

Wintry and Summery Spirituality:  
A Spirituality for All Seasons of the Heart  
Psalm 13; John 16:33

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It was Martin Marty, the famous church historian, who introduced to me the idea that there are two kinds of spirituality: *summery spirituality* and a “*wintry sort of spirituality*.” He got the typology from the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. Marty had suffered the death of his life-long beloved wife and was now walking through winter. He wrote of it in his book, *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart*. He began with these words:

Winter is a season of the heart as much as it is a season of the weather.

Marty had always appeared to me to be a summery type. (Of course we can always be wrong about such things.) But the death of his wife had cast him into winter. He found solace in Rahner’s two kinds of spirituality—and in his affirmation that each type had its own integrity and its own gifts to offer.<sup>1</sup>

I

Summery spirituality lives in the warm immediacy of God’s presence. It feels God, finds God, sees God everywhere. Joy fills its days. Some of us growing up in church may have sung these summery songs:

There's within my heart a melody”

or

“There's joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart”

or

“Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine/O what a foretaste”

Today we might sing,

“Joyful, joyful, we adore thee”

or

“Thank We All Our God”

or

“For the beauty of the earth”

I have sometimes felt that kind of spiritual happiness. Have you?

Some people have had a summery kind of spirituality all their lives. They have experienced the nearness of God from earliest years. Such “childhood mysticism” has pervaded their lives.

Others of us have summery *seasons* in our lives, when everything shimmers with joy, when we feel God close to us, when all seems right and good. Can you remember such days, such seasons? So summery spirituality can be our life-long

spiritual home, or summery spirituality can be ours in certain seasons of our lives.

## II

In contrast, wintry spirituality lives with more a sense of God's absence than God's presence. Paul says we "walk by faith, not by sight", which means also, "faith not feeling". Sometimes wintry Christians feel like they are out in a snow storm looking in through the window of a cabin and seeing people gathered around a fire place, all warm, cuddled together, and the wonder why they are on the outside and these others are on the inside.

There are some who by nature are "wintry types". They stand a bit of a distance from life, observing, analyzing. We need them. They lead with their brains more than their hearts. They are thinkers more than feelers. When other people talk about "Jesus in my heart", or experience what John Wesley experienced, a "heart strangely warmed", they may long for such an experience, but it is not theirs. And they may wonder if something is wrong for them, if their spiritual life is out of whack.

But wintry spirituality has its own integrity and its own gifts to offer the church and the world. Chicago theologian Joseph Sitler confessed to being such a wintry sort of Christian in his sermon "View from Mount Nebo." You may recall

that Moses, for reasons we cannot fathom, was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. He had led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, he had given them the Ten Commandments, he had led them across the wilderness for forty years to the border of the Promised Land. But now he could only look upon it from the top of Mount Nebo. Sittler says that there are those who never experience what other do, spiritually speaking. He writes:

Who knows what goes on in the hearts of those who lack the grace of adoration, of passion, of immediate blessed assurance—who must live out their lives in hard, dutiful obedience to the cooler graces because their lives are unattended by the hotter ones.<sup>2</sup>

But these have their own graces to offer: of intellect, discernment, courage, and a dogged resilient kind of faith. I think the writer of *Hebrews* was speaking to folk like this when he said:

These all died in the faith, *not* having received what was promised, but having seen it greeted it from afar. (Hebrews 11:13)

Do you know any wintry sort of people? Are you one? You have your place here too. Some of our most exemplary Christians have had a wintry sort of spirituality. Abraham Lincoln is one. Mother Teresa late in her life revealed that for long years of her life during her ministry to the poor of Calcutta she lived with

a painful sense of God's absence. Her loving work never stopped. Some upon reading this called her a fraud. I admired her even more.

Sometimes the circumstances of life throw us into winter. The death of a child, a spouse, a parent, a beloved. Or a crippling depression. Or the loss of a job, a career, a life dream. We find ourselves in what the mystics call, "The Dark Night of the Soul", and we do not, cannot know how long it will last.

