

## SPIRITUALITY, BELIEFS, COMMITMENTS & COMMUNITY

John 4: 5-30, 39-42

This past summer, a medical paper was published based on the accumulated research of some of the best medical minds in the world. Tracy Balboni is a senior researcher and professor of radiation oncology at Harvard Medical School. Tyler VanderWeele is senior professor of Epidemiology at the Harvard Chan School of Public Health. Howard Koh is senior researcher in the practice of Public Health Leadership, also at Harvard. The three of them co-chair the interfaculty Initiative on Health, Spirituality and Religion at Harvard University. They also organized a global work group which reviewed 15,000 articles published over the past 20 years on the relationship between spirituality and health. Out of all these articles, they chose 500 that met their agreed upon standard of the highest rigour for scientific research. So what did they find?

They found that people who practice spirituality as a regular part of their lives have significantly better health outcomes than those who have no consistent spiritual practice integrated into their lives. They found that just as important as what you eat and how much you exercise, immersion in spiritual practice affects health in significant ways. The evidence is indisputable. The research studies involved thousands of people from various parts of the world over a period of time, with some of them having to deal with serious illnesses and health conditions.

But what do these researchers understand spirituality to be? Here's a definition they all agreed upon: spirituality is "the way individuals seek ultimate meaning, purpose, connection, value and transcendence." They also found that the benefits of spirituality for health are best received when the individual practices their spirituality within a larger whole, be it immersion in nature, as something they do with their families, or quite significantly, when individuals practice their spirituality as part of a community. The paper explicitly mentions "regular worship attendance" which includes both worship and fellowship. Practicing spirituality with others packs a greater punch than doing it alone.

And what does health mean for these researchers? The many studies they looked at addressed the areas of longevity, depression, dependence on drugs and alcohol, and thoughts of suicide. Studies also tackled some of the big illnesses like cancer and heart disease. Whatever the trajectory of a person's lifespan, genetic makeup or mental health struggles, spirituality, and especially spirituality in community, makes a big difference in a person's overall health outcomes. One of the goals of this paper is to guide the future training of medical practitioners. When asking questions of patients regarding health indicators, questions of spirituality must be as essential as questions of diet, physical activity, stress and other factors for overall health.

While beliefs play an important part in any participation in spiritual community, studies also found that healthy people of faith were participating in different religious traditions and communities. The key is not which tradition or religion is better, but choosing one, practicing it and finding others to connect with as part of a community.

OK, this is fascinating and wonderful, especially for us here in person and online who are actually practicing what this research recommends. But does any of this surprise you? Maybe or maybe not. This kind of research is a little like research on climate change. People may know and believe it's true, but what are they going to do about it? And this question is especially relevant not so much for all of you here in person and online. It's also relevant to all those outside these physical and virtual walls, who are not practicing much spirituality within a community or have fallen away from doing so. Will such research motivate them to rethink their tenuous if non-existent immersion in spirituality within community? I wonder...

But this research also raises some other questions for us to think about too. Is spirituality about beliefs or is it more importantly about experiences? And if it's more about experiences, what role do beliefs play? Do beliefs contribute to physical and spiritual health the way experiences do?

Let's ponder these questions by delving more deeply into our scripture reading this morning. Jesus is passing through Samaritan territory. Jesus is a Jew and Jews and Samaritans carry centuries old grievances against each other. They worship at rival holy places and they hold contrasting beliefs. So, how does Jesus build a bridge with this woman he encounters who is Samaritan? He shows her remarkable compassion, and this takes her aback. He is forthright with her seeing right into her. But rather than judge her, he honours her. He, a Jewish man, talks to her a Samaritan woman, like a person.

Jesus reveals himself to her, which is an act inviting reciprocity of sharing. He also names some of the areas of pain in her life, not to judge her but to embrace her fully as one in need of compassion. Even as she would be categorized a sinner in her world for all her multiple marriages and current living situation, Jesus sees in her life the kind of tragic circumstances that have made her vulnerable to having to make desperate choices. Without a man in her life she has no income and no home. Who knows whether she was divorced or widowed before her current living situation. And no doubt, if someone is to be blamed, it's easier to blame the woman. Therefore, this woman would no doubt not only carry a lot of vulnerability in having to make choices within her limited circumstances, but also a lot of shame.

