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Balance

Remember what the Misfit said in Flannery O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." After the murder of the grandmother's family and before she herself is murdered, "The Misfit", as he calls himself, says, "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead...and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance."

It was the Misfit's decided opinion that one could either follow Jesus or find some pleasure in meanness. But after the murder, when meanness is found, and his partner shouts with pleasure, "Some fun!" the final comment of the Misfit is this: "Shut up, ... Its no real pleasure in life." One can either follow Jesus, or find some meanness, but finally meanness is no pleasure at all. And so there is nothing left to do but to follow Him. "Jesus thrown everything off balance."

Flannery O'Connor is right. Following Jesus alters the whole of life. The new life of the Kingdom touches everything. Nothing remains that is not moved by the glorious and powerful hand of the Lord. From that point of view there really is no balance, for what could be held equal to His life!

And yet, Christianity is a balanced religion. But to say so is very precarious and slippery! The notion of balance presumes that we have it all figured out, that we can speak of perspectives and senses and degrees. Or we may on the other hand prefer to indulge our summary wisdom by saying that Christianity is all a mystery, and our knowledge presumes to be comprehensive once again. Balance is a dangerous claim to full knowledge. And yet it is true that Christianity is balanced.

The balance is found, for the first time, in the converted soul. It is before conversion, when we are without Christ, that our lives are unbalanced, and there is only meanness. In the language of the Scripture, we are dead in trespasses and sins, blind, hard-hearted, full of deceit, wicked and miserable. The Book of Common Prayer is precisely correct; as for our own devices, there is no health in us. But with and in Christ balance comes to the soul both in truth and in mercy. To be a Christian is not vapid self-denial. It is not mere struggle without new life. It is life of a different kind that transposes the song of our hearts into a new key. Our loves, known only in their partial and imperfect expression, are transformed by the Spirit, and made secure and whole. Such a balance is paradoxical. In the mystery of godliness we find life in Christ just at the moment when we lose our own. It is in this way, when we think that the center of the universe and we are

about to vanish, that God draws us close to Him. "Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." In the words of O'Connor's Misfit, "Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead."

Christianity is indeed a balanced religion but only because God sets the scales and measures of eternal life, and not merely the quantity of life everlasting but the quality of spiritual life that God Himself is and into which he incorporates us as His beloved children. Balance is achieved for us and in us not by works but by grace.

And so the notion of balance is dangerous if we think that by it we can circumscribe truth and beauty and goodness. But if the integrity of forgiveness found in God envelops us with His peace that passes understanding, then the soul enters into a balance not known or experienced before. Therein lie faith, hope and charity.

It is these theological virtues, given in grace that provide the transformation of our hearts. They are the means of our balance.

There is a splendid architectural setting of the virtues at the Cathedral of Christ Church at Oxford. They appear as one walks down the nave toward the Altar. In the midst of the choir, set in the tiles on the floor, are four medallions depicting the cardinal virtues: courage, temperance, prudence and justice. One passes over them in this order and succession as one moves closer to the Altar. But these are not all.

There are four other virtues following a spiritual idea that extends back at least to the twelfth century. Beyond justice, just before one passes through the altar gate into the sanctuary, is the medallion of the virtue of humility. It is a most splendid symbol of the essence of the Christian life. The ancient world had known the four cardinal virtues as proper to the good life of man, but one accomplished in these virtues inevitably found himself immersed in the self-satisfaction of spiritual pride, which from the Christian point of view, is the sure way to spiritual death. Only through humility, given in grace, could one move from the cardinal virtues further into spiritual wisdom. Humility provides for this transformation.

Beyond humility, within the sanctuary itself are medallions of the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. Their place within the sanctuary signifies that these virtues are the energy of the soul in communion with God. And so the presentation of the virtues from courage to charity is seen as a whole. There the balance is. What is natural to the life of man and his powers is raised from the inevitability of pride to the humility of communion in faith, and in hope, and with the final union being charity. Christianity is the balance of the natural and the supernatural. Nature is perfected in grace. And Jesus is our true and lasting pleasure.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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