

The mysticism of greatness (Mark 9:30-37)

Mystics experience the holy—an experience that enlarges their interest in their fellow humans.

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Once again, Jesus' followers struggle to understand the nature of his mission and their role as leaders of his emerging movement. "Who is the greatest among us?" they argue. Caught up in worldly values, they see greatness in terms of access to power and lordship over others.

In contrast, Jesus presents his followers with a countercultural vision of spiritual greatness, in which the leader is servant and the easily forgotten members of society take center stage. Children, not Caesar, model what it is like to be great in God's realm—and in welcoming children, we welcome God and see the world with new eyes. Our visions of greatness will shape our spirituality, ethics, and political involvement.

At the congregation I pastor, I teach a seminar called "A Month with a Mystic." In my preparations I have discovered that mystics—regardless of culture, religion, or era—have certain common characteristics. In particular, mystics experience the holy, and out of that experience they attain a breadth of vision that enlarges their interest in their fellow humans. They discover that the holy is embedded in all creation. Even those mystics who appear to flee civilization recognize the essential holiness of all creatures. Julian of Norwich discovers God in a hazelnut. Francis of Assisi experiences God in the disfigurement of a person suffering from leprosy. Mother Teresa sees Christ dying on the crowded streets of Calcutta. These mystics

move from the journey of “the alone to the Alone” toward finding God in the least of these.

Spiritual greatness begins with our own individual experiences of the divine and then expands to embrace all creation. Alfred North Whitehead asserts that peace results from a spiritual vision in which the individual soul becomes identified with the well-being of the larger world. Individualism is transformed into world loyalty as my own well-being is balanced with the well-being of others and ultimately of creation as a whole.

Dorothee Solle asserts that we are all mystics, and I believe that she is right. There is a mystic, a large-souled person, waiting to emerge in each of us. Even the most bloviating and narcissistic political leaders can be transformed—though it is challenging—to look beyond their self-interest toward solidarity with suffering humankind. Mystical experiences may even drive us to become active participants in changing the social order. This is certainly evident in the mystical adventures of John Woolman, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton.

Howard Thurman connects the breadth of mystical experience with concern for the well-being of others. “Social action,” writes Thurman, “is an expression of resistance against whatever...separates one from the experience of God, who is the ground of his being.” Accordingly, the mystic’s social agenda ultimately “has to do with the removal of all that prevents God from coming to himself in the life of the individual. Whatever there is that blocks this, calls for action.”

I believe that congregations are called to be laboratories for mystical or spiritual experiences that reach out from the self and congregation to the world. I have sought to do this with my “Month with a Mystic” seminars, adult and youth meditation groups, and study groups that connect spiritual practices and theological reflection with practical ethics. Spiritual greatness is a matter of sight and insight. Mysticism nurtures our ability to see God in all things, piercing whatever off-putting externals exist in order to experience Christ hidden within every creature.

From my perspective, two statements summarize the mission of faith formation: “Let your light shine and let them see Christ,” and “Treat everyone as Christ.” Intentionally cultivating greatness of spirit and vision, we become Christ to others in our service and hospitality. Open to a deeper vision, we respond to the Christ we experience in everyone we meet, revealing to all their own deeper Christlikeness.