

Romans and reflections on our spiritual journeys

As I read over this particular scripture, on the surface I saw a listing of mostly things to do in order to live in harmony with one another, and a few don'ts. And I thought that this is a perfect way for most us "control freak left brains" to be told what God wants. The thing that is good and bad about it is that it gives some very understandable and specific ways in which we should act, but can also be just another in our many lists of things to do. How do we get to the truth of what God wants and what our role in that is? Once we are in harmony at one point in our lives, does that secure it for the rest of our lives?

The thing I have found over the years is that Jesus and Paul were good teachers. They recognized that all of us are at best persistent learners and at worst, have to be made to grow by learning many lessons the hard way, through much suffering. We learn at various rates and many times have to re-learn what we had once known. That is why we have parables, questions and easy to understand directives all on the same concept. No matter where we are in our spiritual journey, there is a way of hearing an answer that we are ready for.

One of my favorite lines as a teacher was that “There are no winners and losers, but winners and learners.” Each day, if we learn to be a step closer to God’s vision of us, we will be doing well. The best thing we can give our kids today is a love of learning and growth. If they love the process and understand early that while there are rules and regs to keep us safe and secure, there are also life’s questions in which we find answers, struggle over the “right thing to do”, and refine our existing beliefs. They need to know that it is ok not to have all of the answers by a certain time in life and to respect the journey they take, as well as the different ones others take.

I was recently reading one of the articles in my favorite magazine, **Spirituality and Health**. And in it, Rabbi Rami Shapiro was talking about the healing truth behind our great religions. He talked about how the religions of the world are like the languages of the world. Every language, religion and culture has its own unique qualities but there is one wisdom running throughout.

He says: “In the context of perennial wisdom, truth is that which leads us beyond alienation and isolation to integration and unity. It is that which leads us beyond

fear to love; beyond exploitation of the other to justice for all; beyond violence and war to cooperation and peace; and beyond the zero-sum, winner take all worldview of “us against them” to the nonzero, win-win worldview of “all of us together”. In the context of perennial wisdom, truth is that which collapses the divisions between chosen and not chosen, believer and infidel, saved and damned, and leads to the understanding that we are all one community of seekers.”

As I come to understand that second part of knowing which seems to come with age and hard knocks, I am able to appreciate each creation of God as part of His divine face and realize that we are never supposed to gather lists and systematically accomplish them or seek to understand just each one and their importance to us, but to learn to be open to all experiences and precious humans and continue to learn for a lifetime.

One of my other favorite teachers in recent years is Richard Rohr, who is a Franciscan priest and runs the Center for Contemplation and Action. He recently said in one of his daily email meditations that: “it is “holding” things in their seemingly unreconciled state that widens and deepens the soul. We must allow things to be only

partly resolved, without perfect closure or explanation.” This is difficult to do. For me, it takes more quiet time and contemplation than I was used to giving, and it takes more trust in the Creator and less certainty in my own “control”. It definitely requires me to stop putting time limits on myself and others, and looking for that “just right way” to see things.

St. Augustine seems to have captured a part of what needs to be done in order to accomplish this sort of understanding. This is from one of his sermons:

Forge ahead, my brothers and sisters;
Always examine yourselves without self-deceptions.
After all, there’s nobody inside you
Before whom you need to feel ashamed,
Or whom you need to impress.
There is someone there,
But one who is pleased with humility;
Let that one test you.
And you, too, test yourself.
Always be dissatisfied with what you are,

if you want to arrive at what you are not yet.

Because wherever you are satisfied with yourself,
there you have stuck.

If, though, you say, "That's enough, that's the lot,"

Then you've even perished.

Always add some more,

Always keep on walking,

Always forge ahead.

Don't stop on the road,

Don't turn around and go back,

Don't wander off the road.

Amen