

We Are All Mystics
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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15:26

"We are all Mystics" Pilgrim Church UCC, April 10, 2016, (Acts 9:1-20) Third Sunday of Easter

As we continue to explore what happened after the resurrection, we turn from Thomas last week to Saul. It's hard to imagine someone who had a more dramatic change of heart than Saul of Tarsus. The man who started out as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus became Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. The man who approved of the stoning of Stephen (the first Christian martyr)—the man who we're told "ravaged the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women and condemning them to prison"—this is the man who would help spread the young faith far and wide.[1] Who would write letters of encouragement to churches, who would be beaten and arrested time and again for preaching the Gospel.

When we hear about Saul on the road to Damascus, his conversion experience can seem crazy. We hear that "a light from heaven flashed around him" and that a voice we're told is Jesus speaks to him. Part of the reason this passage is strange is that it's highly mystical. This story depicts an experience where a person has communion with God. Sometimes mysticism is experienced as a sort of one-ness with God (union.) While other experiences are intense connections with the sacred that are deep, close, and intimate though a sense of separation remains (communion.)[2] Mystical experiences are hard to put into words because they're personal religious experiences, direct insight into one's own self and God.

In our modern times, if someone says they've had a mystical experience it might be met with skepticism. Yet mysticism isn't some ancient or medieval phenomenon that has disappeared. One of my favorite theologians is Dorothee Soelle who was from Germany and a feminist and liberation theologian, a poet and mystic, and an activist. When she was teaching at Union Seminary in New York she made her mark in the women's liberation movement and as a pacifist shaped by her family's experience opposing the Nazis in Germany. Soelle's magnum opus is *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. In it, she laments that people are often so critical of mysticism and that our very language is inadequate to describe it. Soelle describes mysticism as entering into a "cloud of unknowing" and that "the more people enter into the cloud of unknowing the clearer it becomes, both that God is incomprehensible and that conventional language fails us." [3]

Even if we can wrap our heads around the mystical experiences depicted in the Acts of the Apostles this morning, the words on the page will probably never satisfy us. Nor can this sermon explore Paul's mystical experience as well as I'd like. And it's because these experiences are ineffable, indescribable, and mysterious. Our conventional language will always fail because mysticism is about experiences that are profound and life-altering, personal and transformative, they're often beyond language itself.

John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg coauthored a book called *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon* and they define Paul as a Jewish Christ mystic.[4] The authors point to Paul's experience on the Road to Damascus as the key event of his life (we hear it three different times in the Acts of the Apostles alone.) Paul's experience of the Risen Christ was the event that would launch him into his ministry. The passage says that he loses his sight and neither ate nor drank for three days afterwards—his companions help him into Damascus. Though Saul becomes enlightened, he moved from the darkness of persecution to the light of love. He moved from being blinded by hatred to being

enlightened by acceptance. Like many mystics, he comes to see our beautiful world differently and life will never be the same.

Here's an example of this outside scripture: Dorothee Soelle's oldest son was learning to read numbers and he stood still one day in front of a house's number plate and didn't move a muscle. She encouraged him to get moving, come on! And his response was, "Look, Mummy, what a wonderful 537!" Naturally, Soelle herself had never even noticed this number before. But her son stood there speaking the number slowly, discovering this number, and he was so happy. As Soelle says, "I think that every discovery of the world plunges us into jubilation, a radical amazement that tears apart the veil of triviality. Nothing is to be taken for granted, least of all beauty!"[5]

Who's to say that moment wasn't a little mystical? Soelle says that the stages of the mystical journey are: to be amazed, to let go, and to resist. We can look at the world around us and be radically amazed. We can let go of our need for possessions, violence, or ego. And we can resist oppression, changing the world with compassion by working for justice. It's not an impossible feat to take this journey to mysticism, though it's not easy.

