

## **The Spiritual Pattern of Faith, Joy, and Hope**

Rev. Adam Ericksen, Clackamas United Church of Christ, C-UCC.ORG

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According to almost every religion, there is a spiritual pattern. Some even call it a spiritual law.

It's a paradox that goes like this: In order to get more of something, you have to give what you have of it away.

Some churches use this pattern or law in an abusive way that I want to name right now. Some pastors say, "You need to give your money to the church, and if you do, God will bless you with even more money! And when God blesses you with even more money, you need to give all that money to the church!"

You may have seen televangelists give this kind of message. We've heard of preachers say such things and then they purchase giant mansions and even private jets.

I can assure you that your pastor will not be buying a mansion or private jet.

But here's the point: Do you feel like you have little joy in your life? The spiritual principle is that to get more joy, you give what joy you have away.

Or, are there times when you feel like all you have is just a little bit of faith? Jesus says that's all you need. He [told his disciples](#), "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move."

Jesus is referring to the spiritual pattern that if you want more faith or hope or love or joy in your life, you just have to start with what you have and give it away.

But there can be a problem. The problem is that bad things can happen to good people. In fact, bad things can also happen to bad people. Bad things happen to everyone. And when bad things happen, we can often start looking down and we develop a "woe is me" mentality. We can start thinking that we have no joy or love or faith or hope to give. But no matter how little we have, we usually have something we can give.

## **The Spiritual Pattern of Ruth**

Our stories from our readings today make this point. They both involve widows. In the ancient world, widows were especially vulnerable. They had no safety net. There were no formal public policies that intentionally cared for widows. In a patriarchal culture, if a woman's husband died, she was often left with no protection and no support.

The book of Ruth is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. It begins with tragedy. Ruth and Naomi, her mother-in-law, have husbands who quickly die. As widows, they were

left with grief and not much more. Naomi told Ruth that she was going back to her homeland in Israel and that Ruth should stay with her own people in Moab.

Ruth had nothing to offer her mother-in-law, except for love and faith and hope. But don't get me wrong. They were in a nearly hopeless situation. But what little hope Ruth had, she gave away to Naomi.

I came across an interesting psychological term recently that has been helpful to me. It's called "[agency panic](#)." Whenever something tragic happens, we can start to panic. We can feel like we have lost all sense of agency and the only thing we can do is sit in a corner in the fetal position.

But Ruth shows us another way. Instead of falling into [agency panic](#), she gives what little she had to her mother-in-law. Ruth didn't give up her agency. Instead, she remained active. Naomi became bitter about the world and her circumstance. She tells Ruth to go back to Ruth's people and to her previous life.

But notice Ruth's response. Ruth could have shaken her finger at Naomi and said, "Buck up Naomi! You know better than this! Get over it and move on!"

But instead of scolding Naomi or looking down on her, she gave Naomi the [ministry of presence](#). She said to Naomi, Hey, I know you are having a hard time. I'm having a hard time too. But we're in this together because, "Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die - there I will be buried."

Ruth gave up everything to be with Naomi. And what happened? In our [reading today](#) we discover that what little hope and love and faith they had grew bigger and bigger. They worked together. And together these vulnerable widows overcame their tragic circumstances and found new life.

How did they do it? They did it by living into the spiritual pattern of giving hope and faith and love. And in living into the spiritual pattern of giving what they had, they received so much more.

### **The Spiritual Pattern of Jesus and the Widow**

Our [Gospel story](#) today tells a similar message. It's also about a widow who gives all the money she has to the Temple. Like Naomi and Ruth, this widow was vulnerable because she had no safety net and no one to protect her. But she trusted that even if she gave everything she has, she would be okay. She trusted that she would receive more if she gave.

But this story isn't simply about a widow giving her last penny to the Temple. The basic spiritual pattern is to give and you will receive much more, but we don't have to live into

that pattern. In fact, we can live into the opposite pattern. And that's what the scribes do.

Jesus warned his followers to, "Beware of the scribes." One reason Jesus said to beware of the scribes is because, "They devour widows' houses".

The scribes in the first century were experts in the law and they wrote up legal documents. They had tremendous power and many scribes used their power to gain more wealth for themselves by taking from the vulnerable. And do you know who one of their main targets were? Widows.

Instead of living into the spiritual pattern of giving, the scribes took and took and took for themselves. They thought they never had enough, so they took from anyone they could, including vulnerable widows. That's why Jesus said that the scribes "devour widows' houses."

