

There's Just Something about God

A sermon on Ephesians 4:1-14 and John 6:24-35

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*

In the letter Paul wrote to the Ephesians,
he exhorts us to live “worthily” - with patience, gentleness, and humility.
Can you imagine if people actually did that? Really?

There is an old tale told among monks, about two hermits.
One said to the other: *Let's have a quarrel with one another, as other men do.*

The other answered: *“I don't know how a quarrel happens.”*

The first said: *Look here, I put a brick between us,
and I say, “that's mine”
and then you say “no, it's mine”
That is how you begin a quarrel*

So they put a brick between them,
and one of them said *“that's mine”*
The other one said *“no, it's mine”*
The first answered: *“yes, it is yours”*
and they were unable to argue with one another.

This story illustrates an ideal of how monks should relate to one another -
with an attitude so **humble** and **generous** that fighting is a curious novelty,
and something that rarely occurs,
it may not even be possible for the most spiritually advanced.

This story is meant to be an illustration of an abundance of those virtues
Paul thinks Christians ought to have.
These two hermits exhibit **humility**,
willing to submit to the will of the other,
they show **gentleness**,
in wanting what the other wants,
they show great **generosity** of spirit,
in their lack of attachment to material goods.

But perhaps that's not what you envisioned.
Perhaps you saw instead the dangers of living with such a disposition.

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Does this story mean that life with arguments involves that kind of conflict avoidance,
or appeasement? (The answer is no.)

But, often it seems that that is exactly what happens.
That's why the powerful can take advantage of the weak.
That's why we have that saying "nice guys finish last."

And this line of thinking makes perfect sense, at least to modern Western people.
We have these ideas about Darwinian evolution,
the survival of the fittest,
of the mechanical workings of the material world
where there is a finite amount of resources that we are all vying for.

And we're told to be nice.
It's like saying:
"You're in a battle for survival with all the people around you. But don't hurt them."

Now, I have the utmost respect for science,
and I have no quarrel with natural selection or evolution, Newtonian physics.
Those things adequately describe how we've observed and theorized
the universe to operate.
But I don't think they quite tell the whole story.

Remember those two hermits
who couldn't manage to argue about the ownership of a certain brick?
That's a story that has been passed down for centuries -
something around the order of fifteen hundred years at least.
The reason why people bothered to keep copying books with such stories
was that they were deemed useful.
Through writings like this, as well as the scriptures themselves,
it is maintained that developing those character traits
of meekness, generosity, patience, and all that
was worth any risk that would arise from it.
And that these are virtues pleasing to God,
bringing one to natural, involuntary, and overflowing love
for everyone and all of creation.

It was written by Christians, for Christians.
And this part is key.

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this works best when everyone is committed to it.
That's the basic idea of monastic communities -
groups of people vowed to worship God
and work on their spiritual lives
and help others do the same.
That's also the basic idea of the Church,
and what Paul is writing to the Church of Ephesus about.

In case you hadn't noticed -
We don't live in that Utopia in which quarreling doesn't exist.
Monks don't either by way.
As much as I love my Benedictine brethren,
they are all familiar with this concept of quarreling,
though to their credit, they try to avoid being embroiled in such things.

Living in community can be difficult at times.
It means having to deal with other people.
And the more other people added to the mix,
the more differing opinions there are,
and the more grumbling and arguments.

Still, this problem of having to deal with other people is a perennial truism,
as valid today as it was to the Church in Ephesus that Paul was writing to.

One of the problems the Ephesians were having with one another
seems born of the tension between everyone being supposedly equal,
and some being "more equal than others."

And with it a confusion as to who should be listened to.
And apparently there was some amount of resentment and reluctance to work together.

Paul advises them, well, no he doesn't just advise.
He begs them to behave with at least basic human decency.
He wants them to live lives worthy of the calling.
This worthiness is not measured how much of the world would measure it,
in terms of power or wealth or family.
Paul is interested in a worthiness of character.
Character marked by such virtues as
humility, gentleness, patience,

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and bearing with one another in love.
Striving to maintain unity in a diverse group.

Sounds like a good suggestion -
reminding these Christians of their values.
Problem is there is a difference between assenting to the idea
that patience is a good thing,
and actually having it in the heat of the moment.
It may be a virtue they'd like to have,
but it needs some work
before they get to the point where they don't remember how to quarrel.

And so Paul gives us some different things to think about
instead of focussing on how unfair things are,
or how much hurt had been caused,
or how stupid people can be, believing all sorts of nonsense.

All that even if true isn't that helpful.
What helps is bringing to mind that reality that we're all in this together.
One Lord, one faith, one baptism.
One God and Father of All, above all and through all and in all.

If one takes that seriously, then there is an imperative
to strive to reflect that same unity within the community of believers.

That's one calling they share, it has little to do with them. It's about God.

When I was at Saint John's,
quite often the first day of class would involve some sort of introductions -
usually who you were, where you were from,
and why you were taking that particular class.

And we would all try to come up with very personalized answers.

For my part my answer was usually something like :

Coming from a background in history,
I want to gain insights into the thought world of early Christians
to better understand their world and why history unfolded as it did.

While that's true, it's also a tad bit backwards.

One of my classmates said something very different, she said:

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“There’s just something about God.”

Once she said that, everyone had much the same reaction:
Can I change my answer to that, because that is it.

I can’t speak for everyone, but that was generally the truth of it.
We didn’t go out to study theology because of who we were
quite so much as who God was,
because we shared that sentiment of
“there’s just something about God.”

I think this is the type of attitude that Jesus was trying to explain
to the crowds in this morning’s Gospel reading.
God knows our hearts.

And Jesus certainly knew that the crowd wasn’t searching after *Him*
so much as they were interested in being part of another feeding miracle,
as we heard about last week.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you,
you are looking for me not because you saw signs,
but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

Well, you’ve got to start somewhere.
And He uses their hunger for bread to explain
there are other hungers that they should be attending to as well.
He tells them “do not work for food that perishes
but for the food that endures for eternal life”

This crowd was ready to hear this,
and wanted to what works would gain them this eternal food,
apparently missing what he just said,
that this “food that endures for eternal life” is
that “which the Son of Man will give to you.”

And they try to wrangle more bread out of the deal,
explaining that if perhaps he could conjure up some bread
like the manna the Israelites had in the Wilderness,
that then maybe they could believe.

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But the “bread of heaven” is not manna.
The bread of heaven gives life to the World.
The Bread of Life, Jesus says, is Himself.

And he does, as requested, give us this bread always.
He gives his life to us. But for a reason.

Paul is trying to make that part clear to the Church of Ephesus.
The God that sends his only begotten son, the Bread of Life,
bestows on us also various gifts. And to some he gave
to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.

But regardless of which of these gifts were given to whom,
the same Spirit gives them, and with the same goal in mind:
“to equip the saints for the work of service,”
and for building up the body of Christ, that is the Church.

the aim is for “all of us to come to the unity of the faith
and the knowledge of the Son of God,
to maturity, to the measure and the full stature of Christ.”

That's the purpose of the Church according to Paul -
to foster unity, truth, and spiritual growth into the likeness of Christ,
to remake ourselves in his image.

You may or may not define things differently, but his is a model that works.
It is this one common goal and vision
that allows people to unite and come together as a community.
It's a foundation for allowing God to work in us and through us,
so we can be something more than we ever could be individually,
and take part in helping amazing things to happen.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*