I was not being self-deprecating. I was telling the truth about myself, for I have wrestled the angel and know, in ways that words cannot speak, the really real. I have felt God in me (there is no other word that comes even close) not as some gentle zephyr and kindly warmth, but as the deep thing, the *Tehom* into which mere mortals can only fall and ever after limp. I have known what Denise Levertov calls Terrible Joy. Nothing I say can ever quite express it.

Sometimes, though, in this hour, I feel a bit of it as I preach. And if I am not careful it will carry me away, with words I find in my mouth more than think. Is this God,

or truth? I am not sure. This much I am sure of, it is powerful and uncontrollable except to stop it altogether. That's why I write my sermons out, to make sure the ecstasy doesn't get the upper hand and unmeasured words of hope and fear come roaring out.

I said once that my best sermons have not been preached because I am not sure you want to hear them. This is what I meant. For me to preach from the depth is to give my whole self to it, and risk not knowing precisely what will emerge. I cannot do that if you are not going to give your whole self to it as well. I have to know we are in it together, deep calling unto deep.

For me the famous speech come from Memphis not Washington. "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop." He had. From his depth he called to the depth, and from depths it raised him up to see the world from above, stand outside himself. He had to take himself, all of himself, all the way down before he could go up and stand outside himself.

That is what this spirituality takes, and what it gives. No guarantees. Lots of danger. But a chance, an actual chance, to know in your whole self the deep down truth. I know it is there. Do *you* know it? "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you." Our souls need watering, friends. I have some to share if you want it.