Sunday, October 9, 1983
WHAT IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?
Psalm 46:1-3,10-11; Romans 8:26-27; Galatians 5:22

Jesus rediscovered, revealed, and taught something about God that had been forgotten. His experience was that God was not an object up there or out there or somewhere, but that God was a Presence dwelling in us and among and a loving Force surrounding us.

I said that Jesus rediscovered this about God, because there are strong hints of this same experience of God in the Old Testament, as well. Prophets like Elijah, Samuel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah also knew of this God within them as well as around them. But somehow over the years this experience and concept of God got covered up and forgotten, and it continues to get covered up and forgotten in our time.

We human beings seem to have a tendency to want to separate ourselves from God. And so, we speak of praying to God, talking to God, who is "out there" or "up there."

At the same time we human beings work at this separation, we also know that there is a deeply spiritual side to all of us. We know that we are more than our physical bodies and that there is more to life and the world around us than meets the eye. We know deep down that there is a transcendent dimension to all of life and within us.

So the paradox is that, even though we have a tendency to try to separate ourselves from God, at the same time we want to be in touch in a conscious way with the Spirit of God, or with what I have called the transcendent dimension in life. We want to know that we are connected with the Source of Creation. We want to feel God's power in our lives.

The "transcendent dimension" which I am speaking about, and which is also within us, shows up in the world around us and within us in some ordinary ways. Peter Berger, a sociologist and theologian, calls these "signals of transcendence."

For example, he says that one such "signal of transcendence" is our propensity for order, for structure in our living. Throughout human history, human beings have created some kind of ordered society and have felt the need to bring some kind of order into their own lives. The act of creation itself, as described in the Bible, is an ordering function. God works to bring order out of chaos, divides the light from the darkness, and brings creation into a dynamic form.

Even the insects among us have an ordered society. I read in a recent issue of Science News that honeybees are so organized that they have specialists among them who are undertakers, bees whose job it is to remove the body of a bee who has died. This undertaker bee arrives on the scene within an hour of the death of a honeybee in the hive. This specialist bee grasps the corpse in its mandibles, flies with it from the hive, and eventually drops the body as much as 400 feet away. One or two bees our of every hundred specializes in carrying from the hive corpses of its fellows, according to this article. It's remarkable that they can carry a bee that's their own body weight. These undertakers, who also serve as guards, probably hold the job temporarily for at least several days.

Berger says that our human propensity for order is grounded in a faith or trust that ultimate reality is in order, is "all right," is in the control of God, and that God is continuing to create and to order all of creation.

Another signal of transcendence for us as human beings is that all of us at one time or another seem to have what we would describe as “religious experiences.” Such experiences can come to us at unexpected times and places.

Recently I read of a psychiatrist who had been born and raised a Roman Catholic. He fell away from the traditional faith as college and graduate studies gradually revealed that many of his early beliefs were defensive or wish-motivated projections. “God” melted away into that distant mythical figure on which one’s fears and unfilled hopes were dumped. He was certain that a healthy human psyche could easily live without God.

And so, this psychiatrist grew into his maturity without a God. As a psychiatrist he strove to bring his patients to a freedom which liberated them from the enslaving gods that kept them trapped in the prison of their own fears. But something unexpected happened to him, a series of events which shook him to the depth of his being.

One day he happened to glance at a crucifix on the wall of his home. (His wife had remained a practicing Roman Catholic.) So many hundreds of times before he had glimpsed that same crucifix — a simple, innocuous religious artifact. In that particular instant, however, an overpowering feeling suddenly swept through him; he felt seized by a mysterious “presence,” a being just beyond the reach of his senses, but absolutely there!

This rush of feeling drained him of all physical strength. As he slumped on the edge of the bed, fearful, weak, and aghast at what was occurring, a simple message erupted repeatedly into his consciousness: “Everything will be all right!” This combination of mysterious presence, weakness, and consoling message lasted but a few minutes, yet his whole life was to be transformed by it. A similar experience occurred a few days later during a quiet moment in his office.

A member of this church some years ago wrote me about an experience he had and gave me permission to tell about it.

“One day while driving down the main street of our city on my way to the office, my eyes chanced to encounter the taillight assembly of a then new model automobile. For some mysterious reason, struck by its symmetry of design and refinement of construction, I was suddenly seized by an aura of wonderment and the majesty of humanity from whose hands and intellect such a superb piece of design could emanate. I have stood in awe before sculpture by Michelangelo and of Rodin, canvasses of Rembrandt and Wyeth, have listened to the strains of Schubert and Beethoven played by numerous symphonies and have watched with breathless admiration Nureyev and Fonteyn’s rendition of Tchaikovsky’s ‘Swan Lake’ ballet, but none of them evoked the sense of sublime revelation as did that transient moment at the stop light.”

These are religious experiences, signals of transcendence. I believe all of us have them in one way or another from time to time. They cannot be forced to happen, nor can we prolong them, but we can be open to them or closed to them.

