

Title: Living Out of the Center  
Text: John 3:16-17  
Date: November 2, 2008  
Immanuel Baptist Church  
Chuck Queen, Pastor

Franciscan priest and spiritual writer Richard Rohr says: “We are a circumference people, with little access to the center. We live on the boundaries of our own lives ‘in the widening gyre,’ confusing edges with essence, too quickly claiming the superficial as substance.” He goes on to say that the circumferences, the edges of our lives are not necessarily bad or evil, but they are passing, fleeting, and illusory; they lack substance. To live for money or pleasure or success or control or top honors, does not enable us to reach our potential as human beings. When these things dominate our minds and pervade our hearts we are not living out of our center, out of the true self.

We can be so easily swayed and deceived when we live on the circumference of life. The negative forces of consumerism, militarism, racism, sexism, rampant individualism—these forces can overwhelm us and after being carried for a while on the waves they create, we are then dumped out on a shore of meaninglessness and despair.

We need a center out of which to live; a core that has substance that will give true meaning to our lives. We need to find that center in order to live an authentic human existence.

I believe that the phrase “eternal life” used numerous times in John’s Gospel points to this. It is unfortunate that we have tended to put the emphasis on the duration of life, making it a reference to the afterlife in heaven. Life that lasts forever is its most obvious meaning, but it is not its most important or primary meaning. In John 17 we read: “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” In John 10 Jesus says: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” So its primary meaning relates to kind or quality of life; it is life lived in relationship with God. It is life lived out of the center. And according to John this life out of the center, this authentic human existence, this life in connection and relationship with God and with Christ is appropriated and experienced by faith. So how does this work?

For one thing, by faith we claim who we really are by trusting God to name us. We find our identity in God and our security in God, not out on the edges of our lives. Until we find our center in God and in God’s will for our lives then we will not even know what boundaries are worth defending. Richard Rohr points out that probably the most obvious indication of non-centered people is that they are quite frankly, difficult to live with. All their ego boundaries have to be defended says Rohr: “their reputation, their needs, their nation, their security, their religion, even their ball team.” Rohr says if you find yourself

hurt or offended a lot that's a good sign that you are living out on the circumference, and not out of the center.

We are living on the circumference if we allow other people to define and name who we are. There is a "Peanuts" comic strip with Lucy sitting in a little booth where a "Doctor Is In" sign is prominently displayed. Of course, Charlie Brown visits Lucy. She says to him, "You know what your problem is, Charlie Brown? The problem with you is that you're you." Crushed, Charlie Brown asks, "Well, what in the world can I do about that?" Lucy responds in the final frame, "I don't pretend to be able to give advice. I merely point out the problem."

If we have been ignored or made invisible or rejected as a nobody we might come to internalize Lucy's diagnosis: "the problem is that you are you." If we hear that enough or if for whatever reason we have a fragile self-image we might just start believing it. And then we live out on the circumference of our lives pursuing ego agendas in order to feel good about ourselves and to prove that it's not true. Or maybe we believe it is true and give up. We drift along living from one fix, one high, one affair, one mountain peak to the next.

According to a Greek legend Helen of Troy was kidnapped and whisked across the seas to a distant city where she suffered from amnesia and became a prostitute in the streets. Back in her homeland, her friends kept searching for her. One admiring adventurer who never lost faith set out on a journey to find her and bring her back. One day as he was wandering through the streets of a strange city he came across a prostitute that looked strangely familiar. When asked she said a meaningless name. He asked, "Can I see your hands?" He knew the lines of Helen's hands. When he studied her hands he exclaimed, "You are Helen! You are Helen of Troy!" "Helen" she replied. And then the fog began to clear and a sense of recognition registered on her face. She discovered her lost self and embraced her old friend and wept. She discarded her old clothes and her old life, and embarked upon a new adventure of becoming the queen she was called to be.

If we are to live out of our center, if we are to live an authentic human existence, if we are to discover our true self, then we must by faith claim who we are. Who are we? We are children of God; we are the daughters and sons of God.

We are loved by God and called by God to be friends of God and of Christ. I like what Jesus says to his disciples in John 15: "I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (15:15) Jesus shared with his disciples what he knew about God, he considered them to be his friends, his brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Later on Jesus says "you do not belong to the world, I have chosen you out of the world" (15:19). Jesus is not dividing people into "us" and "them"; but Jesus is making a clear

distinction between the identity given us by the principalities and powers of the world and our true identity as God's children and as Christ's friends.

This is not something we have to earn or achieve. This is a gift. This is our birthright. We are born of God. This is grace. We are accepted and forgiven. We are loved and chosen. John, in his prologue says that "to all who received Christ (the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth), to all who trusted in the word and character of Christ, to these God gave the right or power or authority to become children of God" (1:12-13). As Christians we have discovered an infinite reservoir of grace in Christ. Christ has embodied, revealed, and mediated God's grace to us; God's acceptance and forgiveness and provision for life have come to us through Christ. John says, "Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given" (1:16). When one provision of grace is received, there is another to take its place—there is no end to God's love and grace.

If we are to live out of our center, if we are to live an authentic human existence we must discover and claim who we really are; we must claim by faith our true identity as the children of God.

