

COMBINING THE PRACTICAL AND THE SPIRITUAL

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Christian Mystic, Evelyn Underhill, once wrote: "Most of our conflicts and difficulties come from trying to deal with the spiritual and practical aspects of our life separately instead of realizing them as parts of one whole." She has much to teach us as we begin the season of Lent, particularly with what is going on in the world these days. On the one hand some politicians seem to be operating without a moral compass. On the other hand some religious leaders seem hell bent to impose their brand of religion on everyone else. One is tempted to say, "A pox on both your houses!"

In truth it must be said that religion wouldn't be very useful if it had nothing to do with the rest of our lives. But it is also true that our everyday life would risk being shallow if it is not intentionally connected to some spiritual dimension. This is as true in the larger society as it is in our personal lives. It is essential that we combine the practical and the spiritual. But that is easier said than done.

A good beginning point is to ask a simple question: "Where is God in all that is going on in the world right now? In what I'm going through right now?" There was a time when people would just dismiss it all and say: "It's God's will." Well, I, for one, am not content with that shibboleth. I don't for a moment believe that a devastating flood or an earthquake or someone's cancer is God's will. Nor do I believe that a corrupt politician or an unjust law or disregard for a civil society is what God wants. We need to look for God in a more discerning way.

Fred Rogers [Mr. Rogers] once said: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." Part of the wisdom here is that instead making God into the cause of the world's ills, look for where God is providing help to those who are suffering. When we ask where is God in all this, I believe that God is saying "I'm here, walking with you, or carrying you, or standing beside you, or helping you to make order out of the confusion."

We begin to combine the practical and the spiritual when we realize that God is not confined to some distant inaccessible place. God is present in the whole of creation, and in each of our little parts include. That is very good news indeed. The world, at the moment, seems to be a place of place of conflict and difficulty. Perhaps that has always been so, even in Biblical times. Perhaps that is why Jesus said: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

God is not absent from our difficulties and conflicts. When we realize that God is in the midst of our everyday lives, even in the midst of societies' most difficult hours, suddenly living takes on a spiritual dimension. There is always something for which we can express our gratitude. There is always an opportunity to be of help to someone else. There is always a place where our word or presence can offer peace or comfort. There is always an opportunity to be a means of grace and understanding and hope for those who are weary of the world and heavy laden by care.

The Season of Lent is an opportunity to combine the spiritual depth of our faith with the practical realities of living. In that witness we become a light to the world, and a hope for the nations.