It may be, too, that there are religious experiences which are going on within us, but which we don’t recognize — those times when God’s Spirit wants to break through, but we block it or don’t pay attention, or we’re not sure what’s happening. They may come in dreams which confuse us.

The young man Samuel, whose story is told in the Old Testament, had such an experience. One night as he was sleeping, he was sure that in his sleep he heard a voice calling to him: “Samuel, Samuel.” He awoke and went to where the old priest he was living with was sleeping and awakened him to ask if he had been calling him. The old priest, whose name was Eli, replied that he had not called to him. Samuel went back to bed and back to sleep, but again he heard a voice calling to him: “Samuel, Samuel.” Once more he went to ask Eli if he had summoned him. This time Eli perceived that maybe it was God’s Spirit wanting to get through to Samuel, so he told him if he heard the voice again, he was to answer, “Speak, Lord, for they servant hears.” Again, after he was asleep, the voice came to him: “Samuel, Samuel,” and this time Samuel answered as Eli had instructed him, and then he learned from that religious experience that he was to be a prophet for God.

Jesus showed us that the Spirit of God is within each one of us, but we do not always pay attention to it. Sometimes we try to avoid God’s Spirit. Sometimes we are afraid of it or where it might lead us.

In fact, there are some fears which many of us have which often hold us back and keep us from having more harmonious relationships with others and with God. Some of these fears keep us from being free and loving people.

We might be afraid of being known too well by others, because we are afraid of being found inadequate, shallow, or inept. We are afraid that others might discover our weaknesses. We are also afraid of rejection; afraid that others will not love us or accept us, so we hold ourselves back. We avoid open, loving relationships. And we might fear change.

These fears need to be faced and understood so that we can be freed from them as much as possible. We also need to be freed from the anger and resentment we may have toward other people, whether they be living or dead.

Not only did Jesus tell us about the workings of the Spirit within us, but St. Paul spoke about it to the early church. He said in one place,

“The God who made the world and everything in it does not live in shrines made by human beings, nor is God served by human hands, as though God needed anything, since God gives to all life and breath and everything... God is not far from any one of us, for in God we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:24 FF.)

And then in his letter to the church at Rome, St. Paul added, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”

All this means that if we learn to pay attention to God’s Spirit, we can become more conscious of it, and our spiritual perception will help us see and experience all of life in a new dimension. When we do this, we can grow toward a state of consciousness and way of living so that love is freely received and given, and our whole life is changed.

This brings us to the title of this sermon, “What Is Spiritual Direction?” Or what is Spiritual Instruction, or Spiritual Guidance, or Spiritual Development?

Here’s one attempt at a definition:

It is when we talk with another about our spiritual experiences so as to increase, expand, and understand our spiritual consciousness, that is, to become more aware of the Spirit of God which is at work in us. We also in the process gain more knowledge of our self. It is not therapy or counseling in the usual understanding of those terms.

Why is it necessary to talk with someone about out spiritual awakenings? There are several reasons:

1. To help us increase our knowledge about how the Spirit is working in and through us. We can learn to listen and pay attention to what God's Spirit may be saying to us and to learn more about the various ways in which God's Spirit it trying to break through to us.

2. A second reason for talking with another about such experiences is because we always need to "test the spirits," as the writer of I John in the New Testament put it. "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God."

Often there are conflicting voices, each claiming to be speaking for God's Spirit and disagreeing as to what is the right direction for one to go. Seeking spiritual direction or spiritual guidance is a way of learning to listen more carefully to God's Spirit and a way of testing the spirits.

We all know how our personalities are often fragmented so that we seem to be many different people wearing different masks. Some of our sub-personalities may be negative and others positive. It is important for us to identify each, to recognize them, to determine what gift each has to offer, and to bring them into some harmony.

Thus, Samuel went to talk with Eli about his spiritual experience. Later, in the New Testament, we learn that Saul, who was later to become Paul, talked with Ananias after his overpowering experience on the road to Damascus. Still later, Timothy and Titus sought spiritual guidance or direction from Paul.

Spiritual direction, or spiritual guidance, has been going on within the church since its beginning, and even before that in its Jewish heritage. In the language of today it can be described as an educative process which enables people to grow in their love of and oneness with God, with self, and with others. It is a way of paying more attention to the basic harmony in which we are meant to live with God, ourselves, and others. Or, to put it another way, spiritual direction or guidance is a way of increasing our understanding, our spiritual consciousness so that we are more aware of the gifts of the Spirit — more aware of God's power which is working in us.

Above all, making use of spiritual direction of spiritual guidance is a way of coming to terms with and making use of the many gifts of god's Spirit which are available to all of us for the asking. As St. Paul put it, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

This morning, if you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember these two points: 1) God's Spirit is within and around you and is seeking at all times to lead you into more open and loving relationships with God, with yourself, and with others; 2) Do not be afraid to be more open to God's Spirit, to find new ways of listening to it and following it. In order to do that, you may want to talk with someone or seek what we are calling spiritual direction. Amen.