

THE JESUS GAME

Texts on Sunday, September 16, 2007

Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18; Luke 10: 25-42

"I wish to create around myself conditions in which a man would be continually reminded of . . . his existence by an unavoidable friction between his conscience and the automatic manifestations of his nature." Gurdjieff

On behalf of the Presbytery I was serving a decade ago, I had the opportunity several times to work with a congregation as it prepared the ground for calling a new pastor. As many of you know, this process takes a lot of time and energy. Sometimes the organizational requirements of the process feel onerous. To help trim the work to its essentials, I kept in the back of my mind a short guide to what belongs in a church mission statement: the two great commandments, love God, love the other. That's all. If the congregation thinks it should be up to something else, it's off the track. At some point during the mission study process, someone usually would see that there are only these two essentials in the Jesus game. Love God, love the other. The recognition would pour down on the group like light from heaven. Maybe that is what light from heaven is.

But even light from heaven fades. The church, any church, all the churches together—are proof that our experience of the light does not stay bright. Why, most of the stories in the Bible are not about receiving divine light, but about our resistance to the light, our fading attention, our clouded minds. And the Bible stories go a step further. What usually blocks the light of heaven, they say, is ordinary religion.

One of the behaviors of ordinary religion that shuts out the power and possibility of the eternal is hearing a Bible story in an ordinary way. The story of the "good Samaritan" is perhaps such a story. We already know what each character must do, we automatically sympathize with the brutalized man and despise the two clergy, and we cheer for the Samaritan caretaker. We already know the moral of the story: be kind, even to people it is normal to hate, for normal rules of right and wrong can lead you away from love.

Wow! What an easy exam. You get up from the desk and hand your paper in to the teacher, wondering why the best students are still writing. Well, ordinary religion makes too easy a lesson of being kind. We are not kind, and we have hardly understood this story. The proof is, we don't do it. We *love* it, yes. And we love up-to-date accounts of people who have acted like the good Samaritan, but we have dozens of reasons why we ourselves haven't: The times have changed; it's more dangerous today; we don't meet people *that* beaten up; we *are* busy; *someone* has to feed the children; what would people think?; et cetera. But when we are honest, and not defensive, we see that our world is full of wounded strangers whom we could help, yet we do not. Like the priest and the Levite in the famous story, we have our reasons for sticking to the right side of the road.

All this ordinary religious chatter suggests that we have missed something essential in the story. What we have missed follows in the short scene where Martha comes in from the kitchen grumping to Jesus about her sister sitting there in the living room talking with the master. You probably know the Mary/Martha story almost as well as the good Samaritan, right?—but did you ever hear it where Luke put it, right after "the good Samaritan"? Why did he do that? Because doing good for others is only part of the Jesus game. Remember how this whole passage begins: a man wants to know how to inherit eternal life, how to live life for the highest possible good. Notice, here Jesus does not say "Believe in me." No, like Socrates, Jesus trusts that the man already knows the answer to his urgent desire. Jesus draws the man out. "What is in the law? How do *you* read it?" The man answers with what we call the two great commandments, You shall love the Lord your God with . . . all your all, and your neighbor as yourself. When the man protests some confusion over the identity of his neighbor, Jesus seeks to

reach him with the beloved parable. But you, not the lawyer, are the real audience. Luke is writing for you, for the whole church! He is not simply reporting things that happened. He is giving an instruction for the church which he himself has experienced deeply and inwardly. So: on the one hand, we have a story to shake up our understanding of love for our neighbor, but what do we have on the other hand to help us understand loving God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind? Luke has set his next story down on the table for instruction and nourishment. Learn from Mary and Martha.

Martha stands for you and me as we turn religious life into ordinary, busy activity that just must get done. We go jumping into social services, piling into committee work and planning work, and helping poor unfortunates, though only on a schedule that fits our lifestyle. From time to time, we complain how tiring and demanding this religious life is. Through it all, (though we don't want to admit it) we are still feeling kind of empty and fretful. Kind of ready to bite my wife's head off if she's not in a good mood. Religion has become more work.

