



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

**“The Divine Banquet and Dance, Part 1” Excerpted from
*The Spiritual Journey Part 5,
Divine Love: The Heart of the Christian Spiritual Journey***

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LOVE BEARS EVERYTHING

We were just discussing in our last tape the situation of people who are progressing in the spiritual journey and who are experiencing what they consider the withdrawal of the human props that they had relied on in earlier periods of their spiritual journey. And this may take a fairly acute form at times; for instance, they might find that their reception of the sacraments, their practice of rituals, their reading of Scripture, their ministry have all gone dry or dead or leave them with no sense of gratification or sometimes positively, in case of ministry, to fail. And so, these folks need to be reminded that they may be being moved by the Divine Therapist to work at a different level of faith and to work more closely with God's presence, not through a medium, but through the immediacy of faith and love. And as that becomes more immediate, the mediator-ship of other things such as ritual, which are excellent in themselves and a necessary preparation, begin to be of no great experiential help. They still do what their duties are but there's no satisfaction in them during this period.

And also, they begin to let go, perhaps; for the same reasons, of their expectations. Because now the experience of their weakness and the failure of the support systems, however spiritual, that they had relied on are just disintegrating. They're not about to have some grandiose idea of the heavens opening and Christ appearing at the right hand of God and thanking them personally for their extraordinary efforts in the interest of the Kingdom. In fact, it almost feels as if God couldn't care less what they do. And that's what's so poignant for those who have reached this level of love; and hence here is where the saying of Paul comes in handy: Love bears everything. St. Augustine's interpretation of this injunction is that love bears the unbearable; that is to say, it remains calm and peaceful at some deep level, even when all of the rest of our faculties are confused, are buried in the debris of our expectations which now seem, as they always were, unrealistic.

It's not as though God didn't want us to have great ideas, but the greatness doesn't come as a reward or a glorification of our ego; this is the issue. But rather, it's the glorification of God working in our human weakness which now begins to take on the aspect of that parable of the leaven; namely, our weakness, seems to be monumental. And it may take some very searching forms that

alert us to the fact that an enormous intelligence is working with us and in spite of us and around us and underneath us and above us and respecting mightily our freedom but finding ways to bring us around to what God really wants us to do for our own benefit, even at times against our will or what we thought was against our will. And this immense intelligence, therefore, reveals itself in time as an enormous love which is much more wonderful than signs and wonders and much more wonderful than what we thought the spiritual journey would terminate in; in other words, not in moral perfection or in spiritual consolation or in experiences of ecstatic quality. These may be a phase on the journey for some people. But the heart of the journey is not experiences, but the transformation of our whole life into experience. And the experience I refer to here is the closeness of God in all our activities, even the most profane and the most inconsequential, in the smallest detail. Why is that a surprise? If the God who made insects, which are a trillionth of an inch in size and takes care of them, what's so surprising if he takes an interest in us when we experience this, this monumental weakness.

THE LIFE OF FAITH

What is our experience, then, from this point on in the spiritual journey with this God who we know is present but whose presence is hidden from us? And we call this the life of faith; that is, where our trust in God is not based on human props or examples or re-encouragement of a spiritual nature, but simply on the trust in God's infinite mercy, his forgiveness, his love, his support, his protection. But that is totally at the service, again to refer to Paul, of the growth in love within us. So, all of those wonderful gifts also include the challenges that upset, or question, or invite us to an ever-deeper self-knowledge which, in turn, moves us to ever increasing total dependence on God's love.

I would say that at times, as this growing love increases, one feels that one is a kind of instrument of God. What do I mean by that? And maybe; it's too personal an experience to generalize, but I've seen it happen in a number of people. But every now and then, if you have certain gifts, it feels that at the time these are operating that someone else is providing you with the energy you need of whatever kind is appropriate for the particular gift. Thus, you feel like a pencil, let us say, if you were a writer or a preacher or something like that – someone who deals with words, or someone who interprets the Scripture, or who gives counseling, the Word of Wisdom, let us say, to people who are on the spiritual journey, who need to have their journey affirmed or verified because it has become so perplexing to them.

So, a person, then, feels like a little pencil that is picked up at the appropriate time, and while you are writing, you know that this divine love or this presence is supporting you. It's not the kind of inspiration that we attribute to Scripture. But you know that the strength and the power within you is not coming from yourself. And so, when the true writer, that is the divine goodness, puts down the pencil, what are you going to feel like? Nothing at all. That is to say, all your sources of energy were dependent, at least for those few moments in which you were exercising your particular spiritual gifts, are gone. And so, you experience, then, this great dependence on God, at certain periods, and this enormous weakness or nothingness or inability to do anything until this marvelous presence picks you up again and decides to use you to write a little letter to somebody or whatever the practice is.

