

s-Ephes. series 4-09-Seven Whispers - long  
Ephesians 4:1-16 *One body and one Spirit* (P13B)  
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## SEVEN WHISPERS Short Version

Have you ever gone looking for something you've lost, and instead of finding that thing, you discovered something entirely different? Or have you ever noticed something wonderful on your way to somewhere else? The word for this is "serendipity."

Serendipity can be something as simple as discovering that the red T-shirt you accidentally put in the washing machine with your white underwear *didn't* bleed.

Or that you can't prune your shrubs this year, because the mourning doves are nesting there.

Or, perhaps, your sister's blind date turns out to be the love of your life.  
We can all use more serendipity in our lives!

I have to say, I love serendipitous moments. Sometimes they even seem to carry a special meaning.

I was missing my friend LeAnn the other day. I used to see LeAnn almost every week, at our clergy Bible study group. A couple of months ago, she moved away to take a church up in Canada. I was also fretting about my sermon for this week. None of my research seemed to be taking me anywhere.

To procrastinate a little, I was messing around on my desk, and in the process of shifting some stuff around I pulled out a Bible that needed to be returned to the shelf. Underneath was a little book: *The Seven Whispers* by Christina Baldwin.

Hmm. What's this? I thought. It looked familiar but not familiar, you know what I mean? I picked it up and started reading. And what do you think? It was just what I needed, something to share with all of you.

But the real serendipity was that, when I looked at the flyleaf, I remembered where this little book came from. My friend LeAnn gave it to me before she left for Canada. And so that's what I want to talk about today: this book, serendipity, gifts and relationships.

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Most of us, I think, are aware of an inner voice. As people of faith, we usually interpret that as coming from the Divine. Christina Baldwin calls those inner messages "whispers," and she outlines seven specific ones she thinks speak directly to our lives of faith.

Her first whisper from God is: *Maintain peace of mind*. That's good, but, oh, if it were just that simple! We all know that peace of mind is both the goal and the cornerstone of spiritual life. Our problem is how to get it. Christina suggests that peace of mind comes through a sort of active listening process, one that can only take place in the midst of stillness. But in this modern world, stillness is a rare commodity!

William Blake, eighteenth century poet and mystic, saw peace of mind as a spiritual state, like a destination just waiting for us to find it. Some people intuitively know the way, but most of

us have to figure it out somehow. We have to find a path that leads us away from our needy, complicated, egotistical self and into a space where we can experience something beyond the everyday, something we sometimes call eternity.

To be able to walk that path, we need to exercise our spiritual muscles every day. The best way to have peace of mind is to foster it through some kind of daily practice. Christina personally likes breathing meditation exercises, because she can do them in public without anyone even noticing. She also needs to spend at least a few minutes of every day out of doors, no matter what the weather, just taking some deep breaths and concentrating on *letting go*. Her own little prayer goes like this: “Please, God, give me a split second to hear what you would say, to glimpse the higher purpose. Please think with me and through me, so that I may maintain peace of mind in all I do today.”

How many decisions flow through our hands in the course of one day? Christina suggests that those constant little acts of yes and no, of welcome and refusal, shape who we are and determine where we’re headed. Some days we don’t feel peaceful at all, but maybe those are simply days when we need to pull up our socks and say to ourselves, “Well, this seems like as good a time as any to maintain peace of mind.” We may never feel any peace that day, but at least we have taken a moment to invite it in.

The second whisper that Christina writes about is: *Move at the pace of guidance*. Basically that’s the same thing we’re always saying to ourselves these days, “*slow down*.”

Here’s a good illustration. Imagine a guy dashing through an airport, tickets and carry-on in one hand, cell phone in the other, shouting into the phone and practically mowing people down. Now, compare that image with going on a leisurely walk with a three year old, and just letting the child set the pace. Notice everything the child is noticing. Spend some time staring at a leaf or running your fingers through pea gravel or laughing at something across the street. You get the idea. The pace of guidance is a pace at which we can hear and see and have time to ask questions... and to listen for answers before we move on.

Some days, our to-do list is so long that there’s no way to complete it. Those are the days that turn into the nights when we wake up at 3:00 am, and discover that instead of really sleeping, we’re still working. We just had our eyes closed.

Christina insists that this is not life. *Life* is about being fully present, not about turning ourselves into “doing machines.” Machines do not have relationships with friends and family. Machines do not raise children. Machines don’t need time for themselves and they never play with the dog. And they certainly never, ever, stop their doing for a minute and just enjoy a summer sunset. Machines are not human, but we’re supposed to be. It’s the reason why we’re in the world.

Christina herself decided to try making a commitment to sit down on her living room couch twice a day for fifteen minutes. She wrote two leading questions on the first page of her notebook:

*What do you want me to do? and*

*How do I need to change in order to do it?*

For three whole months, she kept her promise to sit down and just be open to any answer to those questions, and for the first month, the only answer she got was, “I want you to be quiet.”

Now, that took some getting used to. She was impatient! But over time she came to notice how all her prayers started to sound like, “Please, God, gimme some guidance... and give it to me now!”

She wanted to find a more mature way to relate to the Divine, so she began to write what she called “Godalogues”—jotting down *her* thoughts and questions, and then noting whatever answers she felt *God* was giving her.

This may sound strange, and maybe kind of egotistical, but it’s not. I’ve tried it, and I think a few of you have, too. It’s actually quite amazing what comes up. That still, small voice can make itself powerfully clear.

