

SLD07.27.08 17th
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
Emory Presbyterian Church
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“Dying and Living in Christ – The Life of Sadhu Sundar Singh”

Who of us does not want to understand God? Who of us Christians does not want to understand and experience God through the witness of Christ Jesus? Who of us western, post-enlightenment Christians does not want to grasp and know God through the rational faculties of our minds?

We Presbyterians especially are people of the mind, people of the book, of the word, of the intellect, of rational discourse. Faithfully we seek to explore, learn, understand and experience whatever of God we can through reading the Bible, listening to sermons, attending Sunday School, Bible studies, Wednesday Night Programs, committee and Session meetings, through the worship, study, mission and fellowship of the church. If we've been paying attention, we may know something about Reformed Theology, but many of us have also developed our own personal theologies along the way, our own private grasp on who and what God really is, and how God operates, and who and how we human beings are meant to be. We people of the mind have always valued knowing what we believe and being able to articulate and debate it.

But not everyone approaches faith primarily through the mind. Here in the Bible Belt, peopled predominately as it is by Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals, we know that, too. Many Christian faith traditions prefer to know and experience God through their hearts. Not are we Presbyterians are not immune to such heartfelt engagement with the divine, but generally speaking, we prefer to keep our feet on the ground and our

heads out of the clouds . Our denomination's founding father, after all, was French scholar and attorney, John Calvin.

Still, HIS theological mentor was 4th century North African, Augustine of Hippo, who said, "Seek not to understand so that thou mayest believe, but believe so that thou mayest understand." In other words, don't waste too much time trying to make sense of God in your head before you're willing to believe in and experience God in your heart. Take a leap of belief first, advises Augustine, and see what understanding arises.

Today's saint, 20th century Indian Christian "holy man," Sadhu Sundar Singh, echoes Augustine's approach.

"Remember that the heart, not the head, is the temple of God," he says. "Spiritual and religious ideas are matters of the heart – not the head. If our hearts are filled with the presence of God, then our minds will also find enlightenment. Our physical eyes are useless, unless the light of day illuminates the world around us. Similarly, our minds and the eyes of our understanding are useless without the spiritual light of truth. The wisdom and understanding of the mind can easily be turned to clever instruments of evil," he warns "if they are not subjected to the light of spiritual truth."

To illustrate, he tells this parable:

A scientist had a bird in his hand. He wanted to find out in what part of the bird's body its life was and what the life itself was. So he began dissecting the bird. The result was that the very life of which he was in search mysteriously vanished.

Those who try to understand the inner life merely intellectually," says Sundar, "will meet with a similar failure. The life they are looking for will only vanish."¹

¹ For this and many of the quotes in this sermon, see the e-book, [Islam of the Sadhu – Teachings of Sundar Singh](#), compiled by Kim Comer. Reprinted from www.brudershof.com. Copyright 2003 by The Bruderhof Foundation, Inc. Used with permission.

So, who is this holy man from India? And how, in a land of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Sikhs, comes he to be a quotable Christian?

Born September 3, 1889 to a well-to-do Sikh family in a village in the Punjab, Sundar Singh was educated at a nearby Presbyterian mission school. However, he loathed what he regarded as the “colonial religion,” acting out his disregard one day in a frenzy of disruption and stone-throwing, finally, to the horror of the teachers, the villagers and his own family, tearing to shreds a copy of the Bible and throwing it into a fire.²

Behind Sundar’s horrific acting out, however, was a deep and abiding desire to know and understand. For days after the incident, he would return to his room to beg God to send him some revelation, some vision, some experience, of the truth of God’s existence. Later he writes:

“Though at the time I considered myself a hero for burning the Gospel, my heart found no peace. Indeed, my unrest only increased and I was miserable for the next two days. On the third day, when I could bear it no longer, I rose at 3:00 a.m. and prayed that if there were a God at all, he would reveal himself to me. Should I receive no answer by morning, I would place my head on the railroad tracks and see the answer to my questions beyond the edge of this life.

“I prayed and prayed and prayed. At 4:30 I saw something strange. There was a glow in the room. ...I saw a figure in the light, at once strange but somehow familiar. It was neither Shiva nor Krishna nor any of the other Hindu incarnations I’d expected. Then I heard a voice speaking to me in Urdu (his native tongue): ‘Sundar, how long will you mock me? I have come to save you because you have prayed to find the way of truth. Why then don’t you accept it?’

