

Not to be good, pious, moral, or righteous

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One of the strongest influences on my life was William Stringfellow, a lawyer by profession, and a lay Episcopal theologian by vocation. He wrote a number of profound and important books in the 1960s and 1970s, such as “An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land” and “The Politics of Spirituality.”

The heart of his understanding is that we can live fully and abundantly in this world. When Jesus promises us “abundant life,” he is not making a promise about the next world. Rather, his promise is that we can live abundantly in this world. Life is not about preparing for heaven; it is about how we live fully in the here and now.

For Stringfellow, the great drama of life is the victory of Life over Death. He understands that demonic powers still exist. Demons are not relics of an ancient way of thinking. Rather, those powers continue to manifest themselves in ideologies and institutions of all kinds, including the institutional church.

“My concern,” he wrote, “is to understand America biblically ... to grasp what is happening right now to the nation, and to consider the destiny of the nation ... within the tradition of biblical politics.” From that stance, he discerns the power of evil all around us. Death (with a capital D) is a living moral reality, a moral power within the nation.

He wrote fifty years ago; yet his words have a contemporary relevance. We still see the “powers and principalities” at work in our contemporary world. Death is at work in the January 6 insurrection in Washington DC; in the so-called “freedom convoy” in Ottawa; in the lingering effects of the 45th President of the USA; in the assassination of Shinzo Abe, former Prime Minister of Japan; in the multiple shootings in public spaces and schools; in the angry rhetoric of politicians on all sides of the aisle; in the prejudice and hatred shown toward minorities of all kinds; in the anger of people who protest against masks and vaccines and simple measures designed to care for all of us together; in sexual abuse scandals in churches; in the way we have treated Indigenous Peoples. The list goes on and on.

Even so, says Stringfellow, we can live life in all its fullness in the midst of Death. The heart of his message is that “Death reigns AND we are freed from its bondage.” One of his clearest statements came at a church gathering in 1968 during the trial of the Catonsville Nine, nine Roman Catholic anti-war activists who took 378 draft files from the draft board office and burned them during the Vietnam War: “Remember, now, the State has only one power it can use against human beings: death. The State can persecute you, prosecute you, imprison you, exile you, and execute you. All of these mean the same thing. The State can consign you to death. The grace of Jesus Christ in this life is that death fails. There is nothing the State can do to you or to me, which we need fear.”

He did not divide the world into sacred and secular, between spiritual and political. Life is a unity, a great fusion of the human and the divine. Heaven and earth are mixed together. Good and evil live side by side, and God participates in the day-to-day affairs of life, from the home to the marketplace to the neighbourhood to the political arena. Those who love God can participate fully in the affairs of the world rather than trying to shelter themselves from the world.

Stringfellow wrote often about being a Christian in the world. It is not our goal, he wrote, to be good, pious, moral, or righteous. Instead, the goal of Christian life is to live humanely, gently, and compassionately amid our estrangement.

This is the great tragedy of life for Stringfellow, that people live in a state of estrangement between people and God, between a person and their own self, between people with other people, between people and institutions, and between the institutions themselves. As a result, his deepest questions revolved around how we can live humanely amid that estrangement.

As a result, I understand spirituality as a way of connecting. To be spiritual people means to connect with ourselves, with other people, with nature, and with God.

Another way of saying this is that we live sacramentally. A sacrament is defined as a visible sign of an invisible grace. Our lives are sacraments, signs of Life in the midst of Death. Our lives become signs of connection amid estrangement. We live as free people in a society addicted to pleasure and consumerism. We live as people who have become whole among a society which is fractured and scattered. We live with compassion in an angry community.

Because we are human, sometimes we will give in to the spirit of the age. It's hard not to do so. We will mess up. Contrary to the commercial which advises us to "never let them see you sweat," sometimes we will sweat, and they will see us.

But the wonder and gift of faith is that God continues to call us to be sacramental beings, to be signs of Life in the midst of Death. God invites us to revel in the abundance and joy of life. We can colour outside the lines. We can dance and sing with abandon, as if no one is watching.

Stringfellow was deeply frustrated by church rules which taught people to live and behave and act in certain ways, and to believe certain things. He always said that we need not worry about being good, pious, moral, or righteous. We simply need to be signs of Life in the midst of Death.