At her heresy trial in 1431, Joan of Arc was questioned by church authorities about the source of guidance she heard inside her head. “Are these not simply your imaginings?” asked the Grand Inquisitor. Joan calmly replied, “How else would God speak to me, except through imagination?”

Moving at the pace of guidance gives us time to experience the serendipity in our life, and to hear the voice of God whispering to us in many different ways.

The third whisper relates very well to the biblical idea of spiritual gifts and our call to make good use of them. *Practice certainty of purpose*. This whisper answers the age-old question, “Why are we here and what are we going to do about it?”

God’s gifts are all about finding balance in our lives—how do we fulfill our personal needs while at the same time giving of ourselves to the larger community?

There’s a wonderful Hasidic Jewish legend that says that when a baby is conceived, a little angel comes and takes up residence in the womb for nine months. In there, in the dark, the baby and the angel discuss the life to come and what the new little person’s role and purpose will be. *What is this soul going to contribute to the world? Who will help support this purpose? What challenges will be faced? Where will this soul find love? How will death find this soul and bring him or her home?*

The catch, of course, is that babies can’t stay in the womb forever, discussing philosophy. And when it is time to emerge, to be born, the angel touches the baby on the lips with its finger—creating that little indentation we call the philtrum—and says, “Hush, Baby. Now it is time to forget.” And out we come into the waiting world—not remembering a thing about all those deep dialogues.

But maybe we *do* remember, at some level of our being. I think that most of us go through life trailing glimpses of insight, knowing why we’re here, and yet not knowing. Longing to know our purpose in life is what makes us grow. Having a purpose gets us up and gets us going.

One way to do this is to constantly be thinking, *What is the next right thing?*

The next right thing can be any number of options. Maybe we need to stop and rest, maybe we need to get to work. Maybe the next right thing is simply to say “no.” Or perhaps it is to say, “yes.” How will you know when you’ve identified the next right thing? You’ll recognize it because your heart will come alive. That’s what it means to practice certainty of purpose!

The fourth whisper is: *Surrender to surprise*. That’s harder than it sounds! Once we’ve identified the next right thing, we might be very startled at what happens next. Can we meet it with an open mind? Sometimes even gifts can be painful.

And yet, as Christina’s auntie always said, “When God shuts a door, he opens a window.” The outcome of living out our purpose may be something different than we ever imagined. There’s serendipity in living a life of faith. Plenty of good things may come along

while we're on our way somewhere else. Are we open to surprise? That may be what makes all the difference.

Christina's fifth whisper is very practical: *Ask for what you need and offer what you can.* What could be simpler? But what, in everyday practice, could be harder? The implication, first of all, is that we *know what we need*. Pinning that down can be like trying to put Jell-O through a tortilla press. Sometimes, the more we push, the more our understanding runs away.

Yet it's critical to pay close attention to ourselves so that we can identify our needs. We can let a lot of things go if we know our real needs will be met. And when we're confident that we'll be all right, that's when we're comfortable giving all that we can.

Let's make up our minds that today, we will ask for what we really need. And then let us vow to offer whatever, today, we can offer. It's today that is important. Writer Annie Dillard once said, "How we live our days is how we live our lives."

Another saying is "What goes around comes around." Sometimes the circle of reciprocity is obvious. Other times, the results are not so clear. But there's no point in keeping track. We are to "cast our bread upon the waters" and trust that God is in charge of the outcome. If we give, our needs will be met. It's one of Jesus' most basic teachings.

The sixth whisper is another one we've heard from Jesus: *Love the folks in front of you.* That's a challenge! It's hard enough to vaguely care about people 'way on the other side of the world. It's harder to always look for the good in the people we deal with every day.

Our journeys are long, and we will have many companions along the road. Some of our traveling companions will be delightful, but others we'll find incompatible. Yet, over time, we usually learn that cooperation can mean survival; and always, making friends along the way makes the journey much more pleasant.

We *do* have a choice about how we feel about those around us. And the better we know each other, the easier it is to get along. That's why sharing our stories is so helpful. Knowing something about what another person has been through, we can be more thoughtful, less judgmental. More apt to make peace.

Reaching out leads us, again into a circle of reciprocity. And sometimes, it really is literally just a matter of loving the person right in front of you. Try it and see if it doesn't make things better.

Christina's eighth and final whisper is: *Return to the world.* Even the most devout and dedicated mystic can't stay suspended in a perpetual state of bliss. Eventually, we all have to come back down to earth. And that's a very good thing.

We are the body of Christ, but we are also our own, physical bodies. We are one with the Holy Spirit, but each of us has a spirit all his or her own. We are given many special gifts from God, but we also have many everyday kinds of gifts. God whispers to us all the time, and we need to listen, but we also have to touch ground and put what we learn into practical use.

Maybe we will notice some wonderful things on our way to somewhere else. That's called serendipity—and it carries a special meaning. What is the message? Listen—God is whispering. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

O God, we know that, for us, there is one body and one Spirit, one hope and one baptism. We have one Savior and one faith, and we neither want nor need another. Speak to us in whispers that can guide us to a life well lived, a life full of purpose, a life where our minds can be at peace even while we're challenged along the way. Give us moments of bliss but also good, solid hands-on work. Surprise us by joy. We ask you in confidence, and in the name of Christ. Amen.

RESOURCES:

Baldwin, Christina, *The Seven Whispers: A Spiritual Practice for Times Like These* (New World Library, 2002).