



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

“The Most Excellent Path, Part 2”

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 5,

Divine Love: The Heart of the Christian Spiritual Journey

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A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

There's another marvelous wisdom saying, this time of Paul, that I'd like to introduce at this point because it warns us that as we progress in the spiritual journey, as I'm sure those of you who have watched all these tapes and have been practicing Centering Prayer regularly are beginning to experience. You are now changed. You're not the same as you were when you began. And now some of the tools you used to support your spiritual journey or some of the experiences, sensible, or mental or even spiritual, that you counted on to sustain your faith and your hope and to move you along in the ever deeper and purer love of God ... these are challenged.

Some of these don't work anymore and so this raises some difficulties for us and these need to be addressed by the Centering Prayer communities and by the more experienced folks that you may encounter in your group or elsewhere; or at least in your reading. And here's what Paul is really saying, using Greeks and Jews as a metaphor for those who are kind of progressives in the spiritual journey, who have made some progress, but not enough; or he's using it to encourage them farther along the path that he's identified as the ... or a – I think he uses that word, a more excellent way.

And we find it in 1 Corinthians, toward the end of that first chapter. Jews, he says and read progressives in the spiritual journey, demand signs and the Greeks again, translate into a certain kind of progressive look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and an absurdity to Gentiles; but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ, who is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's folly is wiser than men and his weakness more powerful than men. There's an intriguing juxtaposition of words and paradoxes, a kind-of magnificent jumble of images that need to be properly reflected upon and interpreted.

By signs, Paul is thinking of miracles; of answers to our prayers that are exceptional or extraordinary; of coincidences that are special, that tell us of God's message; or perhaps he is referring to the movement of the Spirit in the charismatic gifts of the various communities that he knew in which there were prophecies directed to people and not just to the future. And so, he wants us to realize

that it's no longer time to look for signs. He's poking a little bit of fun at the Jews, not as a people, but as a symbol of those who are progressing and think that they're serving God greatly and deserve, you know, the admiration and praises of the people that they are serving; not that that's wrong. It's just that it's not enough. It's not the purity of love that is this path, which is the more excellent way, eventually requires.

Just look at the Gospel, for instance. Now it's true Jesus made all kinds of miracles, and yet at the same time you sense at times that Jesus kind of regretted this necessity. Basically; signs are designed to strengthen weak faith. But once faith has been established with a certain depth, then you don't need signs anymore because you believe without the reassurance of these human props or events that support the weakness of our faith.

We see that especially in several places in the Gospel where Jesus deliberately congratulates people on their faith. Think of the Canaanite woman where she persevered in faith even in the presence of God's seeming indifference to her needs. In the end he said: Dear woman, your faith is marvelous. You can have anything you want.

Or again we hear about the ruler's son who was sick at a distance and the ruler pleaded with Jesus: Come down and heal my son. He's at the point of death. Jesus' answer is: I'm not going. You go. And so, he challenged this weak faith and the man apparently accepted it. So, when he got home, his son had been cured at the same hour that Jesus said he was cured. But the point here is that Jesus sort of regretfully provides these signs. As he said on that occasion or at another one a little later: This generation is looking for signs and wonders and none will be given it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. Now Jonah, as you know, was three days in the belly of the whale and has become a symbol of the Paschal mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection. What Jesus is substantially saying is: That's the only sign you need, if you're progressing in faith to a certain degree of solidity and depth, then you're not going to get these signs and wonders anymore because you don't need them. And the divine economy is such that he saves those things for people with weak faith.

And so, the miracles of Jesus, then, need to be interpreted or at least reinterpreted to mean he wasn't just trying to persuade people of how great a wonder worker he was. That meant nothing to him; but rather to give them enough evidence that would support the weakness of their faith and help it to grow to a solid strength that could then meet the demands of daily life where faith is constantly challenged by various difficulties: the struggle with the false self, and the daily routine of everyday life which tends to bring back the same old problems, the same routines, the same difficult relatives, the same friends who forget you, and the same jobs that you get fired from, and all the things that we experience as humdrum and of no importance or as secular.

GOD MUST BE PRESENT IN EVERYTHING THAT EXISTS

Well Jesus' idea, and it's especially clear in the parables, is that nothing is secular; that God is present in the details of everyday life; that God is above all, present within each of us, and within everybody else, and within the whole of creation. If you find this a little difficult to accept, or you haven't heard it too many times before, I refer you to the great Thomas Aquinas who says simply: God is existence, is "isness;" that is, "isness" without any limit or modification or limitation. So that means, as Thomas then goes on to say, God must be present in everything else that exists. That's the way it is.

