

Palisades Presbyterian Church
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EGO: Easing God Out
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For Paul, eternal life meant two things: companionship with Christ and a personal character congruent with it; and endless existence and continuing spiritual growth.

His teachings represented a spiritual maturity that sometimes exceeded the capacity of those to whom he preached. And, in this morning's reading from Galatians, we see part of a broader declaration of Paul's religious independence from humankind and dependence on God: a reach then, as now, for many.

In Paul's expansive embrace of the Gentiles and repudiation of the need for physical demonstration of faithfulness (such as circumcision), he had moved away from a constricted interpretation of the requirements of his forebears, one infected with what had too often become self-serving demonstrative actions that indicated that faith hinged more upon satisfying assessment of traditional thought – rather than as a gift of God.

It was a grand distinction. Paul was essentially saying that there was nothing humankind could do to sway God's opinion or please God other than to trust God's grace and stop trying to acquire merit by obedience to the law.

Reminds me of the words from Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains
shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of
the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the
morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth
melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah
Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought
on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and
shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.
**“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”**
The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Paul came to view his and others' attempts to *acquire God* through adherence to the law as diminishing in our lives the presence of God and God's Spirit.

Remembering Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, where he encountered the Spirit and presence of Jesus, this makes sense. All of Paul's traditional and zealous response to the law of the time had led him to the persecution of the followers of Jesus. Then, in one instant, in the nexus between the law and his first-hand experience of Jesus – he was given vision to see how the law had failed, in fact how the law had distorted and disfigured God.

Up until the moment of his conversion, Paul saw his acts of persecution as the meting out of justice: according to the law, therefore in compliance with his faith and its teachings.

Paul's new gospel, a gospel of God reconciling humankind to Godself, rather than a God waiting to see if we were obedient and in compliance – was almost too good to be true for those to whom Paul preached, following his experience. In fact, the spiritual maturity of his message was for many too great to grasp. For many, it must have seen – the old rules, imperfect as they were – were easier to follow.

In my time of chaplaincy training, we talked frequently of spiritual growth, sometimes in terms of what we called -- spiritual world visions. One of the studies we read referred to three "World Views" of spiritual life: World A, World B, and World C.

- World A was a very literal interpretation of the Scriptures or religious writings of a particular faith. Much like Paul before his conversion, this identified those who, for the most part, believed that whatever God had to say had already been said. You followed the writings or didn't; reached salvation or didn't.
- World B was a vision of the spiritual world that admitted to some questions about the ancient writings, probably acknowledging that there had been some changes over the years that did not really reflect accurately the times or the intent of when first composed, but that even with these shortcomings, the writings and prescribed dogma were inherently effective and truthful and, if we followed them to the best of our ability with some common sense and reasoning – we'd be ok in life and life-after.
- World C vision encompasses a broader sense, I would say a mystical sense of God as being transcendent, mysterious, present, revelatory, active and participating in the world through the Spirit. It is a vision that acknowledges that all words and language and beings are at best pointers to something beyond what we could otherwise know, and it is to that mystery that we are innately inclined and by which we are justifiably humbled.

In chaplaincy, we were taught these and other concepts to help us gain a glimpse into the faith journeys of those we might encounter, doing our best to meet them where they were – in an effort to be useful.

What we were also taught was to not be so surprised when, under duress or extreme conditions – that even the most enlightened, the most spiritually mature – were inclined to revert to the most concrete, basic, fundamental teachings of their youth, so great was the gravitational force of the early teachings. Think of those turning back to the idols when Moses took a little too long to come down from the mountain. There is probably no greater obstacle to spiritual growth, sustained if uneven spiritual growth – than fear that we have gone astray.

Here, in this place of the tension between the law and the Spirit did Paul find his work and his struggle. He was in no uncertain terms teaching and preaching radical reform, so much so that he found himself at odds with the Apostles, notably Peter, because Paul rejected the idea that he needed the other disciples to mediate his experience with Jesus: an experience that rejected the difference between Jew and Gentile and other delimiters of the times, with which the Apostles were still wrestling.

Doesn't this all sound so familiar to the destructiveness of our own irregular approaches to making this church (the PC(USA)) a welcoming, light and spirit-filled reflection of the love showered on and through Christ? Have our arguments about who is in and who is out, who is justified and who is not – have these arguments really changed all that much since the time of Paul until now?

