

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

Have you ever gone looking for something you lost, and instead of finding that thing, you discovered something entirely different? Or have you ever fallen upon something on your way to something else? When it's unpleasant, we might call it an unhappy accident. For instance, I was looking in the back of the refrigerator for a container of sour cream I knew was in there, and came across a Tupperware that was growing its own gene splicing experiment. Eeeyew!

Or reaching in to pick a tomato and getting a handful of tomato worm instead.

Fortunately, not all our discoveries on the way to something else are unpleasant ones. Our happy discoveries, our pleasant surprises, are called "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 your broken television set is still under warranty.

Or that your mother in law is visiting as usual, but this year she plans to stay in a motel.

We can all use more serendipity in our lives!

But sometimes those serendipitous moments seem to carry a little more 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, since I didn't get to discuss the scripture passage with LeAnn. 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 to get my sermon kick started.

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

Christina Baldwin's little book is all about how to listen to that inner voice we interpret as coming from the Divine. She organizes this quiet guidance into seven "whispers," or phrases, each of which speak not only to our hearts and our lives of faith, but also, I think, specifically to the scripture passage from Ephesians that Dorothy and I just read.

Baldwin's first whisper is: Maintain peace of mind. Oh, if it were just that simple! We all know that peace of mind is both the goal and the cornerstone of spiritual life. But how to get it? Baldwin suggests that we can achieve that state through a sort of active listening that can only take place in the midst of stillness. But in this modern world, stillness is a rare commodity.

William Blake, the 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 that; others of us have to figure it out. The pathway to this kind of peace leads us away from our needy, egotistical, complicated outward self, and into a space where we can experience what is beyond the everyday. Sometimes we call that space eternity.

Baldwin suggests that to get there, we need to exercise our spiritual muscles every day. We need a daily practice that fosters peace of mind. She 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 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? Baldwin says 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 those are simply days when we need to say to ourselves, “Well, this seems like as good a time as any to maintain peace of mind.” Maybe peace doesn’t return to us that day; but at least we have taken a moment to invite it in.

The second whisper that Baldwin writes about is: Move at the pace of guidance. What does that mean? Well, basically it’s the same thing we’re always saying to ourselves these days, “*slow down*.”

Baldwin gives 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 that child set the pace. Notice everything the child is noticing. Spend some time looking 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. Do we set it down and let go of it for a while? No, those are the days that turn into the nights when we wake up at 3:00 am, and discover that instead of sleeping, we were still working. We just had our eyes closed. Maybe at that point we get up and write notes under the glow of the nightlight. The important thing is to get things *done*. Right?

Baldwin 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, and we have to hang onto and cherish our humanness. It’s the reason why we’re in the world.

When we’re engaged in spiritual dialogue with God—call it meditation, or prayer, or whatever feels good to you—we’re in a state of what Baldwin calls “call and response.” Any prayer at all—from formal kneeling in a church all the way to a yelp of pain when we hit our thumb with a hammer—is a call. And any signal—from a clear command we hear inside our heads, to a sense of invisible tugging in one direction, or even in the voice or action of another human being who brings us a message that changes our lives—is a response.

The more broadly we interpret this process of call and response, the more we will see how the world within and around us is inviting our attention to guidance.

Baldwin herself decided to try making a commitment to sit down on her living room couch twice a day for fifteen minutes, and write down whatever came to her. She had two leading questions at the head of her notebook:

*What do you want me to do?*

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

For three months, she kept her promise to sit down and just be open to any answer to those questions. For the first month, the only answer she got was, “I want you to be quiet.” That took some getting used to. She was impatient, and her impatience didn’t go away. Instead, it grew. But she noticed how her prayers started to sound like, “Please, God, gimme some guidance... and give it to me now!”

She didn’t want to be “God’s little girl” any more. She wanted to find a more mature way to relate to the Divine. So she began what she called “Godalogues”—writing down her thoughts and questions, and then writing down whatever answers she felt God was giving her.

This sounds strange, and maybe kind of egotistical, but it’s not. I’ve tried it, and I believe a few of you have tried it too from time to time. It’s actually quite amazing what comes up. That little quiet 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 no simply your imagination?” asked the Grand Inquisitor. She replied calmly, “How else would God speak to me, except through imagination?”