We, unfortunately with our false self-system, have developed a world of our own, which is not the real one. And so, we've got everything upside down. We think we're here and that God is someplace else; especially if the faith is a little weak and needs to rely upon human props to keep it going. And you see always in a case of tragedy when circumstances challenge the depth of our faith or its sincerity, that then some people fall apart, and they start saying: Well, why does God treat me in this way? And the great problem that plagues all believers of whatever religion begins to arise; namely, if God is sovereign over all things, if he's all powerful and if I'm trying to serve him every day as best I can Why? And as the disk goes on a while the language gets more intense: Why the hell doesn't he help me out? What kind of a God is this? Maybe; I could do better with some other God or I'll stop going to Church now since when I pray, God doesn't answer. It's a waste of time.

Well it's these people who need the kind of charismatic gifts or the signs and wonders, as Jesus puts it, to shore up their faith. But at some point, they're not going to get any more. They're going to be challenged to grow up to a mature faith that does not rely on human props but on God ... and who God is for their foundations of faith.

IT'S TRUSTING IN GOD

And so, in the New Testament, faith should normally be translated as trust. It's very close, the two ideas. And so, it's trusting in God that makes signs and wonders unnecessary. Still you may get a few and you may have more than you had before, but the point is what God demands of us through the purity of this love is that we give the attachment or the dependency on signs and wonders, or spiritual experiences, or spiritual consolations – all of which are just human props. Because, as I said earlier, we cannot see God just as he is in this world and still live. So, we have to live contentedly on the other side of vision and this is the side of faith that see through a glass, as Paul puts it, in a dark manner. But that doesn't mean that God is not there. It's just that he's not there for our selfish or our self-centered demands for consolation, reassurance and for the gratification of our instinctual needs for happiness, for security, power, control, affection, esteem and approval translated to the spiritual life. So that instead of looking for them in material goods or climbing the corporate or ecclesiastical ladder; we now are interested in the truth about ourselves and about God. And we're aware that now we need a new relationship with God or to modify our attitudes towards this new depth ... not of punishment, please, but of love.

In God's relationship with us, there is no such thing as punishment. God is love. Where could punishment come from? It doesn't belong there. And so, what we project onto God as punishment is what we would expect big shots to do to us if we misbehaved or didn't keep their laws, or whatever it was.

But God isn't this way. What we interpret as disastrous events or disappointments or a failure on God, the sovereign power, to take care of us and to make sure that we never get sick and we never have an accident, that natural disasters never overtake us, that we never get shot by a terrorist's bullet or something ... who said that we wouldn't get the same kind of treatment as every other human being? It's not a sign that God doesn't love us, but that God is inviting us always into ever more sophisticated, sublime, and glorious even participation in the ultimate divine plan for humanity, which is the transformation of the whole human family, past, present and to come, into the fullness of the divine light, love and life. And so, what we interpret as disasters are, in actual fact, the mercy of God confronting us in a way that is necessary because of our density of mind, at the depth of our attachments to our own way of wanting God to help us or to even dictate to God how

he's supposed to treat us. And this is not pure love. This is love that is looking for reward first of all and if God doesn't measure up to that standard, too bad for Daddy!

In any case, this marvelous wisdom saying of Paul emphasizes several important points. I've exemplified who the Jews are in this metaphor and they are us as we progress in the spiritual journey and start groaning because the former supports of a purely human kind are taken away and we want to see a few miracles to hop ourselves up or to support our weak knees, as Isaiah calls this situation.

INTELLECTUAL VISION OF THE TRUTH

But who are the Greeks in this situation? The Greeks seek wisdom. Now here wisdom is used, I think, in a special sense; in the sense that Greeks understood it: as the movement to a moral perfection or an intellectual vision of the truth that was so reassuring and so satisfying and so liberating that they passed beyond the usual ups and downs of everyday life and sort of entered into a state of enlightenment, you might say.

Now this is not to disparage the enlightenment in the sense that the eastern religions call it, at least not full enlightenment. As I understand it in our eastern brothers and sisters, there are levels of enlightenment just as there are levels of the theological virtues in the Christian scheme of things. And as faith deepens, so hope and so love grows.

But I'm speaking of, rather, that naive wish that those who are plagued or oppressed or feel put down by life's circumstances, or who are bored with it or who have suffered disappointments like bankruptcy, painful divorce, loss of a child, an addiction, having to take pills, having to go to a rehab, getting old, getting senile, going to a nursing home, having to die – all these things are a part of ordinary daily life. And Jesus' teaching is that the Kingdom of God, that is to say, the consciousness of Christ, of God's pervasive presence in everything that happens is obscured for them. They don't see it and, hence, what they're seeing is just the negativity, not the secret transformation that is going along.

THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

And in this connection Jesus has the parable of the leaven. The leaven is not like modern yeast. But the leaven was the way they kneaded bread in Jesus' time and it became a symbol of corruption because it was made from leaving a piece of bread in a dark, damp place and letting it deteriorate and decay and stink. And then it was ready to be kneaded into the bread. And so, in this parable Jesus says a woman took leaven and kneaded it into three measures of bread. This is an enormous amount of bread – it would make about fifty loaves – until the whole was leavened. And having delivered this parable, he then walked off down the street and left those poor people trying to figure out what this means. Well, the question that must have arisen for these people given their particular mindsets. In the Pascal feast days, you weren't allowed to have leavened bread in the house. It had to be unleavened. Jesus says: beware of the leaven of the Pharisees; that is to say, the corruption of the Pharisees.

Well, in the case of three measures of bread, Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven being like monumental corruption. So, what does that mean? His followers must have been saying: Is this guy saying that evil is good or that good is evil? I don't understand this!

What it means is that Jesus is challenging what people regard as unassailable standard for judging what is good and what is evil. And in the religious atmosphere of Jesus' time what was good was the feast day, the holiday, the sacred place, the sacred person and what Jesus is teaching is saying: that's not so. The kingdom is no longer exclusively in the temple, in the holy day, in the feast day, in the temple rituals. Where is it then? It's in everyday life.

And that's why the Publican went back to the world and his house justified. And the Pharisee in that parable went back to his house just the same as he was when he came in. Jesus has revolutionized the idea of the sacred. So now the Kingdom of God is at work in where you least think it, or where you can't believe it is, or where nobody can find it. In other words, it's in the storm; it's in what strikes me as tragedy; it's in what strikes me as moral disaster or spiritual loss or mental disaster. And so, we find Jesus saying that now the maximum of the Kingdom of God is not where you think it is; but is where you don't expect to find it. And, hence, if you change your attitude, you give up the myth of trying to rise to some kind of serenity in which nothing can ever disturb you, in which you enjoy all knowledge and all truth, can answer all questions. Everybody comes to you for the bottom line in how to solve their difficulties; or the ambition to be a spiritual master, to be beyond the ordinary human boredom, routines, ups and downs of daily life, whatever your particular lifestyle is.

THE GOD OF EVERYDAY LIFE

So that understanding can be lived in a cloister. It can be lived on the street. It can be lived in a house. It can be lived in an apartment. It can be lived on a mountain, in the desert, anywhere. If we accept the God of everyday life, you have him right now. If you're looking for the God who is going to rescue you from oppression and from the difficulties of everyday life, forget it. Try another universe.

In any case, this is the extraordinary teaching that Jesus delivers in the parables and that Paul sort-of recapitulates in this wisdom saying. So, the Greeks are those who desire spiritual consolation, those who desire not only signs and wonders exterior to them, but the interior reassurance of grace that we are beloved by God, that God is always thinking of us (actually he always is but we don't need to think so in order for it to happen). It doesn't depend on our virtue. And so, this is the teaching that the people of Jesus' time found so unbelievable and so extraordinary because they were trained to think God is hard to get; he's far away; he's transcendent; he's the God of armies. He's the God who is going to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Romans of several generations. All the nations of the world will flow into this wonderful new theocratic nation in which all the nations of the world will recognize the supremacy of Israel and the oppressed and the poor will be raised up to God's level and all their troubles will be over.

The parable of the leaven says: no chance. The Kingdom of God is not in that kind of success. On the contrary, the Kingdom of God is in the most ordinary circumstances and more so if these circumstances are difficult; because difficulties tend to accelerate the spiritual journey and move us beyond the routines of selfishness that are so deeply rooted in us that we've brought with us from early childhood and that in general we call the ego or the false self and its two basic roots: one is the emotional programs for gratification, through power/control, affection/esteem and security and survival, and our over-identification with the social group from which we come or which we join.

GOD IS RIGHT WITHIN US

What Jesus is saying in this parable is: God is so close, is so loving, is so present, you don't have to go anywhere to find him. Yes, go on a pilgrimage if you want and you may get great graces there, but you don't have to go anywhere. God is right within us twenty-four hours a day, in sickness and health, life and death. There's no place to go to find him because he's already here.

It's rather, us who have to stop going other places mentally or physically on a regular basis so that we can begin to access the mystery of God's presence within us. And this is the work that Paul recommends. It's a stumbling block to the progressives who haven't gotten beyond the need for signs and wonders. It's beyond the Greeks; that is, the progressives who want enlightenment or faith or spiritual consolation, sensible or spiritual proof that they're making progress in the spiritual journey. Jesus says when you don't know where you're going; when you have no proof that you're on the right road; when you're totally confused; when everybody rejects you; when you're persecuted; when everybody speaks ill of you; rejoice!, he says because this is the gift of divine wisdom that opens our eyes to the fact that God's kingdom is most accessible at times in the most unexpected, difficult, and unacceptable situations.