

Daily Meditation 09/14/2021

Bishop John Spong: Courage, Conscience, Critical Thinking, Real Leadership

Good morning.

We honor today the wonderful work and life of Bishop John Spong from Newark diocese in the Episcopal Church. He died at the age of 90 years old this Sunday. And he really was a brave and courageous bishop and individual, a fine scholar.

His last book, I believe, was his book on John's gospel, which I enjoyed very much... and then that he confessed that he never liked John's gospel until he wrote the book and then he really fell in love with John's gospel.

But so in honoring him, I went through some of my files, and I found a letter that he wrote me on my 60th birthday. And I wanted to share some of that with you, because to me it's not only a sign of his care and concern about the Christian church today, and his courage which so stands out, but also his support of others. I found him to be very outgoing and generous in his support.

So he wrote me on my 60th birthday, and said:

"Your book *Original Blessing* was the work that first brought you to my attention. It was in many ways a breathtaking book, because it challenged the core, the primary interpretative Christian myth that proclaimed the basic fallen sinfulness of human life. That myth had been used historically, primarily to enhance power of the institutional church and its ordained hierarchy."

I think this is stunning: that this bishop is able to criticize the power of institutional church and its hierarchy! He goes on:

"In the service of that myth, the church was destined to become first and foremost the dispenser of guilt. Someone has observed that the church does guilt more successfully than it does anything else, and guilt is, as one person noted, the gift that keeps on giving.

"To convince people their unworthiness is step one in creating a controlling mentality--" and that's very true, that's where authoritarianism and fascism come from --- "especially when the church claims to be the only dispenser of forgiveness. It was also this definition of human life as flawed and hopeless that inspired the interpretation of the Christ as the divine rescuer.

"This, in turn, caused Christians to view the cross as a human sacrifice, which would be pleasing to a god who required a blood offering in order to restore the fallen world. It was and is a strange way to tell the story of the love of God found in Jesus Christ, but for centuries we Christians seemed to know no other.

"Finally, in no small measure because of your work, we awaken to the reality that this way of proclaiming Christ presents us with a god more grotesque than worship-worthy. Once this ancient myth was broken open in your book, *Original Blessing*, you then were able to develop your version of the Cosmic Christ. That in turn led you to place your emphasis on human wholeness, instead of encouraging that passive, dependent, immature kind of Christianity that the church traditionally seems to encourage.

"This vision of wholeness in turn opened you to seeing holiness in all that God has made. So your love for God's creation, our Mother Earth, led you into being a theological environmentalist.

"Your discovery of holiness stretched out to include women, whom the church had dismissed, and gay and lesbian people, whom the church had rejected. In each area you were a voice for something new, pointing the Christian church to something it has never been but surely must become.

"It is easy to see why you frighten the guardians of traditional orthodoxy. it is also easy to see that you were and are calling the Christian church beyond the limits of antiquity, beyond its denominational structures, and being the voice of a new creation. As one who shared with your revision of this new Christianity, I have been pleased to learn from you, to walk beside you, and to be your colleague in helping to usher in this new day of the Christian church.

"Prophets who see the future, and embrace it in their lives as living signs of that new truth, are never appreciated by the leaders of those institutions which the prophet's words inevitably challenged. In their desire to cling to the past, they have attacked you. It is fascinating to note that as they sought to exclude you, they were also signing their own death knell. That is the way it always is with institutions when they become closed to new truth.

"But a generation from now, Matthew, people will look back at you and your work and give thanks: that one like you lived in this critical moment and helped the Christian church gave birth to new possibilities. Being an ecclesiastical midwife is quite a vocation! I salute you with affection and appreciation."

Jack,

The Right Reverend John Spong, Bishop of Newark Episcopal Church

Now I would just like to add that a generation from now people will look back at Bishop Spong and his work, and give thanks that one like him lived in this critical moment and helped the Christian church to give birth to new possibilities. He too was an ecclesiastical midwife and he was a man of great courage and integrity. So thank you, Bishop Spong.

We'll see you tomorrow.