

Turning to Love: John 15:4-11

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Suggested viewing: Sufi dancers whirling (easily found by searching YouTube.)

It started with the best kind of peer pressure. “Hey, Randy, Let’s go study in Turkey!” And my first response was hesitation. I was a few weeks into my first semester of a Master’s Degree program. I was finding my footing. I was learning the ropes. And the opportunity to study for two weeks in Istanbul and in Konya looked disruptive. The schedule for the trip included missing the last week of the semester; the week when projects were due, the week when final exams were planned. In order to go to Turkey to study, I would need to negotiate my relationship and expectations with numerous professors, along with all my other life commitments. It seemed like too much work. But the invitation was out there, “Hey, Randy, Let’s go study in Turkey.”

As a student, returning to graduate school after age 40, I had made several commitments to myself; I would choose to study with great professors, and, if I had a chance, I would study outside the United States. The leader of the study trip was the provost of my seminary, an African American man who grew up in Berkeley, had explored Christianity, Judaism, and mystical Islam as religious practices, and was currently residing in Istanbul. It seemed like an opportunity worth taking, despite the disruption. So I started planning to make it so.

The focus of the trip was a pilgrimage to Konya, the city where the poet Rumi had lived. To prepare for the trip, we were invited to attend dzikr, which is the name of the Sufi religious ritual. Sufi Islam is the mystical stream that focus on the inner life. Sufi practices include meditation, chanting, singing, dancing, poetry, and other art forms. We might say the life of the heart, the life of love, or the life of union with God. So the first dzikr I attended was in a carpeted room, where maybe 30 of us sat on the floor in a large circle. We learned the words to several chants, then the music began. We listened, we joined in the chants, we focused on driving love into our hearts, and at some point, someone already trained in Sufi Whirling stood up and began to turn in a circle. And after an hour, the dzikr was finished and we had snacks.

I believe I attended two dzikr services before leaving for Konya, Turkey. I was travelling with a dozen other students on this pilgrimage. We were travelling in December, because there is a gathering in Konya every year of pilgrims from around the world, who are celebrating the day that Rumi died, or to say it another way, the day that Rumi was reunited with the Divine: December 17, 1273: about 750 years ago.

I’ll tell you a bit about the world of Rumi. He was born on the north eastern side of what is now Afghanistan. His father was a teacher in the Sufi tradition. And when Rumi was born, the ruler Ghengis Khan was 45 years old. Genghis Khan had united the mongolian tribes into a force for empire. And that empire was moving west toward Rumi’s family. So they fled. They were refugees fleeing ahead of the terror of approaching war. They went west and west and west, eventually arriving in Western Turkey, in Konya, south of Constantinople. Constantinople was the crossroads where Europe meets Asia and the Middle East. By the time Rumi’s family arrived in Turkey, the Crusades, the sporadic incursion of european armies heading for the holy lands had been underway for more than 100 years. And in fact, about the time that Rumi was born, european armies had overtaken Constantinople. So in Rumi’s lifetime, his family was caught between empires and armies. I don’t know, other than being a refugee family, what the impact was on the life of Rumi amid the swirling global political movement. Like his father,

Rumi became a teacher in the Sufi tradition. And there are a variety of stories which attribute to Rumi the origin of the whirling dance.

The Sufi tradition in Islam was already 500 years old by the time of Rumi. In the Sufi tradition were many guides, or Dervishes, who in following the inward journey of turning toward love, rejected the material world and lived in poverty. Many religious traditions have individuals who have taken an ascetic path. Even our contemporary religion of consumer capitalist has minimalists and people who desire tiny houses; people who are turning away from the attractions of the material world. Certainly I am more familiar with these kind of people in Judaism and Christianity, from some of the old testament prophets, to John the Baptist, to the desert monastics, to St. Francis of Assisi who lived at the same time as Rumi, to medieval mystics, to present day Catholic Workers, and others. But the Sufi tradition had some guides in the way of union with God who then started dancing in the style attributed to Rumi, a whirling dance. In English we might call these people Whirling Dervishes.