Would you like more serendipity in your life? Then make an effort to move at the pace of guidance.

Baldwin’s third whisper is this: Practice certainty of purpose. This relates very well to the idea of spiritual gifts and our call to make good use of them. Baldwin says this whisper includes the 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 maintaining our awareness that everything we do affects the needs and desires of the larger community?

There’s a 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. The baby and the angel speak of many things, especially about 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 to this sweet story is that babies can’t stay in the womb forever, discussing philosophy with their own little angels. And when it is time to emerge, to be born, the angel touches the baby on the lips with its finger, and says, “Hush. 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. Most of us live in this paradox, trailing glimpses of insight, knowing why we’re here, and yet not knowing.

Certainty of purpose starts by believing we have a purpose, Baldwin insists. Longing for purpose is what gets us up and gets us going. Thinking about our purpose makes us grow. Fulfilling our purpose helps us find peace of mind.

Some time, sit down and write the story of your life, in the third person.

*Once there was a man who wanted to stop being a farmer and take up a life of travel and adventure. And so he began to look at the far horizon to see what might call him out into the big, wide world...*

*Once there was a woman who always did what she was told. She behaved herself, got good grades, married a decent man and raised three good children. When she was fifty years old, she sat down on the porch and wondered what she would do with the rest of her life...*

Using our imagination to complete little stories like this can reveal a lot. Where do we come from, who do we think we are, and where are we going? We might be surprised to find out. We might end up with a new list—not a to-do list, but a to-be list.

The purpose of life is not to maintain personal comfort; it's to grow the soul. *What is the next right thing?* Maybe it is to stop and rest, maybe it is to get to work. Maybe the next right thing is simply to say "no." Or perhaps it is to say, "yes." We'll know when we've identified the next right thing because our hearts will come alive.

The fourth whisper is to surrender to surprise. That's harder than it sounds! Once we've identified the next right thing, we might be quite startled at what happens next. The question is, do we meet it with an open mind, or do we withdraw? Sometimes even gifts can be painful.

And yet, as Baldwin's aunt 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. In some churches right now there's a favorite catchphrase: "If God is good, then God is good all the time." And it's true. We're invited to trust God working in our lives, even when the outcome is a surprise that is not to our liking.

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.

Baldwin's fifth whisper is: Ask for what you need and offer what you can. What creed could be simpler? But what everyday practice could be harder? If we pay attention, we discover we can't give without receiving, and we can't receive unless we give. When a friend asks, "Can I give you a hug," do you ever wonder how she could give you a hug without taking one for herself?" Asking/offering/giving/receiving is one circular motion. We live in a world of reciprocal energy.

Today, I will ask for what I need, having first determined what that is. Today, I will offer what I can by trying to understand what is needed and how I can give it. Writer Annie Dillard once said, "How we live our days is how we live our lives."

Sometimes the circle of reciprocity is immediate and obvious. Other times, we may not see the result for years, if ever. There's no point in keeping track; it's a spiritual exercise. We have 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 just this: Love the folks in front of you. That's a challenge! It means that, as Christians, we're asked to look for the good in other people, even when we suspect it isn't there. Baldwin believes that in our speedy society we've become lazy about love. To really love the people with whom we come in contact means that we have to reveal ourselves to one another, to see and accept that we need each other.

Our journeys are long, and we will have many companions along the road. Often we're stuck traveling with people with whom we're not really compatible. Yet, cooperation means survival; and always, friendship makes for a more pleasant journey. We do have a choice.

We may never be best friends with everyone around us, but we can opt to take into consideration all the history and decisions and serendipity that went into making that person who he or she is. Knowing a person's story makes us less reactive and more thoughtful and tolerant. Less judgment equals more peace. Reaching out leads to reciprocity. What kind of help might we offer one another?

Baldwin's eighth and final whisper is to return to the world. We can't stay suspended in a state of spiritual bliss; we have to come back down to earth. And that's a very good thing. We are the body of Christ, but also our bodies. We are one with the Spirit, but we have a spirit all our own. We have gifts from God, and we have very average, everyday gifts—that still are needed, just as we all have our everyday needs. The whispers will continue prodding and reminding us, but unless we touch ground we cannot put into practice all that we are learning.