

ESSENTIALISM vs. EXISTENTIALISM
(How Can We Change?)

August 11, 2019

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 7:15-20
Galatians 5:22-23

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22)

For those of you who came in through the back door or the kitchen door this morning, and who therefore may not have seen the posting on the sign board in front of the church, the sermon title is listed as “Essentialism vs. Existentialism.”

When I emailed Bill Guenon, who changes the sign in front of the church every week to reflect either the sermon title or the essence of the sermon for the coming Sunday (and he does this rain or shine, high humidity or freezing cold, and whether he receives my input on Mondays or, which happens more than occasionally, later in the week), Bill had a suggestion.

When I told him that I intended to preach about how we as a society can change, Bill responded that it seemed like the basic issue I was raising was the perennial philosophical debate between essentialism and existentialism. I had to agree that he was right. He also suggested that if we posted this on the sign, it might get people’s attention. People driving by might get curious. When he suggested that this posting could even be considered a little “edgy,” that sealed the matter. If there is one way I definitely want to be, or at least how I want to be perceived, especially with my new haircut, it is edgy. Hence the sign.

I don’t generally focus on political issues in my sermons. I think the members of this church know where I stand politically without my telling them. However, since our Christian faith provides a standpoint for understanding what is happening in our country and around the world, and since our faith, our Christian values should shape our response, there are times when we need to reflect on current events. This is one of those times.

Last week, we witnessed two more mass murders in our country—two *more*. The homegrown terrorist attacks in El Paso Texas and Dayton Ohio claimed the lives of over thirty people and wounded many more. We are all saddened; we are all sickened by these events, at least one of which was a clear expression of white supremacy, white nationalism, and the perception of immigrants or people of color as the invading enemy that threatens to conquer and dominate our beloved white America. We are all saddened; we are all sickened by the realization that these are not isolated shootings that are solely attributable to the gunman’s

mental illness; they are expressions of the way many people in America feel toward those of a different race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or ethnic background. If we Americans did not feel this way, we would not have elected a president who embodies and even amplifies these abhorrent views.

In last Sunday's *Boston Globe*, Nestor Ramos wrote a powerful front-page editorial on what these mass shootings say about America and about us as Americans. Ramos begs to differ with the oft-stated response to mass shootings or the Neo-Nazi defacing of synagogues: "This is not who we are as Americans." He counters by saying, "This is exactly who/what we are." We can no longer believe the lie that we have been telling ourselves, the lie of moral exceptionalism, the delusional belief that we are actually better than history and current events show us to be.

This, as Bill insightfully noted, brings to mind the contrast between the philosophical schools of essentialism and existentialism. Essentialism maintains that we have a basic human nature. Existentialism disagrees. This dichotomy speaks to our religious beliefs and the dynamics of change within ourselves, our society, and the world.

One school of theological essentialism maintains that we are basically sinners. We are born into a state of original sin, a condition that goes back to Adam and Eve. Beautiful, innocent little babies are born in sin. The only way out of our basic condition of total depravity is through divine intervention. The Son of God has to take on our sin and serve as the scapegoat, the sacrificial lamb; otherwise we are doomed to hell for all eternity. This has been the official view of the church from the early centuries. As some sceptics have noted, this, not coincidentally, places the church in the power position. If the only way to be saved from eternal damnation is through the church, we need the church. However, this may only be a coincidence.

An alternative essentialist option has existed from the early days of the church as an undercurrent to the prevailing pessimistic view of human nature and human destiny. The creationist school of theology of which Matthew Fox, the former Dominican theologian, is an eloquent example, believes that we are all part of God's creation and, as it says in the Book of Genesis, God has judged creation to be good. This approach maintains that human beings are basically good, though we can go astray. They note that the Greek word for sin in the Bible means "missing the mark." Sin is like an arrow that goes off course, a life that is lived off center. If we return to the center, to the image of God that is implanted in our soul, our life will become more fully an expression of our true nature.