“It was then I saw the marks of blood on his hands and feet and knew that it was Jesus, the one proclaimed by the Christians. In amazement I fell at his feet. I was filled with deep sorrow and remorse for my insults and irreverence, but also with a wonderful

² For this episode and much of Sundar’s biography, see Sundar Singh: Essential Writings, selected by Charles E. Moore. The Modern Spiritual Masters Series, Plough Publishing House for the Bruderhof Foundation, Inc. Farmington, Pa, 2005. p. 14.

peace. This was the joy I had been seeking. This was heaven.... Then the vision was gone, though my peace and joy remained.” (pp.14-15)

Later, when Sundar rose to tell his father what had happened, he told him to go back to bed.

“Why, only the day before yesterday you were burning the Christians’ holy book. Now you say you are one of them. Go and sleep, my child. You are tired and confused. You will feel better in the morning.”

Well, Sundar did not feel better in the morning. Or at least, he did not feel differently. Nor did his heart’s faith change for the remainder of his life. And if Sundar’s family had been horrified at his earlier disrespect toward Christianity, his subsequent and total conversion to it struck them first as a joke, then with alarm, then as an outrage. Finally his father disowned him and threw him out of his house, his family and his caste.

I will never forget the night I was driven out of my Home, he wrote. I slept outdoors under a tree, and the weather was cold. I had never experienced such a thing. I thought to myself: “Yesterday I lived in comfort. Now I am shivering, and I am hungry and thirsty. Yesterday I had everything I needed and more; today I have no shelter, no warm clothes, no food.” Outwardly the night was difficult, but I possessed a wonderful joy and peace in my heart. I was following in the footsteps of my new master – of Yesu, who had nowhere to lay his head, but was despised and rejected. In the luxuries and comforts of home I had not found peace. But the presence of the Master changed my suffering into peace, and this peace has never left me.

Sundar wandered a bit and ended up at a Christian boys’ boarding school.

The people there received me very kindly and protected me in every way, wrote Sundar. But I was shocked to see the godlessness of some of the students. ... I had believed that Christians would be like living angels; in this I was sadly mistaken.

Nevertheless, he sought baptism at the nearby St. Thomas Church in Subathu.

Thirty-three days after his baptism, at sixteen years of age, Sundar Singh appeared in

the quiet pinewoods of Subathu in the saffron robe of a sadhu, an Indian beggar-monk, and began what would become a twenty-five-year pilgrimage through India, and throughout the world, to spread the good news of his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I have not become a sadhu because I think that there is any merit or salvation to be gained by it, Sundar explains. I long only to serve God the Master with all my heart and soul and mind and strength and to love my fellow men and women even as I love myself. If we allow this principle to guide our lives, then selfishness will flee from our hearts and we shall be like children of God. We will find in every man and woman our own brother and sister. This is the only salvation; this is the only release from karma, from the cycle of sin and death. So I lay aside all worldly encumbrances and lead the life of a sadhu not to gain release from karma, but in thankfulness to God, who has already released me.

(Sounds like a Presbyterian to me.)

As a Christian witness, Sundar was both welcomed and persecuted. Thousands were struck by the simplicity of his faith. Yet by many missionaries and even Indian Christian leaders he was considered a highly eccentric convert, completely out of step with contemporary Christianity as he wandered the roads in his yellow robe and turban. And yet, Sundar became perhaps the best-known Indian mystic in the first half of the twentieth century, certainly doing more than anyone to establish Christianity as compatible with Indian needs, aspirations, and faith.

After years of traveling in India, Tibet and Nepal, China, Malaysia and Japan, sometimes welcomed, sometime reviled and assaulted for his beliefs, Sundar set his eyes on the West. In January of 1920, he landed in England, a tall young man of thirty-one years old, barefooted and wearing a saffron robe. Although he had made no advance preparations for the journey, his personality and message so caught the imagination that people flocked to halls and churches to hear him.

After three months in England, he traveled to the United States. The relentless chase after wealth among all the hurried and harried Christians here disturbed him greatly. He told this story

Once when I was in the Himalayas, I was sitting upon the bank of a river. I drew out of the water a beautiful, hard, round stone and smashed it. The inside was quite dry. The stone had been lying a long time in the water, but the water had not penetrated the stone. It is just like that with the “Christian” people of the West. They have for centuries been surrounded by Christianity, entirely steeped in its blessings, but the Master’s truth has not penetrated them. Christianity is not at fault; the reason lies rather in the hardness of their hearts. Materialism and intellectualism have made their hearts hard. So I am not surprised that many people in the West do not understand what Christianity really is.

In 1922 Sundar traveled across Europe. Due perhaps in part because of the emergence of a more tolerant liberalism in Christian theology, along with general curiosity about seeing a “real” Eastern mystic, especially one whose manner and appearance evoked traditional images of Jesus, everywhere Sundar went he was received by large and enthusiastic audiences filling the cathedrals and sports arenas where he spoke. But more than anything else, his chroniclers insist, it was Sundar’s simple faith and authentic practice of Christ’s teachings that his audiences found so compelling.

