

Our Spiritual Footprints

Isaiah 42:1-9

...a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench....

Matthew 3:13-17

...and a voice from heaven said, "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

We have become aware that the way we live as individuals and collectively directly affects the world in which we live. For a long time we rolled merrily down the road of so-called progress, mindless of any effect we were having on our environment. Now we are having to learn very quickly how to stop harming the earth, the air, the water—our own home. "Carbon footprint" is now the way we speak of how our living impacts the earth itself.

So the other day it occurred to me that we also have a "spiritual footprint." I think you know what I'm talking about. You are in the company of someone who is complaining about this and that, dissatisfied with everything and everyone. Soon you feel your own spirit sagging and your worldview growing gloomier. A person who is angry, controlling, or unhealthily dependent can affect a whole group or organization. Counselors will sometimes advise us to stay away from "toxic" people and situations that erode our sense of wellbeing. On the other hand, you can be around someone who is very "present," a good listener who shows a sincere interest in you and your life. Now you feel quite different, hopeful, energized, your view of yourself and others is more loving, generous and positive.

Our spiritual lives have an effect not only on personal relationships but also on our relationship to the creation itself. I think that our "spiritual footprint" underlies our "carbon footprint." How we understand ourselves spiritually shapes the way we live in relation to other people and the earth. Diarmuid O'Murchu, an Irish theologian and writer on spirituality, has given us a very significant book for our day, entitled RECLAIMING SPIRITUALITY. Our current environmental and spiritual crisis, he says, began with the Agricultural Revolution about 8,000 BCE. That's when land began to be divided up and the idea of ownership began to take hold. Competition and conflict entered into human society on a scale never before experienced. With the Industrial Revolution, which O'Murchu claims really began about 1,600 BCE, patterns of living shifted dramatically toward what we experience today as a crisis in our relationship to the earth. Competition, exploitation of resources, nationalism, and the rise of formal religions—these are developments in a period of 10,000 years set against the whole span of human life on earth which extends back two million years when *homo sapiens* first appeared.

Formal religion is about 5,000 years old, with Hinduism appearing around 3,000 BCE. Before all of this, O'Murchu writes, "we lived in close harmony with the Earth as one, unbroken reality. The earth was experienced as a cosmic home, to which everybody belonged and over which no one subgroup had control or exclusive dominion. Nor did humans feel any strong urge to master and control the world." (p. 70). O'Murchu's book shows us that spirituality can and did at one very long period in our history shape human living in a harmonious, creative and non-destructive way with regard to the earth and each other. O'Murchu does not idealize some ancient distant past, but shows that with the rise of industrialization, nationalism, and the formal religions, spirituality changed drastically into control, domination, and fear. These are the roots of our predicament today.

Awareness of our spiritual footprint is another way of looking at the spiritual life as we work with it here in our community. It has to do with our inward and outward journeys, and the relationship between our inner and outer life. What kind of effect am I having on others? How is the condition of my inner life shaping the way I relate to others or the way I go about the work to which I feel God has called me? Our inward journey is our dynamic self-understanding in our relationship with God, the world, and ourselves. Valuing that inward journey affirms that **who we are** is just as important, if not more so, than what we do. **How we work** with the things God has called us to do is just as important as getting the job done, as it were.

I find that the portrait of God's servant in Isaiah 42 gives us a fruitful image for working with our spiritual footprint. On this Sunday of the church year, we hear the story of Jesus' baptism and God's words: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." They echo the words in Isaiah: "Here is my servant, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." Yet, it is not just the servant himself or herself, but Israel as a people. The second portion of the reading speaks of the people of God also in servant terms. The characteristics of the one spoken of in the first portion apply equally to the people as a whole. So the servant in Isaiah and the servant Jesus have to do with us, too. The spiritual footprints of God's servant in Isaiah and of Jesus help us reflect on our spiritual footprints as a community and as individual followers of Jesus.

First, there is something assumed in the reading but made explicit elsewhere in Isaiah: The servant listens to God first of all. In Isaiah 50, the servant says: “Morning by morning, God wakens my ear to listen as one who is taught.” The servant is open at the core of her being to God as the foremost reality in her life. At our Chrysalis Mission Group meeting last week, the accountability report being shared raised a lively discussion of the importance of quieting our minds. This is hard to do, but necessary if we are to listen to God and our relationship with God. It is the practice of letting our thinking and emotions settle, becoming inwardly quiet. Our minds are constantly active and crammed full of thinking. Our incessant mental activity is the source of much of our suffering and disconnection with life. Thinking is a useful tool for critically examining our lives and life around us. However, our tendency is to live out of our heads, out of our thinking. This means we are always once removed from life in the present moment, life as it really is. We cling to our thoughts, attach ourselves to ideas that we have constructed. So we end up living through the grid of our thoughts and not through our relationship with the living God and out of the reality of our unique God-created selves.