Congregations struggle with the pull of the traditional, predictable, safe world of the spirit and the shimmering presence of God embodied in a loving and radical practice of the same love that hit Paul upside the head. We are all still trying to build up our escape velocity enough to be free of the pull of fear and those loud and formidable voices – institutional and otherwise - that do their best to keep us in manageable, controllable, exclusive orbits.

Paul's writings and teachings take the orbit and its force and use it as a slingshot into a place that simply trusts God, believing it is that unconditional trust that is what we are called to and what is most pleasing to God.

And, these lessons were not necessarily new. From the earliest of writings, teachings for trust and warnings against hubris were ever-present.

I remember an experience I had, where I met Richard Nixon coming out of a restaurant in Montauk called "Lunch" many years after he had left office. Whatever one's opinion of the man and his record, there was still this awe of being in his presence, for me an intriguing sense of curiosity for what he must have seen and learned as president – things that I would never have the chance to experience? Frankly, I was surprised at my own reaction. I understood the pull and aura of such a person.

At the same time, though, I didn't turn him into an idol nor an enemy. What followed was a feeling of sadness, generalized for him and us, and a connection to our humanity and the human condition, which in the end equalizes us all.

While I haven't said too much about the Kings reading his morning, it is one of those writings that I think has the early message about faithfulness and humility – and has it right.

In preparing for these comments this morning, I wrote pages of notes on yellow paper: considering King of Aram sending his General Namaan to the King of Israel – for healing of his leprosy, a terrible systemic disease – characterized by disfiguring skin sores, peripheral nerve damage, and progressive debilitation. The events that surround Namaan's journey reminded me of modern day “shuttle-diplomacy” with king to king, suspicions, gifts of peace, huge egos, and even an ambassador of God (a prophet if you will) who disses a general by refusing to meet with him.

I made notes of all the innuendos and possible meanings then and now, as with any good exegetical exercise – but I kept thinking “bookends.”

There are bookends on this narrative, bookends that leave all the posturing and power lifeless. The bookends are the two servants on either end of the tale: the captive Hebrew slave who precipitates Namaan's journey with a comment that there is a God and prophet in Israel that could easily heal Namaan's condition; and Namaan's servant at the end who encourages the General, gently, to place aside his ego and the prophet's bad manners and step into the river and be healed.

EGO. The word, “ego” comes directly from the Latin, where it is the nominative form of the first person singular pronoun and is translated as “I myself” to express emphasis. Some of my friends put it more succinctly: “EGO stands for Easing God Out.”

Certainly the kings, generals, and prophets vied for power in their ancient world, whatever their motivations, too frequently forgetting the source of the power in their world, unlike the servants, who even in the presence of mighty masters, never lost their compass.

And so it is with Paul and us today. It seems that part of the human condition is to Ease God Out, without even realizing it sometimes. Part of being human requires the ego, so they tell me, yet great masters of all times have also known the ego to be an impediment to spiritual growth and more. Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th century Dalai Lama was quoted as saying “...ego, the number one enemy of compassion.”

And so it is, I think. A couple of days ago, I was on line at the pharmacy at CVS. It was not too long of a line, but longer than I would have liked. I was in a rush I had to get someplace. I don't recall where, but I had to get there.

There was a person who had moved up in the line, off to the side, nudging to get in? Well, I made sure that, subtly, of course that that wasn't going to happen – I closed the gap. I was aware of what I was doing, caught in some strange sort of place about – “Hey, I waited, they can wait just like me.”

As I moved forward, the man behind me asked the person if they would like to step in. His gentle invitation clanged like a bell in my head. “Why couldn't I have done that at that moment? Surely, I had before. What was different?”

Simply, at that moment my needs, rights, sense of justice – were that I should go first. After I realized how inconsiderate I had been, quite intentionally - I felt sick– sort of a soul sickness.

As I came out of another store a few minutes later, I came face-to-face with the person I had dissed on their way. I stopped and apologized for being so caught up in my own importance that I didn't make a place for them. I had a chance to make an amends, and I had to acknowledge – again – just how this EGO can get in the way of being compassionate, patient, a servant.

Paul's writings this morning really are encouraging, because as I started out saying, the requirements for this life and the next are companionship with Christ and a personal character congruent with it - whether on the line of CVS or seeking justice for all in this church; and endless existence and continuing spiritual growth – knowing that spiritual growth will always be rooted in a place of humility before God and servant hood toward others.

It is a very good thing for me to keep in mind, and such, as Paul reminds us, is the way of Christ – radical hospitality and all!

Without it, I'm just that clanging bell...

Amen.