Admonished for his lack of familiarity with twentieth century science, Sundar asked, “What is science?” “Natural selection,” he was told, “and the survival of the fittest.” “Ah,” he replied, “but I am more interested in divine selection, and the survival of the unfit.”

Then there was his attitude toward money. He refused to accept it, even when he needed it. And when someone forced a gift on him, he gave it away. There was

also his unorthodox attitude to matters such church membership, of which he said, “I belong to the body of Christ...to the true church, which cannot be understood as a building of tiles and stones. It is a body of true Christians, living and dead, visible and invisible. But I have nothing against anyone becoming a member of an organized church....” (p.25) Inevitably, such views both endeared him to the masses and drew criticism from ecclesiastical authorities.

But what impacted and troubled Sundar Singh most was not the presence or absence of personal adulation but the arms-length approach to God so prevalent among his listeners in the West, seekers, clergy, and theologians, alike.

Let people think what they will, he said, but I am no saint – they are mistaken. I only desire intimacy with God. In fellowship with God I experience a peace that is unknown to the worldly. I know that I am weak and sinful, but most people do not even know that they are sinners. Hence, they do not know the cure for their sin, and they die without ever finding the peace that I have found.

And what is required to find the peace that Sundar found?

He told this story. (“The Hungry Birds.”)

Once as I wandered in the mountains, I came upon an outcropping of rocks, and as I sat on the highest rock to rest and look out over the valley, I saw a nest in the branches of a tree. The young birds in the nest were crying noisily. Then I saw how the mother bird returned with food for her young ones. When they heard the sound of her wings and felt her presence nearby, they cried all the more loudly and opened their beaks wide. But after the mother bird fed them and flew away again, they were quiet.

Climbing down to look more closely, I saw that the newly hatched birds had not yet opened their eyes. Without even being able to see their mother, they opened their beaks and begged for nourishment whenever she approached. These tiny birds did not say: “We will not open our beaks until we can see our mother clearly and also see what kind of food she offers. Perhaps it is not our mother at all but instead some dangerous enemy. And who knows if it is proper nourishment or some kind of poison that is being fed to us?”

If they had reasoned thus, they would never have discovered the truth. Before they were even strong enough to open their eyes, they would have starved to death. But they held no such doubts about the presence and love of their mother, and so after a few days, they opened their eyes and rejoiced to see her with them. Day by day they grew stronger and developed into the form and likeness of the mother, and soon they were able to soar up into the freedom of the skies.

How often, asks Sundar, do we question the reality and the loving nature of God. But the Master has said (that’s what he called Jesus – the Master): “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Whenever we open our hearts to God, we receive spiritual nourishment and grow more and more into the

likeness of God until we reach spiritual maturity. And once we open our spiritual eyes and see God's presence, we find indescribable and unending bliss.³

Asked one Christian devotee: What advice do you have, Sadhu-ji, for Christian churches in the West?

Sundar answered, "I studied theology in a theological seminary. I learned many useful and interesting things no doubt, but they were not of much spiritual profit. There were discussions about sects, about Jesus Christ and many other interesting things, but I found the reality, the spirit of all these things, only at the Master's feet. When I spent hours at his feet in prayer, then I found enlightenment, and God taught me so many things that I cannot express them even in my own language.

Sit at the Master's feet in prayer; it is the greatest theological college in this world. We know about theology, but he is the source of theology itself. He explains in a few seconds a truth that has taken years to understand. Whatever I have learned has been learned only at his feet. Not only learning, but life, I have found at his feet in prayer.

I never advise anyone to consult theologians, because all too often they have completely lost all sense of spiritual reality. They can explain Greek words and all that, but they spend too much time among their books and not enough time with the Master in prayer. ... You must stop examining spiritual truths like dry bones! You must break open the bones and take in the life-giving marrow.

The public appetite for Sundar's message grew. During the last few years of his life, as his health failed, he published six slim books, the first in Urdu and the rest in English, although all six volumes have since been translated into every major Western language, plus Japanese, China and every principal dialect of the subcontinent. But Sundar was not an author at heart. In his teaching as in his life, he offers little by way of rational orientation, categorization or theological analysis. It was in his presence that people felt the presence of God; in the quiet cadences of his speech that people heard the wisdom of Jesus Christ, in his own living and breathing in the Spirit that others were drawn likewise to desire and experience God in a new and passionate way.

³ Comer, p. 2.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman mixed with flour. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.

I don't know, maybe you and I can do a better job than Sadhu Sundar Singh of figuring out in our heads exactly what Jesus meant by all that. But I say, if we're *really* lucky, or, I should say, blessed, maybe one day we'll break open the bones of his parables and take in, through our hearts, their life-giving marrow.

To the glory of God. Amen.