The humanistic psychologists also embrace a positive essentialism. They maintain that humans are basically good, but that forces outside us can lead us astray. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, maintains that it is *society* that screws people up. A current articulation of this position is in Pink Floyd's masterpiece *The Wall*, where Roger Waters shares his thoughts about how school contributes to the crushing of the child's natural, beautiful spirit. Waters writes,

*We don't need no education.
We don't need no thought control.
No dark sarcasm in the classroom.
Teacher, leave them kids alone;
Teacher leave them kids alone.
All in all, you're just another brick in the wall.*

The positive essentialist way of thinking, when I first encountered it, made a lot of sense to me. It was congruent with the basic teaching of Tibetan Buddhism that all sentient beings share a universal buddha-nature, share in the Universal Mind that underlies all that is. It was congruent with the fundamental teachings of Taoism, Hinduism, and the Christian belief that each and every one of us has a soul, a spark of the divine within us, and that the Holy Spirit who dwells within us helps us deepen our relationship with this divine Centre by serving as the inner presence of the person and teaching of Jesus.

Then I ran across the existentialists. The existentialists maintain that we are not essentially anything, that we are not essentially good or essentially bad. We are the life that we live, the decisions we make, the actions that arise from our stance toward life.

For example, if I were to say that I am basically an honest person; I just happen to lie a lot, the existentialists would demur. If you lie a lot, you are a liar. If you lie an awful lot, you are a pathological liar. If I maintain that I am not prejudiced, but I discriminate against people of color, enslaving them, treating them like objects, like property, and seeking to deny them their constitutional right to vote, then I am a racist. The existentialists tell us that if you want to determine what kind of person someone is, you don't have to look for some mystical inner essence. All you have to do is look at what that person thinks, feels, says, and does.

When I first encountered the existential perspective, I found it annoying. It challenged the warm, fuzzy, rose-colored image that I had of people—and also myself. For example, I cling to the belief that I am firmly committed to working out, to staying in shape, but to be honest, I never go to the gym. I don't even go to the gym when I have a gym membership, purchased in the vain hope that if I have a *paid* membership, I will definitely use it. I think we know what the

existentialists would say about this. On a more serious level, the existentialists would challenge the assumption that we human beings are basically, are essentially good, loving, compassionate, caring beings. They ask, if this were true, why did over 100,000,000 people die as a direct result of war in the 20th century? Why did the Nazis kill six million Jews, Stalin kill probably ten million Russians, Pol Pot in Cambodia kill three million of his own people, and the Hutu kill almost a million Tutsi in Rawanda? They raise an interesting point.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus is asked how we can know if someone is good or bad, if someone's life and actions are guided by the Holy Spirit or a demonic spirit. Jesus tells us, very simply, "By their fruits you shall know them." So, I guess Jesus was an existentialist of sorts. He tells us if we look at the way the person lives his/her life; we will know what forces, what spirits are shaping the person's thoughts, feelings, speech, and behavior.

In his pastoral letter to the Galatians, Paul echoes Jesus' teaching when he lists what he calls "the fruits of the spirit." Paul says that if our life is shaped by the presence of the Holy Spirit, our words and actions will be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As an essentialist, I believe this is what a life looks like when our outer life is an expression, an incarnation of the divine inner presence, that spark of God that seeks to light up our life and, through us, illumine a darkened world.

In closing, I want us to think about how this matter of essential or existential theology might inform our thinking about change. When I get discouraged about how difficult it is to root out our white supremacy, to stop treating women like objects, to overcome the fear we have of anyone who is different, to find alternatives to war, to combat the greed that concentrates wealth in the hands of a few and crushes the souls of those who are lower on the socio-economic ladder, I am reminded of the story of a young trekker seeking words of wisdom from a Buddhist master.

The young man trekked to where the master lived in a small monastery high in the mountains of Tibet. Sitting at the master's feet, the young man asked his question: "Can you tell me what the future will be like--for me as an individual and for the world?"

