

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
ISEC Opening; 1 September 2019  
Rowan University, Glassboro – Todd Foster  
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## Spiritual Exploration

### I. Intro

*Good Afternoon!*

*My name is Todd Foster and I serve as a priest at St. Thomas' Episcopal Church. St. Thomas' is right across the street from Holly Pointe Commons, next to the Landmark. I am also a member of a group of lay and clergy volunteers from four different Episcopal Churches who have banded together to provide an ongoing program of spiritual opportunities through the ISEC under the collective label "TEC@RU" (The Episcopal Church at Rowan University). I'll have fliers here for you next week.*

It is an honor for me to be asked to make this address for the opening of the Interfaith and Spiritual Exploration Center at Rowan University. Christians don't always have the best reputation for playing nicely with others. I'm grateful to Roxie, Donn and Isha for entrusting me with this opportunity today.

I want to start with a brief disclaimer:

I grew up talking about God and faith. You might not have. When I talk about God, when I talk about faith, I'm referring to those things that tell a story which helps me make sense of my life, those things from which I infer my own value, adequacy, and belovedness quite apart from my grades or my income or my prestige or any other of the lesser goods life may have to offer. You may talk of God or gods, of the universe or reality or purpose or your own innermost self. From my point of view, you and I are talking about the same thing. It's that cornerstone of meaning upon which we each build a universe in which to live. I ask for your forgiveness if my use of the word "God" doesn't convey a helpful image for you: sometimes it seems wholly inadequate to me, too.

An hour ago I was leading worship at St. Thomas'. When we at St. Thomas' meet to worship together, we usually read three passages of Scripture, plus a Psalm. So when I preach over there, I have lots of choices for what I might speak about.

Speaking to and about an Interfaith Center is a little more ambiguous. By our very nature, those who gather here will hold diverse opinions about the sacredness or usefulness of different texts. So there are two texts I want to draw on today which might be appropriate to the situation. One is explicitly religious, and one is undoubtedly sacred.

## **II. The rose**

The religious text actually points straight toward the sacred text. The religious text is from a Sufi poet commonly referred to in English as "Rumi." He writes:

*That which God said to the rose,  
and caused it to laugh in full-blown beauty,  
He said to my heart,  
and made it a hundred times more beautiful.*

Anton Boisen said the same thing a little more prosaically when he asserted that every person is a living human document, a document upon which the joys and traumas of a life are written. That beautiful heart of which Rumi speaks is a sacred text that we each bear inside of us. It is the text we read in order to understand ourselves – and, if you're so inclined, to understand God.

## **II. My Story**

As it happens, I've been given exactly one copy of that sacred text of a human life to interpret, the text of my own life. So that is the second text I want to share with you this afternoon. I want to tell you about my journey of Spiritual Exploration. And I will observe that my journey, like every journey, is based in particularities.

### *Ila. Roots*

I grew up in a very religious household: we attended church three times every week. We belonged to a more-or-less fundamentalist church tradition called "Churches of Christ" that had started off in the 1800's as a unity movement, but gradually became just as sectarian as everyone else. As an adolescent I was also attracted by the quiet worship and thoughtfulness of peace churches like the Quakers, Mennonites, and Amish. I enjoyed my Baptist family and friends. I had been given firm roots in one particular Christian tradition, but I became aware that God was bigger than what could be contained by any single religious idea. By the time I had graduated from college with a degree in Computer Science, I had also discerned a desire to pursue God more energetically. And for me that meant going off to seminary.

### *Iib. Synagogue*

After seminary my spouse and I moved to the Bronx to work at planting churches. While there I visited and then attended services regularly at an Orthodox synagogue, Kahal Adath Yeshurun. I'm still a dues-paying member there, though I haven't attended prayers in over a decade. Photos of my children, Aviva and Elisha, still hang on the walls in their fellowship hall. It was in the synagogue I learned about prayer books and liturgy. In the synagogue I heard Common Prayer and chanted Scripture. In the synagogue I saw the power of a cycle of feasts, fasts, and seasons to form a people not just intellectually, but in their hearts. In the synagogue I saw a deep respect for history, for one's forebears in the faith, and their continuing power to inform and inspire one's own growth and search for God.

### *Iic. TEC*

By the time we left the Bronx, I had found that I was no longer fit to serve in the church tradition of my youth. There were particular issues – not about theology so much as about how we treat and value different classes of people, especially based on gender or sexual orientation – that I could no longer abide. A narrowness that I did not want my infant children to absorb as they grew up. And so, despite being a loyal, rule-following, obedient son, I broke with the faith tradition of my parents and set about finding another.

Eventually I stumbled into the Episcopal Church, and for me it was right on so many levels. In the furniture of this Anglo-Catholic parish, I saw echoes of its inheritance from the synagogue. In Common Prayer, in the movement of liturgy, in the chanting of Psalms, in specific practices like parading the Gospel book out into the middle of the people to be read, I experienced many of the things I had loved about the synagogue – but in church! In the Episcopal Church I also found a deep reverence for exactly the things that were at the core of the faith and practice of the church of my youth. These included the centrality of Holy Scripture, an emphasis on the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and a clear valuing of the priesthood of all believers. Finally, on top of these things, I found an explicit, full-throated embrace and advocacy for social justice, I witnessed the ordination of sexual minorities to positions of leadership, and I discovered a deep, vital connection to the history of Christian and Jewish practice. The Episcopal Church spoke to me, resonated with me, like one of those Tibetan singing bowls, as a context profoundly suited to my own journey in search of God.

### **III. Interfaith**

Now I tell you this story not in order to advocate for the Episcopal Church or even Christianity. Please don’t hear my telling this story to denigrate the tradition of my youth: it was crucial in my formation into who I am today. I’m telling this story in the context of an Interfaith gathering to communicate something else entirely:

Interfaith doesn’t mean wishy-washy, ambiguous, and content-less. Interfaith doesn’t rule out faith commitments and strongly held beliefs. Interfaith, rather, invites all the particularities of belief and unbelief to sit at the same table, to interact with mutual respect, and to embrace their diversity and even their mutual contradictions.

In college I experienced a spiritual awakening, and that has been the single most profoundly shaping force in my life ever since. I believe that is a good thing. I believe that is the best thing that has ever happened to me! And I think it is only, by the grace of God, in the diversity of particular religious experiences and communities of worship that I have been enabled to discern my own unique path forward, my own calling by the God who loves me.

And that unique path forward thing: that's what I want to bring out for you today. Because that unique path forward is a feature, not a bug. To put it in Christian parlance, God loves you so much that God is reaching out to meet you in a way that is uniquely suited to who you are.

In college, amidst all the changes of life, social, academic, and emotional demands, and the blossoming of independence, Spiritual Exploration is perhaps the most crucial task of all. St. Augustine observed we each are searching for a peaceful home for our restless hearts, for a story that gives structure and meaning to our lives, for something that can help make sense of both the joys and the tragedies, the delights and the deep pain, the deep engagement and the oppressive ennui, that together make up a whole human life.

God or the Divine or spirituality cuts across every human boundary or construct. No two people will encounter God in the same way. Spiritual Exploration is the work of a lifetime, learning to hear the voice of God speaking to us, that the beauty of our own souls might shine forth in ways that change the world for the better.

I am deeply privileged to participate in that work with you as fellow-travelers here at the Interfaith and Spiritual Exploration Center at Rowan University.

Thank you.

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