We must also by faith choose to love. Love is both the foundation for faith and the expression of faith. In Paul's letter to the Galatians Paul contends that the only thing that really counts is faith expressing itself through love (5:6). Faith links our present day experience, whether ecstatic or tragic, wonderful or terrible, to the Divine Goodness at the heart of life itself. Faith enables us to weave the fragments of our experience into a greater whole; to connect our little stories to a greater story where Love will ultimately triumph.

Unlike the kid with his face pressed up against the bakery window, with no money and no resources to access any of the goodies he sees and craves, by faith we have access to the Divine Love that created and sustains all things. God's Spirit is within us and the fruit of the Spirit is first and foremost love (Gal 5:22).

Love is a choice. Every day we must choose forgiveness over resentment, grace over guilt, mercy over condemnation, kindness over apathy, faith over fear, and hope over despair.

All of life is movement; it is transition and change. We are either pushing God away by choosing not to love, or we are drawing near to God by choosing to love and to live out of our center. When we choose to love, we align ourselves with God's saving, healing purpose and God's power is unleashed within us. When we choose not to love, when self or ego leads us in a different direction, we close ourselves off to God's redeeming power in our lives.

I heard about a rather affluent, but very frugal elderly woman, who, many years ago, when the blessing of electricity was being provided to her community, decided to tap into this

great source of power. After about a month a workman came to her house to read the meter. Thinking there must be a problem he inquired about her usage. She explained that she turned on her lights only long enough to light her candles. We have been wired by our Creator to love. God is love and we are called to live and express God's love. But we must choose to live out of the center, we must choose to surrender our ego, and engage in acts and deeds of love and speak words of love.

Will we fail? Of course. It will be harder for some of us than others; it will be especially difficult for those who never received much love or affirmation in life. It will be difficult for all of us who have to break ego addictions and let go of our ego attachments. It will not be easy to break free from self-centered, ingrained patterns of living and negative habits of reacting. We may have deep seated guilt and resentment issues to resolve. And when we find ourselves making the same mistakes and failing to love well we can get flustered and frustrated.

I love the story about the little girl who learned the verse in Sunday School that says, "So let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." When she got home she asked her mother what it meant. Her mother told her that it meant that when she lets Jesus live in her heart the light of his love and goodness and kindness shines upon all those around her.

That very next week in Sunday School the same little girl got caught up in an argument with another child in the class. She got so out of sorts that they had to go get her mother. Her mother said, "Sweetie, don't you remember about letting your light shine before others." The little girl blurted out, "I know mom, but I just blowed myself out!"

I'm sure we have all felt that way after we have failed to reflect the love of God in our words or actions. But when we fail it does no good to linger there, loathing and despising ourselves.

Frank Laubach was a sociologist, educator, and missionary to the Philippines in the early twentieth century. When he was in his forties his life and career fell apart. He lost the vocational opportunity he most desired. His plans for the Maranao people were utterly rejected. He and his wife lost three children to malaria, so his wife packed up and took their remaining child a thousand miles away, leaving him desperately lonely. At the brink of despair he took his dog Tip and went to the top of Signal Hill overlooking Lake Lanao. He wrote in his journal,

Tip has his nose up under my arm and was trying to lick the tears off my cheeks. My lips began to move and it seemed to me that God was speaking.

My child . . . you have failed because you do not really love these Maranaos. You feel superior to them because you are white. If you forget you are an American and think only of how I love them, they will respond.

I answered back to the sunset, “God, I don’t know whether you spoke to me through my lips, but if you did, it was the truth. My plans have all gone to pieces. Drive me out of myself and come and take possession of me and think thy thoughts in my mind.” (Ortburg, p. 164)

Frank Laubach went from lonely missionary whose life was falling apart to world statesman. He founded the World Literacy Crusade and without any political appointment he became influential on United States foreign policy in the post-World War II years.

Through his constant interaction with God he learned the secret of many new beginnings. In his book on prayer he wrote,

God forgives us instantly and eagerly. Let’s forgive ourselves! To “repent” does not mean to “repine,” but to “right about face and start moving in the right direction.” Christ’s joy is in helping persons make new beginnings. He finds no pleasure in condemning. He delights only in helping us rise higher. No matter what the last hour may have been, it is past, and we live in this moment, to make it as fine as we can in thought and deed. Never let the sins or errors of the last hour poison this! “Snap out of it” instantly, and, lo, a new fresh page is turned. He who adopts the philosophy of instantaneous new beginnings has the secret of peace.

Author and Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg was teaching a meditation class at a women’s prison in California some years ago. One of the inmates observed, “When you’re in prison, it’s especially important to try to live in the present moment. It’s easy to get lost in the past, which you can’t change anyway, or to get lost hoping for the future, which is not yet here. If you do that, it’s like you’re not really alive.” Then she paused and declared, her eyes glimmering, “I choose life.”

What we will choose? Will we choose to let the voices and powers of the world name us and shape who we are, or will we claim by faith our identity as the daughters and sons of God? Will we choose to live on the edges by defending and manipulating people and plans for our own aggrandizement or will we choose to live out of the center, to love in thought and word and deed. The seed for a life of authentic human existence, a life rich and abundant in love is within us. With a little bit of faith that seed can take root and flourish.

Gracious God,

May your Spirit open our minds and hearts to receive your love and to be channels through which your love can flow.

Give us the faith to claim our place as your beloved children, and give us the courage and commitment to choose to love others and love life and live life to its fullest. Amen.