Maybe we've already felt profoundly connected to God and we've just never labeled those experiences as mystical. Maybe deep connection happens when you pray, or when you lose yourself in the beautiful sights and sounds of nature, or when you hear a moving song, or when you realize how thankful you are for people in your life. Even though mystical experiences look differently, happen differently, and are experienced differently, there could be many moments of union or communion with God. Many moments where we feel at-one with a greater power far beyond ourselves.

Part of what makes today's story so wonderful is that Paul isn't the only mystic. Ananias, a follower of Christ who lived in Damascus, also experienced the Divine. For Ananias, he has a vision and hears the command to reach out to Saul, to lay his hands on him so that Saul can regain his sight. Ananias responds with trepidation and fear, almost asking Jesus if he got the right person, saying that he's heard of this Saul and "how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem." [6] You can almost hear Ananias asking if he's about to have the same fate as poor Stephen, stoned to death right in front of Saul. But he does reach out to "Brother Saul," laying his hands on him to restore his sight and then baptizing him.

With mystical experiences often comes a change of heart, of seeing the world in a new way, of being blind and regaining true sight. And here's the thing—we can all be mystics. Even if you don't think you've ever had a mystical experience before, the potential is there. The title of Chapter One in Soelle's *The Silent Cry* is: "We Are All Mystics." Because we're all able to experience the sacred in our lives. We can open ourselves up to one another and to all of creation and feel deeply connected.

Maybe this doesn't get emphasized enough—it's not just "special" people who can connect to God. God is accessible to everyone. A group that can help all Christians remember this is the Society of Friends (the Quakers.) You know, Quaker was a derisive name people called them because of their silent devotions and spontaneous, unprepared speeches. Some said that these Friends moved by the Spirit, would begin to quake. When they formed in 1668, there were 60,000 followers of "the Inner Light" in England—bound by a Christian expression without dogma, without church buildings, and without paid clergy. George Fox (who founded the Society of Friends) had a vision when he was twenty years old and saw the inner light. For Fox, the light symbolized the spirit, silence, experience, and equality.

Quakers still gather in silence three hundred years later. By turning inward, they attune themselves to each other. The silence of a Quaker meeting replaces our Protestant custom of

the sermon. Sacraments aren't needed because the conduct of life itself is a sacrament for Quakers. George Fox taught: "walk joyfully on the earth and respond to that of God in every human being."^[7]

A student at Union shared with Dorothee Soelle an experience of her first visit to a Quaker Meeting after a friend had invited her to attend. Everyone sat in silence on wooden benches in rows facing each other. Ten minutes went by and the student became nervous and asked, "when is the service beginning?" and the response was a whispered "it has already begun." The student waited for the minister to enter but everyone sat so calmly and peacefully that she didn't ask any more questions. The silence lasted for forty minutes until one man stood up and spoke. After he sat down, a woman got up and spoke. By that point the student was really confused and still couldn't figure out who the minister was. After a few more minutes of silence, everyone began to greet one another and the meeting was over. When she turned to her friend and asked, "Where was the minister?" her friend just burst out laughing. For Quakers, every person is clergy and the gathered silence is the worship of God. This way of living has been the foundation for Quakers for three hundred years—this "waiting for the Lord." It's practiced in silence and this waiting is a mystical preparation.^[8]

Now I'm not trying to preach myself out of a job—after all I have an adorable foxhound who needs food and bones and a roof over his head. Though this form of Christianity without professional clergy or super structured worship that centers around waiting for God in silent mystical preparation is really interesting. In the end, mysticism is not just for Paul and Ananias or Dorothee Soelle or the Quakers, mysticism is for all of us. If we allow ourselves to truly experience our faith, not just talk about it or think about it. But experience it in our hearts, maybe we can be transformed in ways that are beyond words. May it be so with us, Amen.

[1] Acts 8:3.

[2] Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul: Reclaiming the Radical Visionary Behind the Church's Conservative Icon*, 20.

[3] Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, 58.

[4] Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul*, 21.

[5] Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 89.

[6] Acts 9:13.

[7] George Fox, as quoted by Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 172.

[8] Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry*, 169-173.