"Martha, Martha!" We must hear ourselves addressed. "You are worried and distracted by many things—but only one thing is needful, and Mary has chosen it. It will not be taken from her." There is a priority. I call it "soul service before social service." Not: soul service is more important than social service. Just, soul service first, then social service, in a virtuous cycle. *First, learn to love God with your all, then you will see in ever-renewed ways what it is to love your neighbor as your self.* By placing the Mary/Martha story after "the good Samaritan," Luke is working to wake us up from our dull assumption that we know how to love others. We cannot—unless we are learning what it means to love God and to love our self. Without that, what we do cannot really serve the good at all. We just move our mud around.

What is soul service? What was Mary doing in the living room with Jesus? Of course no one knows. But we can say this. Jesus cannot have been talking all the while. People don't learn well from much talking. We say Jesus was a great teacher. Well, the only sign of great teaching is great learning of what the teacher intends. So what did Jesus intend? That poor people receive lots of services? That we Marthas work the tables of a hungry society really hard? Not really. No, Jesus' intention was clear. *Take up your cross. Lose your life for my sake, don't save it. Seek first the kingdom. Become perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect. Die to your self, that you may be re-born.* These are the objectives of the Jesus game. This is what disciples aim to learn how to do. That is what Mary was up to in the living room with Jesus—a careful, disciplined conversation bringing attention to bear upon her soul—her self—and her relationship to her source in God. Here's a strange fact of soul service: to love God wholly, you must find out what it means to love your soul, your true self. If you do not nourish your true nature, you cannot offer what is of lasting value to others. Soul service is to learn to be present in your true nature. Soul service before social service.

What is your true nature? When the Christian religion is presented free of guilty neurosis and distortion, an answer to the question of your true nature emerges as plain as a plate. Your true nature is Christ. As the apostle proclaims it in the first chapter of Colossians, "I became a servant according to God's commission to make the word . . . fully known, the mystery hidden throughout the ages but now revealed . . . which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." Eight years ago, when I first went to serve Central Church, I began the ministry of the Word there by preaching Colossians from beginning to end for the first three months. Twelve sermons. I offered that as water to parched lips thirsting in a desert. To this day, some members of my church say that they had never before heard the word, that Christ is in you. Christ is your true nature.

We must be clear, however. The affirmation that Christ is your nature can mislead you if you think it is only a promise of a future glory. No, Christ is your true nature now. Therefore, the other half of the

mystery of “Christ in you” is that, so much of the time, we forget it, don’t want it, don’t live it, don’t want to be reminded of it. We cannot stay focused. We fall asleep, like those disciples who could not watch with their Lord for yet an hour. And yet, and yet! How sure it is that our most sublime joy in becoming human arises in those moments of our recalling ourselves to ourselves, to who we are and to what we are able to do—calling and recalling with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength and with all our mind. **Yes, Christ is in you. No, you do not live always in your true nature. This is worth study.** This is the purpose of soul service—what Mary was up to in the living room, what you may be up to right now. Soul service involves a process of becoming aware of what distracts you from the power and presence of Christ in you—what keeps you from playing the Jesus game.

Some time ago, I wrote a little article comparing Christian life with playing a game. “Three things are needed to make a game,” I wrote. “(1) For the sake of a certain kind of pleasure, (2) you voluntarily choose (3) to follow weird rules. Take any one of those three elements out of play and you don’t have a game in the good sense. Pleasure is the point, play is voluntary, and the rules are different from the ways of the world.”

That is what you have signed up for, to learn the most extraordinary play possible on the greatest field of energy, imagination, and love. The world doesn’t want to play the game. The world is afraid its freedom will be lost on this field. The world thinks the play is painful, and it craves pleasure. But no pleasure can exceed that of putting your true nature to the test, all your heart all your soul all your mind all your strength. You will make mistakes—even foul out. But you know the Judge, and you know you will never be thrown out of this game. If you want to play the Jesus game, all that is needed is a humble understanding that you are not very good at it—no one is; that guilt and anger at yourself for failures only keep you off the field, self-absorbed, ignorant of your true nature; and that there are teachers who can help you see what you are doing—and what you are not doing—that worries and distracts you with so many things. To love God wholly you begin by learning that God has set Christ in you, in your Self. Through soul service at the feet of teachers, you learn to know this Self, and to love this Self. And then you begin to see how to love your neighbor as your Self. That is the Jesus game. No one will take it from you.

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