"Certainly," said the master. "Today will be just like yesterday. Tomorrow will be just like today."

"So, the future will always be like the past?" asked the puzzled young man, sadly.

"Yes," replied the master. "Unless, of course, there's a change of consciousness."

Whether you are an essentialist or an existentialist, it seems clear that the only way to change the future is to change the present, and the only way to change the present is for us to

experience a change in consciousness, a change of heart, a change in the way we think and feel. I believe that the Holy Spirit is trying to guide us in this change, trying to help us to evolve as human beings, trying to help us live according to God's plan, God's will for us and for all God's children. I recently came across an excellent example of what this change might look like.

Last month, on public radio, a female reporter interviewed a man who lived in a small town in North Carolina. The man identified himself as the former pastor of the Baptist church in town. The occasion was a gay pride picnic that was held on the town common and was offered to everyone in the town. This provided the townspeople with the opportunity to meet and talk with fellow citizens who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or do not fall into any discrete category of gender identity. I thought that this was much more constructive than a parade.

In any event, the man who was being interviewed shared that he had been a strident opponent of gay rights, especially gay marriage. He was quite clear what the Bible said about these kinds of people (though I thought, as he said this, that it is not really that clear—at least not to me). He had condemned these sick, deviant people from the pulpit. He told his parishioners that these people were all going to hell.

Then his son, who was in high school, came out of the closet. He confessed to his father that he was gay.

The pastor said he was totally devastated. He, a crusader against gay people, had to confess to his congregation that his son was gay. He didn't know how he could do this, how he could reconcile his Christian beliefs with his deep love for his son.

The pastor said he knew that in his moment of desperation he had to follow the guidance of scripture. He had to bring it to God in prayer. He went to his church sanctuary, knelt down, and prayed like he had never before prayed. He prayed that God would change his son.

There was a long pause in the conversation between the pastor and the reporter. Then the pastor said that his prayers were answered. However, God did not change his son. God changed him. The pastor said that God changed his heart.

This was why he was at the gay rights picnic serving food to his fellow townspeople and talking with them about the religious experience that had totally transformed his life. The conversation between the reporter and the father ended, but I was in tears.

Then I recalled what he had said earlier; he had described himself as the *former* pastor of the Baptist church in town. Is it possible that when this pastor shared his experience of having his heart, in the words of John Wesley, "strangely warmed" by God, when he shared his

experience of having the Holy Spirit fill his heart with love and acceptance, with empathy for children of God who have suffered discrimination and persecution simply because they are different, when he shared this powerful transformative religious experience with his congregation the following Sunday morning . . . they fired him?

That would be sad. This would be *really* sad—to fire a pastor for trying to help his people become less judgmental, more accepting, more caring, more loving, for trying to help them become more like Jesus. It would say something about the church. An existentialist would say that no matter what the sign in front of the church proclaimed, this is *not* a Christian church. Its theology is not grounded in the teachings of Jesus. There is no evidence that the parishioners have taken on Jesus’ heart and mind in the way they look at people, in the way they relate to people.

Of course, this is just hypothetical. I don’t know what actually happened. It’s possible that when the pastor shared his religious experience from the pulpit the following Sunday, his parishioners may have found themselves moved to challenge their homophobic theology. When the church voted to change their stance on this issue, the Southern Baptist Convention may have kicked them out of the denomination. This would be good for the church but *really* sad when it came to the denomination. Sadly, I suspect the former option was more likely to have happened.

This pastor taught me something about essentialism, about the power of prayer, and about how the Holy Spirit leads us, draws us back to our true Centre, the Centre out of which Jesus preached, taught, and lived. The man, the father, the pastor prayed for God to change his son. God said no to this prayer. Instead, God did something much more powerful, much more important, much more beautiful. God changed *him*. God changed his consciousness, his heart.

And God can do the same for us.

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