But contrary to every cultural current of the time, Jesus chooses to reveal himself to her, and he empowers her to claim her voice. She proclaims the gospel to the rest of her people, and instead of denouncing her, they listen to her and respond. They come to Jesus because of the woman's testimony.

The woman is liberated. She finds her voice. To speak out as she does, she has obviously set aside her shame. She's not afraid of being out there in public. And the fact that people respond to her message about Jesus must further reinforce her confidence. Isn't this beautiful? Jesus has given her the living water to assuage a deep spiritual thirst. And many more people come to the spiritual well that is Jesus to drink for themselves. Their health and wholeness will no doubt be activated as they are spiritually hydrated.

OK, wonderful! But how does this story address our question about the relationship of spirituality and beliefs when it comes to spiritual health?

Jesus tells the woman some big things about himself, namely, that he is the Messiah, and the Messiah not just for Jews, but for Samaritans and all people. Whether you believe differently about where sacred spaces to worship are located, the key is in your relationship with God who transcends space and time. In essence, because God is Spirit, you can find God anywhere around you and within you. To believe Jesus is the Messiah and to believe God is Spirit and truth, is about beliefs. But until the woman experiences who Jesus is, until he reveals himself to her, until he connects with her as compassionate love rather than judgement, and until he names the sad truth she has had to live all these years... in sum, until she experiences Jesus, she cannot truly embrace the beliefs about Jesus and God she is being called to believe. Beliefs that are genuine and true must arise out of deeper core experiences that ring true in our heart and soul. Does this make sense?

But there's more. Beliefs, rooted in experiences of the heart and soul, also lead to commitments that are action based. Our membership questions today, are all about commitments that are action based. But such commitments presume certain beliefs about Jesus, God and the Spirit, and such beliefs presume a certain confirmation in a person's heart and soul. **The truth must become my truth in order to be embraced as the truth I believe in and act upon in my life.** Does this make sense?

OK, so we have seen and affirmed our membership questions. Let me end by offering the latest version of a "creed" (a series of "I believe" statements) I have written up, based on what I believe are the essential ingredients of Christian Faith. There is a version of this creed on our website. But here is the most recent revision.

1. I believe that I am created full of goodness and beauty, by a Love who is the Ground of all being, whom we Christians name 'God'.
2. I believe that despite the goodness and beauty in me, I break faith with this Love in how I often mistreat and abuse other life, myself and creation as a whole, whether that is my intention or not.
3. I believe that I need to find my way back to healing and wholeness with this Love, and this journey back to wholeness is my deepest life purpose.
4. I believe that the way back to wholeness must involve an experience of 'grace' - that I am loved and forgiven fully and completely, despite the mistreatment and abuse for which I am responsible and accountable.
5. I believe that the experience of grace also inspires and empowers me to seek out healing and reconciliation where possible, and to spread love in the world as my further life purpose.
6. I believe that such a path to wholeness through Love is revealed and embodied most fully in Jesus – in what he teaches, how he lives and the way he dies. I also believe that Jesus is raised from the dead and that his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is a life-giving energy working in me and in the world to inspire the kind of faith, hope and love that can truly transform our living.

7. I believe the God who is Love revealed and embodied in Jesus the risen Christ and active in the world as Holy Spirit, can most fully inspire in me faith, hope and love when I am being nurtured in worship and fellowship with others in Christian community.

These seven statements are beliefs. But as you can see, these beliefs point to a pattern of experiences also. Faith, hope and love in the God revealed and embodied in Jesus and manifesting as an energy we call Holy Spirit must be experienced to be believed. But these beliefs also point to life commitments and actions consistent with our membership questions.

Love is the ground and the energy flow all the way through. And in a world of tragedy, cruelty, hurt, suffering, mistakes and failure, love must rise up and flow through in very specific ways to heal and transform. For us here, God in Christ through the Holy Spirit is that pathway, and we support each of our personal journeys by sharing love and compassion with each other in community worship and fellowship.

May God who is the fullness of Love, revealed and embodied in the human Jesus, and radiating outwardly as the energy and power we call Holy Spirit, be felt in and experienced by you, becoming more firmly established in your mind and heart as what you believe, and becoming the growing basis of your life commitments... Amen.