### **The Spiritual Pattern of True Biblical Justice**

This is about so much more than merely money. This is about a spirit of justice. Naomi, Ruth, and this widow, all lived in a culture that led to injustice. Justice in the Bible is not primarily about revenge or punishment. It's primarily about caring for the needs of the vulnerable. That's why the prophets repeatedly say that the nation must live into the spiritual pattern of giving and caring for the widows, the orphans, and the poor. So this story *is* about a widow who lives into the spiritual pattern of giving. But it is also a warning against those who disobey and live into a pattern of taking from widows.

According to Judaism and Christianity, this spiritual pattern is deeply rooted in the universe. It's how the universe was formed. This pattern is cosmic and it's there from the beginning of creation.

### **The Spiritual Pattern of *Zimzum***

In one Jewish tradition, this pattern is called *zimzum*. According to this tradition, at the beginning of creation, God was everywhere. God took up all space in the universe, so there was no room for anything else.

In order for God to make room for creation, God had to make space for other things to exist. *Zimzum* means to make space. God had to give up space in order to make room for creation. And in giving up space, God received something so much more - a relationship with all of creation.

Here's why *zimzum* matters. When you give something up for the betterment of your spouse or partner or friend or neighbor, you are participating in the divine pattern of *zimzum*. For example, Ruth *zim-zummed* for Naomi. When you make room in your life for a relationship with another, it might lead you to be uncomfortable, but it means you are practicing the divine pattern of *zim-zum*. When you reschedule your life so you can care

for a spouse who has fallen ill or to care for your great-grandchild or for your children who live on the other side of the world, you are practicing the divine pattern of *zim-zum*. When a church or even a nation says, we are going to care for the needs of the poor, vulnerable, sick or a caravan of immigrants, it is practicing *zim-zum*.

So the next time your spouse or partner or a friend or neighbor gives something up or goes out of their way to help you, I want to invite you to say, "You just zim-zummed for me. Thank you. I am grateful."

### **The Spiritual Pattern of *Kenosis***

Briefly, in the Christian tradition, this same spiritual pattern is called *kenosis*. *Kenosis* means "self-emptying." One author of the New Testament says that when God decided to become human in Jesus, [God emptied God's self](#). God gave up something of God's self in order to become human. But in God's self-emptying in the person Jesus, we discover that God fully gives of God's self in order that we might receive the divine life and the knowledge that God loves us just as we.

We are a just peace church. We believe that the way to peace is through justice. But this isn't a justice based on violence or revenge. It's a justice that is based on the pattern of giving. It's based on *zim-zum* and *kenosis*. True justice makes room for those who are most vulnerable. It invites us into the divine pattern of emptying ourselves so that we can care for those who are in need.

### **The Spiritual Pattern of Veteran's Day**

I would be remiss on this Veteran's Day if I didn't talk about our veterans. I personally do not believe that war leads to peace. War may be a necessary evil at times, but I think it's important we call it what it is, an evil that doesn't lead to peace. Zim Zum and Kenosis lead to peace. I think following the pattern of Ruth and Jesus lead to peace on a personal and national level.

So I may be anti-war, but I'm not anti-veteran. I am pro-veterans. Our nation is the best in the world at training and sending our soldiers to go to war. In fact, "[The United States spends more on defence than the next seven countries combined.](#)" But as we have seen in another horrific [shooting in California](#) this last week, we don't do nearly a good enough job in helping our soldiers return to civilian life. Post traumatic stress disorder is still a stigma and so many veterans don't get the help they need.

In addition, studies show that soldiers are trained to overcome an innate human desire to [resist killing another person](#). This leads to what is called "[moral injury](#)." That's when someone's moral conscious is transgressed and they experience profound shame. Typically, our culture does not teach any of us, let alone veterans, how to manage this sense of moral injury. And so it can fester within until it gains an outlet, often in some form of horrific violence.

So on this Veteran's Day, I'd like to end with this. Our culture needs to do a better job making room for our veterans when they come home. They are vulnerable. Justice requires that while we work to end to all war, at the same time we work to care for our veterans.

Why? Because emptying ourselves and making room for others is the divine spiritual pattern of the cosmos. It is *zimzum*. It is *kenosis*. It is what Ruth did for Naomi. It is what Jesus did for his friends. And it is what God does for all of creation.

May we follow that spiritual pattern today and forever more. Amen.