

Meditation on the Tree of Life

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For thousands of years, the sacred tree, the *axis mundi* at the “center” of everything, has occupied an exalted place in how people experience and conceive of life's meaning. Living today, in the “here and now” as we conceive of it, that singular, symbolic, but spiritually real tree seems to be a long way off. In our religious tradition, it figures prominently near the beginning of Genesis in the Garden, but even that seems a world away. So before turning to the sacred tree, let's begin where we are -- the only starting place we'll ever have. Maybe the sacred tree will not so far away after all.

Recently, the number of people who share with me, as a serious pastoral matter, their worrisome frustration or alarm about difficulties in everyday conversation has substantially increased. They're talking about their families and friends, telling me about divisions that have happened within their families to an extent they've never known, and the loss of friendships for the same reasons. Much of this is related to politics, but that's not all of it. For example, their social networks online give the impression of being very personal, extensive and immediate, yet their lives feel, from the inside out, unexpectedly impersonal. Something isn't right. In their minds, they go over it again and again, like watching the same movie over and over again, which adds to the frustration. It's exhausting, but even that might not be obvious. The outer disturbance reflects an inner disturbance, and vice versa.

Increasing ambiguity in our ideas and assumptions about “power” and “persons” seem to underlie much of it – as if the ground of existence is shaking. Just hearing those words spoken in conversation or in the media is likely to get my attention. Whether or not we’re aware of it, I suspect this is true for most everyone, especially in the church. I’m not thinking of the meaning of words found in dictionaries, but the larger, lived meanings – meaningfulness -- that make up our lives everyday. My experience is that when we’re paying close attention in almost any conversation, we’ll hear echoes of “power” and “person” swirling in the background – their meaning unresolved, up for grabs. As the ground of our existence seems to shake – as a result of political, economic, social, and ecological upheaval -- so do our assumptions about core meanings in life. Meaning becomes fluid and life feels shaky, for better or worse.

This is what I mean by “for better or worse.” That fluidity (and ambiguity) could be a good sign in difficult times, if it suggests that our creative juices are flowing – if we’re spiritually awake and willing enough to go deeper, spiritually, to realize the mess we’re in, *and* to search for a better course. But it’s not good, if it only suggests the kind of confusion and divisive forces created by manipulation, domination, and propaganda -- the very opposite of genuine creativity.

Either way, all this is about how we create a large part of our common life, what St. Paul would have called our “world” and the “principalities and powers.” Bonhoeffer wrote in a similar way by describing “a life together” as the cherished, to die for goal in life. Powerful worldly forces are at work these days, forces that divide our “life together” into layer upon layer of “us” versus “them,” which would force us to forget any deep spiritual understanding of what it might mean to be a person or how to be with other persons. When this happens, the

world becomes thing-like. Other people become thing-like. All God's creatures become thing-like.

Because this happens, Christians follow the way of Jesus, choosing faith over fear, discerning in our hearts and minds what it means. If all goes well, we'll know that our efforts will not be enough – and then, we'll stop talking to ourselves long enough to find that forgotten inner silence – when our minds rest long enough to hear the Spirit speak. An intuition, a voice, seems to come out of nowhere: *being right about moral issues is important and good ... but down deep in the soul, I'm not actually asking you to be right ... I'm asking you to be loving. Everything else will follow.*

When the inner silence fixes our attention even more, a door opens – “the gate” that Jesus talked about and was. We feel it, but without knowing how to move ahead. The Spirit comes to our assistance, whispering, *do not be afraid, I love you.*

We want to trust all this, but the place seems totally unknown – so we start talking to ourselves again, trying to talk ourselves out of everything that has happened, without realizing what we're doing.

Now the Spirit says plainly, *this is your choice ... you can either empty yourself, or fill your self with yourself and the world. Pick up your cross, or continue to build crosses. What do you really want?*

We say yes to self-emptying and cross carrying with our heart and soul. But the unknown, the darkness, is overwhelming. The Spirit knows this too and says, *pick up your cross and I'll carry you through the darkness. We'll fly together, your cross and you on my back, all the way home.*

“Home” – what do you mean? The Spirit then becomes a luminous form saying, *you are home ... you just haven't realized yet where you live or your God-given work.*

When we pick up our cross and carry it, we begin to be changed, just as the cross becomes the sacred tree. The world God created is alive with the Spirit. Our work is to care for God's world, every bit of it. God is calling us home. *What are we waiting for – now is the time.*