

## **The Disintegration of the Church**

A Meditation on Ash Wednesday, 2014 and taken from Psalm 51

Ken Carter

Resident Bishop, Florida Conference

The United Methodist Church

In a work on spiritual formation entitled Invitation To A Journey, Robert Mulholland sketches the importance of a holistic spirituality, which he defines as “*the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.*” This process includes the understanding of self in relation to God and our neighbor, and the examination of what he calls our creation gifts. He then notes that a grasp of our preferences can lead to our seeing those as the norm for others. If I am right-handed, I think you should be right-handed! The neglect of the gifts of others displays our common tendency to ignore our shadow side: if we are extraverted and draw energy from being around people, we may not be inclined to set aside times for individual introspection.

The neglect of the shadow leads to what he calls a one-sided spirituality. Mulholland notes, “*While it may be comfortable and may seem to be advancing us on our spiritual pilgrimage, (this) will ultimately begin to disintegrate under pressures for nurture from our shadow side.*”

Psalm 51 is one of the traditional scripture lessons for Ash Wednesday, and can be read as David’s willingness to see his shadow side. This is an intense self-examination: to see the part of us that God sees, but we often ignore, or we pretend that it does not exist. To come to grips with this reality is the process of awakening, which can be both exhilarating and dreadful. And yet this awakening, if we attend to it, leads to one of the classic movements in the spiritual life: purgation, from which we get our word purging. Lent can be a time of purging. I have a friend whose spiritual discipline in Lent is to remove one bag of stuff from her house, one bag a day for the forty days!

Purgation is attending to everything in our lives that is unlike the wholeness or the will of God for us. The psalmist writes:

**Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin. (1-2)**

This Psalm has always been impressive to me, and instructive, and inspiring, because in the tradition it captures the words of a leader, namely David, whose sin with Bathsheba had been discovered. David is regarded as the greatest king in the history of Israel. And yet we see, in these words, the disintegration of a person:

**I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.**

**Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean.  
Hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquities.**

There is something profoundly disintegrating about Ash Wednesday:

**Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.**

The ritual, of having the ashes placed on our foreheads, is God's way of teaching us humility, literally of being grounded, that our bodies came from the dust of the earth, and thus we have this common origin, according to Genesis 2, and we will return to the dust, and so we have this common destiny. In the meantime, we are on this pilgrimage, and today that is marked by the necessity of purgation.

The New Testament captures this image as the essential movement of dying to self. Jesus calls us to take up the cross (Luke 9) and explains that unless a grain of wheat is buried into the earth it cannot bear fruit (John 12). Paul reflects on dying to self as a necessary preparation for the new creation (Romans 6).

And so I recently began to reflect on all of this and what it might mean for us in a number of ways.

- What does it mean to die to self as an individual?

I need to acknowledge where my pride gets in the way, my lack of patience with someone else's progress; it is wanting grace for myself and justice for others! It is seeing myself at my best and others at their worst. It is my not willing to be accountable to others. This is a significant temptation for a bishop!

- How might a local church die to self?

I am in awe of churches that are willing to let go of the past—traditions, heritage, sometimes buildings, their respectability, their impressions of themselves—in order to see the mission and the people that God is sending to them today. And yes, sometimes local churches close—they can either live in the tomb of that death or plant new seeds for new people and new communities.

- How might an annual conference die to self?

It is the acknowledgement that we really do exist for the local church, and for the people, the leaders of those local churches, and not for ourselves. We exist to serve them—it is not so much that they are in compliance with us. And one of the ways a conference dies to self is to put aside the different preferences and silos and give itself to a greater purpose, a purpose more significant than our survival: the kingdom of God.

- And how could a denomination die to self? I have actually thought more about this question.

This is a sobering thought, in 2014. We have been, for a generation, an institution in decline. We have been in a season of purgation. Perhaps God is pruning us. And perhaps we are in the process, like David, of disintegration. We certainly know something about one-sided spirituality. We are prone to stay in our preference groups, people who live in our regions, who support the causes we champion, who think theologically the way we do. This is a comfortable place to be, but, as Robert Mulholland notes, pressures in time bring about a disintegration.

He notes that this disintegration can take two forms. We can lose our faith and become stagnant. Certainly many in United Methodism have lost faith in God, in the church. Many of our churches are stagnant: the statistic of the number of churches who do not welcome anyone into the community on profession of faith each year is unsettling. And second, he says, we can remain in the church, but we are compartmentalized, with an *“unholy mixture of faithful Christian discipleship and participation in the destructive brokenness of the world”* (63). We think we are doing the work of Jesus, but not always in the way of Jesus. And so our political rhetoric mimics the world, and it becomes a noisy gong and clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13).

The neglect of our shadow side prevents us from living into the fullness of an holistic spirituality, which is the love of God and neighbor (or “sanctification” in the Wesleyan tradition), the desire for truth and the offering of grace, the gesture of radical hospitality and the necessity of personal and social holiness. The embrace of the fullness of the gospel leads to the experience defined by Robert Quinn as “deep change”; the neglect of this gift—implying the desire to stay within our preferences—has an inevitable outcome, which he refers to as “slow death”.

Clearly, our denomination has been on a path of slow death for a generation. The last General Conference, with the responses of the Judicial Council, was an exercise in resistance to change. It was an unwillingness to see our shadow side. The shadow side of a large denomination is often the local church; the shadow side of a complex polity around human sexuality is the experience of many of our gay and lesbian members; and the shadow side of a culture of individualism and a lack of accountability among the bishops is our need and promise to unify the church. The result is disintegration, and of course this reflects the reality at every level of our Christian lives: the individual, the local church, the conference, the society. As Mulholland notes, *“we participate in the brokenness of the world.”*

Is the path to slow death inevitable? The alternative is deep change. Ash Wednesday is a day to remember our baptismal vows—remember, Paul’s words in Romans 6:

**“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”**

This day marks the first step in a season of repentance. We take comfort in the good news that faithful men and women have walked this path before us, year after year. And we take even greater comfort in the profoundly good news that God created us, from the dust of the earth, to reflect the divine image, to be whole and holy, to love God and each other.

To die to self is to lay aside what Thomas Merton called the “false self”, the self that is self-justifying, which is embodied in a church described in St. Francis’ recent words that is “self-referential”, and to place it all, our strengths and our weaknesses, our light and our darkness, all that has been redeemed and all that awaits purging, before the One who is our judge and our hope. It is a frightening journey, not unlike the memorable phrase of Robert Quinn, of “building a bridge as we walk across it”. And yet we trust in ourselves and in the great tradition, to learn the way. The spiritual classics have always taught us that the journey leads from purgation through illumination to union. This is the disintegration of the church, but it is the necessary spiritual work that might lead to the integrity of the church.

Hear the words, again, from Psalm 51 (10-12):

**Create in my a clean heart, O God  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.**

Prayer:

O God,  
walk with us in the journey of these forty days:  
from brokenness to wholeness  
from preferences to purpose  
from sin to forgiveness  
from divisions to unity  
from decline to flourishing  
from death to life  
from the ashes to a garden, an empty tomb, a risen Lord  
and the new creation in Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Sources: Robert Mulholland, Invitation To A Journey (Intervarsity Press); Robert Quinn, Deep Change.