So a few years ago, as a pilgrim in Konya, I sat through more dzikr rituals in the gathering room of the guesthouse, with 50 people crowded tight in a very hot room full of sweaty people chanting and singing and some of them whirling. I attended the Sema, where thousands of people gather in an arena to watch Dervishes whirl in a more formal performance. And I went to the Dervish center for a few lessons in whirling as a form of embodied meditation or prayer, turning my heart to love.

I'm not qualified to teach you to whirl. And what I'm saying about Sufi traditions is a bit like learning about the Amish from a reality TV show. You might get some broad outlines, but if you draw specific conclusions, you're probably pretty far off. What's important for me in Sufi whirling, is that it is an embodied experience that some people find useful to turn their hearts toward toward love.

So I turn to John 15.

This question of how we experience union with God, or communion with Christ, or how we turn our hearts toward love shows up in the gospel of John. Last week Katy Heinzl talked about a passage early in the gospel of John where Jesus asked "What are you looking for?" To which Katy answered, a place to belong, a place where we are known and loved by God. A place where we can stay with, or abide with Christ.

If you remember how John starts "In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. And the word was God." John places Christ in union with God from the beginning of all time. Then, in the passage for today, John suggests an image for how we might be joined with Christ, like the branches of a vine. John invites us to abide in Christ, to abide in love and suggests that there is a link between this abiding in love, and living in joy. My invitation today is to consider; how do you abide in love? What practices do we have for turning our hearts toward love?

When I was a boy at Landisville Mennonite Church, we sat on hard wooden pews bolted to a wooden floor. Occasionally we would be asked to kneel for prayer. This meant we would slide off the benches, turn around, rest our knees on the hard floor, and stare at the back of the bench. I was probably supposed to close my eyes, but it was more interesting to trace the wood grain in the pew. And I'm sure that with those prayers, the first step was discomfort of the knees on the floor, but after a time that discomfort might fade into the background to make way for a prayer that was different when we were on our knees, than when we were sitting or standing.

Within the Christian world there have been groups that practice forms of movement as prayer. Both the Quakers and the Shakers are named because in their worship some of them danced, or quaked or shaken. And my Mennonite experience might seem pretty short on movement as prayer. But Merce Cunningham, the choreographer, suggests that the first dance in the body, common to everyone is breathing. In our singing, we are breathing together. We might be dancing together in our singing. In our Taize services, like the one we had last week, with longer repetition, we might find prayers that create in us an experience of union with each other, union with God, or union with love.

And I know there are people here who find value in centering prayer or meditation, which might include specific postures for the body. There are others here who practice yoga or running, who practice hiking in nature or boating on the water, watching your dog run in the park or listening to music, singing, or playing an instrument. Any of these may be forms of prayer that include our bodies. And in any of these practices, perhaps you have moments, beyond the physical comforts or discomforts, where you enter another place. Perhaps you call it the zone, or flow, or union with the divine. And if you don't feel it that way, perhaps you might play around with that idea. What if any of my routine practices were a prayer inviting my heart to love?

But this morning, I also have to ask, in a world of urgent needs, who has time to learn how to pray by whirling, or by some other practice, hoping that it might turn the heart to love? My only answer to that today, is to remember the recent events of protest at Standing Rock to protect sacred land from bulldozers and an oil pipeline. The current protest began with two women deciding to pray. And everyone who wanted to join the protest, was invited to join the prayer. And they persisted.

Hanging in the back of the sanctuary this morning, are symbols of a prayer in this county, to protect our sacred land from a pipeline that may soon be buried. A project of Lancaster against pipelines.

During our sharing time this morning, you may choose to tell us how you are praying in the current time. What's happening on your inward journey. If your prayer is action, or if your prayer is meditation, or if your prayer is whirling, I invite you to play with ways that in your prayer you can turn your heart toward love.