

THE SOWER

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BY ALL MEANS (OF GRACE) BY JOHN W NUPP

What do you miss most about your childhood summers? Mine followed that rhythm of work and rest, of hoeing rows of corn and riding bikes, of weeding and mowing through the hot days that lengthened into

long evenings of kick-the-can and catching lightning bugs. Now

there still is plenty of grass to mow and weeds to catch up with, but what happened to the lightning bugs? I must confess that at first I did not notice they were missing. Life had become so busy and the air conditioning such a comfort that chasing a few fireflies in a grassy field had simply faded into my memory. My wife, who teaches Kindergarten, reports to me that her

“IF YOU KNOW THESE THINGS, YOU ARE BLESSED IF YOU DO THEM.”
John 13:17 (NRSV)]

students responded with puzzled looks when she mentioned bugs blinking and lighting up the fields in summertime. What Rachel Carson predicted in 1962 as a “Silent Spring” has become a summer of light pollution

that leaves us blind to lesser wonders. I worry that

someday, maybe in the not-too-distant future, some will say, “I wonder what ever happened to all those churches that were around when I was younger?” For an increasing number of people, religious affiliation is but a fading memory. Indeed, for many in the next generation of Americans, corporate religious experience registers no place in their memory at all.

Just like those young students in my wife's class, when you talk about God, the only reaction you are likely to receive are puzzled looks and a few blank stares.

As we consider the diminishing influence of the church in our world, several questions arise: 1. How will we answer the call of God in our lives; 2. How will we achieve the goal of sharing grace within the congregations we serve, the settings for our ministry? 3. Ultimately, how will God's call on our lives, worked out in the grace we share, work through us to transform the world? In order to answer to these fundamental questions, we are going to have to learn a new language, God's language.

Those of us who grow up in these United States have a hard time imagining the need to learn a foreign

language, since many of us assume that wherever we go, American English will be spoken and understood. Likewise, those of us within the church world, particularly in the American Protestant Church, have grown accustomed to living in our church-centered bubble. Everyone speaks our language, don't they? The short answer is, no, they don't!

Dallas Willard uses the process of learning a new language as a metaphor for learning how to grow and change into more active followers of Jesus. In order to become adept at a new language, you need to have a Vision. But having a vision alone will not enable you to acquire that language; you must attend to your will, your intention, your desire to apply yourself to learning. Beyond this Vision and Intention, you must develop the Means to language acquisition.

Those of us steeped in the Wesleyan tradition are familiar with the language of means, specifically the means of grace. These are

the channels by which God's grace, God's active love, flows into our lives. By these means we find places to meet with God, ways to connect with others who are seeking God. When we lose our way, when we stumble along in the dark, when we lose our joy, these are the lesser lights that lead us to the True Light, restoring us to the joy of our salvation.

We may have a *vision* of God's love abundantly at work in the world, but what makes this Vision more than just a distant memory? We may address our work as servants of Christ with the *intention* of seeing God's grace, God's radical acceptance, lived out in our homes and in the church. But *how* we move from vision and intention into lives of discipleship requires action -- employing those *means* of grace God has given us. Sounds like common sense, doesn't it? Seems like a no-brainer? But how many times have we become so busy in our lives, so comfortable in our sanctuaries, that we have

lost sight of the life we have been missing?

I submit to you, brothers and sisters in Christ, and fellow servants of the Servant, that we are losing sight of the Means of Grace. By our own efforts to maintain well-manicured houses of worship, we have managed to eclipse the source of light in our midst. By seeking to provide for our own security, we have drowned out the lesser lights that lead us to the source of joy, to salvation from our own self-righteousness. We have become so ingrown and self-centered in our spiritual lives that we have begun to lose the ability to hear and speak the language of God.

And so, we must embark on a campaign of Spiritual Literacy. If we ourselves knew the language of God already, don't you think we could have taught the world how to love by now. But dear children of God, there is so much we need to unlearn of our God-talk, our church language, our own plans. There is so much listening to be done --

listening to the Spirit in the silence of our unique hearts, listening to the interactive Spirit in scripture as we study together, listening to the Living Word alive in the streets. After we unlearn what we thought we knew, after we listen, then comes

the speaking. We are called to be unique, but not individualistic, bringing truth to power in the shape of a cross.

By what means, you may ask? By all means necessary, by all the means of grace, that is, all the means of

God's radical love which God has provided to speak to the world. And not just to speak, but to transform. For the One who spoke Creation into being still speaks that Word which creates, which redeems, in that language which brings life and light.

INTERVIEW WITH RABBI SIEGEL

Rabbi Joshua Martin Siegel served the Columbia Jewish Congregation from its inception until 1997, also serving as White House Advisor for Housing and Homelessness. He began serving as Rabbi to the Baltimore Washington Conference in 2005. He continues to teach several studies each week, including a Torah study on Thursdays at the Mission Center.

I wanted to share some of his thoughts on Spiritual Literacy. Take some time to reflect on the following

words and allow them to move you into action. We invite you to join us!

"We need to transform the meaning of words like God, grace, etc. Our vocabulary has been atrophied. It has lost most of its meaning for those in the world and even for those of us within religious institutions."

"My goal is to allow students, some of whom are pastors, to develop a framework for looking for God in a new and humble way; God as known, unknown and unknowable."

"We need to get away from preaching, from the approach that says, 'I know, now let me tell you!'" That model has failed. With honesty and humility, we can move from what we know of God, to discover the wisdom of what we do not yet know and to embrace the mystery of what we cannot know. Together as human beings, we can begin to bring true renewal to our troubled institutions and to our world."