### III

Which are you, wintry of summery? Which are you now, at this time in your life? Of course typologies are always limited. You may be a mixture of the two. God, like nature, uses all seasons to bring forth life, Summer, Winter, Spring and Fall.

God loves you exactly as you are, and in whatever season of the heart you now walk. And God will use everything for your wholeness. As Paul says in Romans "In everything, God is at work for good." The hymn, "Great is Thy Faithfulness" sings of God's faithfulness, "summer and winter, springtime and harvest."

I think the church needs to honor both wintry and summery people. Is church a place you can bring your sadness? Is church a place you can express your joy? For some churches are it is summer all the time. "Summertime and the living

is easy.” They have thrown all the lament hymns out of the hymnbooks. Like “Come Ye Disconsolate”. Where have the laments gone? Into folk music, country music and the blues. Like Joan Baez’ folk song “Blowin’ in the Wind”. Or Hank Williams’ country song, “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.” And the blues? One blues singer sings, “De blues ain’t nothin/But a poor man’s heart disease.”

A number of years back church growth experts counseled churches never to sing a hymn in a minor key! And take out the prayers of confession. They are a downer!

So where can wintry people go to church? Where can they go when they are trudging through winter? How can we encourage the gifts of the wintry sort of people and make use of the “cooler graces” they offer? How can we make them feel less like they are out in the snow storm looking in at us huddled warmly around a fire?

The Psalms lead the way. I’m talking about all of them, not just our favorites. There are summery psalms full of praise and thanksgiving. And there are wintry psalms that let us bring our sadness, our doubts, our agony before God. The great Reformer John Calvin called the Psalms “The anatomy of all parts of the soul.” The psalms are for all seasons of our lives.

Our Psalm for today, Psalm 13 is a Psalm of Lament. It begins:

How long, O Lord, will you forget me?

How long will you hide your face?

How long must I bear grief in my soul?

But then at the end, the Psalmist turns from lament to a dogged kind of faith:

As for me, I trust in your merciful love.

Let my heart rejoice in your saving help.

Let me sing to you, Lord, for your goodness to me.

Summer and winter, springtime and harvest. Jesus loved people, both wintry and summery. To those in winter he said,

Come unto me, ye who are weary

and heavy laden and I will give you rest...for I am gentle and lowly of heart

and you will find rest for your souls

And to us, all types, he said,

In the world you have tribulation (literally, a grinding) but be of good cheer,

good courage, I have overcome the world....

And this:

These words I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.

#### IV

I close with two stories, one wintry, the other summery.

The rabbis tell the story of a young rabbinical student who traveled far from home to go to rabbinical school. One day he came to the master rabbi and said:

Rabbi, back home everything was simple, everything was clear. I studied and I prayed. But now nothing is simple, nothing is clear. I am lost. I cannot study, I cannot pray. All I have is sorrow and tears.

*I have been where that young rabbinical student was.*

The rabbi paused, then said, “Perhaps God does not want your study and your prayers. Perhaps God prefers your sorrows and your tears.”

Of course, on one level this is not true. God would never prefer us to be in sorrow and tears. But if tears and sorrow are all you now have to offer, God wants us to offer these.

So let’s come before God with all we have then to offer, in whatever season we walk.



The second story, from a memoir of an illiterate nineteenth century evangelist named Billy Bray. He writes

I can't help praising the Lord. As I go along the streets, I lift up one foot, and it seems to say, "Glory"; I lift up the other, and it seems to say "Amen"

So lets us keep walking together, wintry and summery friends, til one foot says "Glory" and the *other* foot "Amen".

1. Martin Marty, *A Cry of Absence: Reflection For the Winter of the Heart*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).
2. Joseph Sittler, "View from Mt. Nebo" in *Preaching the Story*, Edmund Steimle, Morris Neiderthal, Charles Rice, ed. (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1980),p.47