IN THE MOST ORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

Now suppose that you move beyond that phase of experiencing the presence of God in your ministry or activity, and I would include, of course, in any ministry – parenting and service of others

of any kind, and service in justice and peace issues – all of these things are equally concerns of God. And, I think, there's a divine way of doing anything ... like there's a divine way to be a lawyer or a doctor or a grandma or a teacher. Perhaps; there's a divine way to be a homeless person, I'm not sure. With this view that Jesus has communicated to us, that the Kingdom is present in the most ordinary circumstances and is not any less when circumstances are difficult, begins to increase this sensitivity to the movements of the Spirit within us. So that now, life, with a little more grace, can become a little dance ... a little dance. And I'm thinking here, perhaps; of a – if you've seen a couple who are really superb ballroom dancers -- their steps are in complete synchronicity. Think of Fred Astaire and some of his great partners and the better part of his extraordinary gifts as a dancer. They twirl; and they turn. They stop; and they start – all at the same time. And their bodies are so closely interwoven, you'd think they were a jigsaw puzzle, that the two parts were joined together. Well maybe, perhaps; this happens with rock and roll, but I think it might be a little too much of this stuff ... to be a good example of what I mean. Perhaps; the ballet is the best. You notice the grace and the skill. So that now Divine Love is the partner and it's inviting us to respond in the details of life to this movement which always the initial movement comes from the partner and then one follows, but follows with every increasing skill, so that each movement is in synchronicity with the divine movement.

This, it seems to me, is what it means to be transformed. And everything then one is doing is expressing the tenderness, the goodness, the dance of the Divine Goodness, which is all energy and all love; and which invites our cooperation and invites us into the project of creation. So that together we sort of co-create, only the Creator remains the leader always and the guide and sets the speed, the tone, the time, the place for each thing that he wants us to do.

The dance, then, of God with us is an effort to exercise this hymn of divine love in terms of action, not just in terms of words. So now, as Paul says, love is kind – this is the movement – love bears no grudges, love has endless forbearance, love has no end or limit to its trust. And so, you can see here how the Divine Partner is sort of leading you and twirling you and standing on your toes and then bending over you with some embrace. Everything becomes a sensitivity to this action. But people as a whole may not notice this at all because it's so ordinary. It's so much the way things are supposed to be anyway, that it can completely escape notice because it's so ordinary; unless there's someone there with the eyes of faith and a sensitivity to the transmission of divine life that is going on there in secret.

AT THE GREAT BANQUET

This brings me to another parable that I think is important for us to understand the intimacy and what's involved in this determination or the divine will to save everybody, to bring everyone into the dance, to provide everything with a share at the great banquet where they can eat the mature food of infinite light, life, love and the happiness without end that belongs to those kinds of divine activities. And this is the parable of the great banquet. In the previous talk I mentioned a few aspects of how the Jewish people, or the Israelites at the time of Jesus viewed the Kingdom of God.

It had been prophesied by their great prophecies. Like Isaiah 25 sees it as a great banquet on the top of a mountain in which the nations of the world will be subjugated to the Israelites and an era of peace and justice will be established throughout the whole world and the poor and the oppressed will enjoy a vindictive triumph or at least will be raised up to the level of God and their miseries taken away.

This is not God's, or at least Jesus' idea, of the kingdom and it was precisely the fact that his disciples couldn't get the point because this mindset or this myth was so deeply rooted in their psyches that a person like Judas, for instance, who apparently had certain political expectations of Jesus, just went on the rocks because Jesus completely undermined his idea of what the Kingdom of God was going to be; namely, the vindication of the Jewish state and religion.

In this parable, then, Jesus is addressing this mindset and here is the way the parable goes. I'll be following mostly Luke. We hear about a householder. And almost every exegete agrees that the householder is the image of God and that the great banquet is, indeed, referring to the great banquet on the mountain referred to in Isaiah, I believe 25, and mentioned in other parables too.

Here's how it goes. The householder was, obviously, among the elite of this small town. Only the elite lived in houses or in homes. The poor lived in the best they could get, maybe; a roof over their head, but that was about it. And there was no upward mobility in those Palestinian villages at the time. So whatever class you were born in, and there were only two – the rich and the poor, that's where you stayed for the whole of your life. Well the householder, obviously, invites to his feast that he's prepared, his peers. And his peers are other landowners, other rich, other people that belonged to his strata of society. And so, the invitations go out and he starts getting the responses. The RSVP's are anything but flattering. The three people he invites turn him down for rather insignificant reasons. One had some property to look at, somebody got married, someone had to try out a herd of oxen, or something like that. It's a delicate touch that there were three rejections.

