

Religion – what is it?

It takes a while to try and define what religion is – and we might come up with different answers –
or different ways to address the question.

Anyone willing to venture an answer?

Doesn't religion try to answer some questions?

Perhaps religion answers the question of meaning – why am I here?

Perhaps religion answers the question of morality – how am I to act?

Perhaps religion answers the question of mortality – ultimately what happens to me –
or where am I in the bigger picture?

Surely religion addresses these kinds of questions.

It may not answer them – but it tries.

It gives us the opportunity to settle in to an answer that fits.

Religion also addresses the idea of holiness -

holiness – what character am I to develop?

What is inside me?

That would be related to the first questions I mentioned -

Why am I here? How am I to act? Where am I in the bigger picture?

But it's different – it's more about what is on the inside -

and how we give ourselves to the world -

how we are formed because of our relationship with Christ.

John writes about holiness.

There is something sacrificial about it.

There is a principle here.

We die in order to live.

We give in order to receive.

We release in order to retain.

What we most fear to lose we cannot hold.

What we are willing to lose may come back to us in other ways.

“When a grain of wheat falls” is to me a principle about my life.

It is something about letting go of the old
and embracing the new – but it is more than that.
It is hard to know what to let go of and what to hold on to.
We don't want to chase every fad.

The pendulum swings both ways – and what is in fashion one year may excite the next.
But if we do not adapt and grow – we will soon be left behind.

When it comes to faith - the question would be -
what it means to cherish the faith of our fathers and mothers
without getting stuck in the past.
And, what does it mean to embrace new paradigms and expressions of faith
without losing sight of where we have come from and where we are going?

But some things have to surrender in service to something else – which may be greater.

Jesus said, when a grain of wheat falls it bears much fruit.

Does anyone remember the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus*?

Richard Dreyfus starred in the movie as Mr. Holland.

Mr. Holland dreamed of being a composer -

but a new baby in the family caused him to reevaluate.

So he found a job at a high school teaching.

He would spend his spare time writing, composing music.

But life crashed in again and the overwhelming duties of teaching forced him to choose:

his dream symphony - or his student's education.

He tried to continue his writing. Slowly the independent composer dies to the teacher.

Mr. Holland's heart was broken but he fulfilled his obligations.

Out of the death of his dreams came fulfillment of another.

He had composed his opus.

Not on paper - but in the lives of his students,

a symphony composed of

the individual lives that he encouraged and nurtured through his teaching.

Surely that is what Jesus was getting at when he said,

“When a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies,

it surrenders to new life and bears much fruit.”

Maybe it has happened in your life.
Or did it happen in the lives of your parents or teachers?

What grains of wheat do you see now?
Where are they? Are they in the Aspen Community Church or in your life?

There is a principle here
Or, we could, like Dan Millman, call it a law of spirit.

He would call it the law of surrender.¹

The law of surrender part begins with a quote from Sylvia Robinson.

It says, "Some think it's holding on that makes one strong;
sometimes it's letting go."

So the law of surrender means accepting what happens in your life –
But not passively tolerating what happens or ignoring injustice,
or letting you be victimized or controlled.

True surrender is active, positive, assertive commitment to make use of your situation.

It is not to pretend anything or deny your feelings.

It is about transforming them.

Surely this was a part of what was going on with Jesus in this reading.

When a grain of wheat falls.....

Well, the idea here is more to surrender to the moment and your response to it -
feelings and all.

In a way it is to get out of our own way -
and hold the possibility open that a larger will could be in play.

We might ask, "OK, If a wise, loving, compassionate God were guiding me now,
what would I do in this situation?"

Then feel your heart and listen to your higher self.

You start out at whatever level you are willing to open yourself.

And you relax. It takes some practice.

Just to relax is to let our own bodies surrender to the moment.

Let go of fixed ideas about what should happen.

What we want to do is be able to respond freshly and innocently to each moment,
without judgment or expectation.

We can think of it in terms of martial arts.

The highest martial arts, like water, are flowing and flexible, responsible rather than rigid or reactive.

They teach us to pull when pushed and to push when pulled -
to blend with life's forces rather than wasting energy struggling against them.

I have told you before how the book about the laws of spirit
is a collection of adventures with a wise sage while hiking a mountain.
Surrender helps us realize how life is a mystery with a depth our minds cannot fathom.

Surrender opens the way for faith to grow -
and for us to see unity with all beings.

Now Jesus said it differently – but not all that differently.
“The truth of the matter is, unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies,
it remains only a single grain.
But if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.
If you love your life you'll lose it;
if you hate your life in this world you'll keep it for eternal life.”

Remember, this is the Gospel of John – and it is pretty mystical.
But – do you hear the parts about relentlessly holding and letting go -
surrender to a higher power – so to speak.
I expect this is real important guidance for us.

Another teacher addresses it this way:

¹ Dan Millman. *The Laws of Spirit: A Tale of Transformation*. p. 89 and following