When we practice sitting in prayer, silence, and meditation, we experience the relief and the vitality that come with really being present to ourselves, to God and to life. Then we are ready to listen to God and what God has given us to be and to do. Listening only to God. Not to the culture. Not to the nation and its egoistic purposes. Not to other voices that want to tell us who we are and what our loyalties should be, or voices that have hurt us, put us down, or made us feel inadequate, insufficient, or anything but God’s beloved daughters and sons. Not to any other person, even a saint! But to God alone in our own hearts and in the world. When we practice that kind of quieting and listening, then we are ready to live the fulfilling life of a servant of God.

Then, there is the way the servant in Isaiah goes about living as an instrument of God’s justice. God’s spirit is given to us to bring forth justice. This happens through a life that does not cry or lift up the voice, or make it heard in the street. This is odd. The servant is not strident and attacking. The servant does not have to roll up his sleeves and use force, literally or figuratively. It is almost as though the servant does nothing! This kind of not-doing seems to be the most fruitful instrument for God’s purposes. It sounds like passivity, and in some ways it is. We are so used to the idea that we must always speak up and speak out, confront and challenge, that we can hardly believe that God works best through us when we **let** God speak through us. I think that this rather puzzling word in Isaiah can simply cause us to reflect on how our speaking and actions can get in the way of our being channels of God’s spirit and living word.

The servant in Isaiah does not approach life in an adversarial and combative way, but a way of tenderness, care, and nurturing. The servant does not break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick. Sometimes in our stridency, our sense of our own rightness of purpose or what we think best for others, we damage other people and douse the flames of life that are around us. We assume that others are not doing what they should do or are not doing things the way we think they need to be done. We de-value the contribution of those we judge not to be strong enough, to have the right view, or to be doing things the wrong way, that is, not our way. We fail to perceive the gifts that persons are and bring. In discussions we may simply not listen to the contribution of others which doesn’t measure up to what we think is important.

These words are about paying careful and caring attention to life around us. The bruised reed may be the person who, in the ways our culture measures people, doesn’t seem to have much to offer. It may be that this person’s contribution is exactly what is needed. The dimly burning wick may be the small beginnings of a mission that need our faithfulness and gentle nurturing in order to burn brighter. These words call us to patience, gentleness, attentiveness, and the cultivating of a different way of seeing reality—the valuing of every person and potential that is around us.

Finally, there is the mission of God’s justice. The life of the servant in Isaiah is an instrument of God’s justice. Jesus’ life is seen in the gospels as an embodiment of God’s reign, the dawning of God’s realm of justice. Justice in scripture, of course, is very different from justice in our society. God’s justice is not about people getting their “just desserts.” And it is certainly not about legal and economic structures that benefit the wealthiest, most powerful, and privileged. It is about life as God made it to be shared by ALL people, with particular attention to the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the suffering, the left out.

Let me offer a picture of God’s justice, which is not separate from God’s love and compassion. Dr. Sara Bhattacharji is medical director of the Low Cost Effective Care Unit of the Christian Medical College and Hospital in Vellore, India. Kaye and I, with our group, were privileged to spend time with her one day in Vellore, as she gave us a tour. The clinic is in the heart of the city and is focused on caring for the poorest of the poor. Sara told us that the care given at this clinic is of such a high quality that many wealthier people come there to be treated. They often come expecting preferential treatment, going to the head of the line, so to speak. They often want hospital beds, rather than the floor mats which are the accustomed way of sleeping for the poor of India. She kindly explains to them that they are most welcome to come and receive treatment, but they will be treated like everyone else and must wait their turn. This is a picture of God’s

justice. It is a part of God's love and compassion for ALL people, but which pays particular attention to those who are excluded, deprived, and neglected.

Listening to God in our own hearts. Living with attentiveness and care, especially toward the bruised reed and the dimly-burning wick. Living justly, with God's compassion for all people, in particular those who are left out, neglected, or discounted. And overall, living with awareness of our belonging to this earth, God's good creation. Working with our spiritual footprint in this way will improve our carbon footprint, as persons and communities and nations. We will be those who hear with growing clarity God's words to us: These are my daughters and sons with whom I am well pleased.