There's a certain importance to numbers in the Hebrew scriptures that is reflected in the New Testament. And here, like in other parables ... remember in the parable of the Good Samaritan, two people come down the road and pass by the man who is beaten up and left for dead at the side of the road. And the third man rescues him. In the parable of the talents, two put their money in interest and gain the satisfaction of the owner of the money who loaned it to them. And the third one who hid the money is condemned. So, the listeners, who are used to this parabolic way of teaching, are expecting that the third person will accept the invitation, and thus, the reputation of the householder will not be lost. But the fact that all three reject him is the symbol that he's totally dishonored and rejected by his peers. And since he draws his self-identity and his honor from partaking of the banquets, a symbol of comradeship and identity with his peers, he's really in trouble. His reaction is to fly into a rage. And so, he says to his servants: go out and bring in the poor, the maimed and the blind that my house may be filled.

Now we know from the prophets that the poor man in the Psalms, at least, is God's hero, is the hero of the Psalms, his favorite. His option is in favor of those who are poor. But poor here means not just destitute of material goods, but poor on any level. It means, really, a person afflicted for God's sake for any reason and who basically; accepts that state for the love of God. So, it was no surprise, then, to the listeners, that, as the prophets had foretold and as Luke often expresses concern for the poor in his Gospel, that these people arrived at the feast. Remember the feast is the symbol of who actually gets into the Kingdom of God, who actually is saved.

The problem is the house isn't filled yet. And for some reason that we're not told, it has to be filled. So now the householder is faced with a huge dilemma. He's lost his honor with his peers. And now he's faced with the option of calling off the dinner or inviting more people so that his house might be filled. And what is his decision? His decision is, and his orders are to his servant: go out into the highways and byways and compel people to come in. In other words, pick up everybody that you

find on the street or hiding under a bush or a bridge, and, if necessary, drag them in here so that my house may be full. And here is where we understand by highways and byways ... street people; that is the homeless, the marginalized, the people nobody wants, the public sinners, the tax collectors who were mostly into graft, and the prostitutes... everybody that they can find must come into the house because the householder says: my house must be filled.

Okay, now what is he going to do with all these people nobody else wants? And this is the great window on who God is that Jesus reveals. He's lost his honor as a member of the elite. And now he has to decide whether to lose his honor altogether by joining the hoi polloi, the public sinners, the people nobody wants. That's his choice or dilemma. And here is what Jesus reveals about God. He doesn't have any honor that he cares about. He doesn't give a hoot about being a member of the peer group. And, as Jesus manifested in his own conduct, he wants to identify with every human being, just as they are. And the meaning of eating with people in that particular culture was extremely significant. It meant that the person who sat down to table, identified with the people who were there. That's why the authorities at the time of Jesus were so askance and horrified when Jesus ate with public sinners, prostitutes, and talked to women who were regarded in those days as unclean. This was a "no, no" in those days of rabbinical practice, and Jesus represented himself as a kind of rabbi, and so on.

So, what, then, does this parable say about who God is? God doesn't care about honor. He's interested in love, as we saw. And he's interested in anyone at all who's willing to accept that invitation. So, here's the great insight, it seems to me, of that parable. Namely, instead of calling off the feast and embarrassing himself by going in and joining with this ill clean and ill dressed and ill-bred ne're-do-wells and positive blights on the landscape, he joins them! He joins them! This is the symbol of what the Incarnation really means — that God becomes a human being just where human beings are: which is in desperate need of healing; which is in desperate need of affirmation; which is in desperate need of being loved; which is in desperate need of realizing that God loves us, forgives us, wants to communicate his own inner life to us, wants to share everything that the divine goodness has, and that God has no hesitation to do this at the price of his honor. This is not a consideration.

And so it tells us that God has the most incredible humility, a humility that you might say almost wants not to be God in order to express the totally non-possessive attitude that God has to all the divine riches; so that this reflects how the Trinity works: how the Father who initially enjoys the fullness of the Godhead totally empties himself into the Son so that the Son becomes consubstantial with the Father. This means that the Son is absolutely everything that the Father is, except the relationship of receptivity. So, the Father has the Godhead to give and the Son to receive. And together they rejoice in this incredible goodness in an act of total self-surrender in which each of these persons try to give themselves totally away in order to express an inconceivable love that is unconditional; a sigh of love that is not an aspiration for something, but is the expression of infinite satisfaction in being nothing. That is to say, of having no particular identity ... no thing-ness ... just by being. And they want to communicate that capacity just to be and just to enjoy it to everyone who is willing to accept the invitation. Anyone. That means everyone is invited.