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His Good Pleasure

HIS GOOD PLEASURE

Several conversations this past week, with different parishioners, got me to thinking about an old issue. It is the matter of true spirituality. What is it? Where can one find it? What does it have to do with attending church?

One can take classes nowadays on Spirituality. One can go on retreats, and "do workshops," and learn about spirituality just like the latest seminar of an inspirational psychologist or the most recent update of computer software. I am sure these all possess some benefit, but I am not sure how much. As with all matters of true spirituality, we shall have to leave this also to God.

To discover true spirituality, we ought, first of all, to look to the great repository of spiritual truth, the Bible. It is the locus classicus of the work of the Spirit, beginning with the Spirit in creation moving "upon the face of the waters," all the way to the last book of the Bible, "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." The Bible, therefore, offers the classic definition of the spiritual, which is that which has to do with the Spirit.

If therefore we are to ask the question of what true spirituality is in the Bible, we should think about the Spirit himself, and how he lives in us to do the work of God.

St. Paul understood this. As a zealous Pharisee, he was an horrific persecutor of the Church of Jesus Christ. He believed in what he was doing as the very work of God. But then at his conversion, Paul experienced firsthand that God was at work in the lives of men through the one man, Jesus Christ. And so, from then on, in order to do the will of God, in order to move in concert with his creative and redemptive powers, one must believe in Jesus, and through him, receive the presence of his Spirit.

And so Paul understood the Holy Spirit to be the very energy of God. He was personal, yes, but the Spirit's mission was never to bring attention to himself. His mission was to pour forth the gifts of God, which mankind received in the perfect life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so Paul wrote, "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God, for ye have not received the Spirit of bondage again to fear, but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Romans 8:14, 15).

We have received the Spirit of adoption. We are related to God the Father now, through Jesus, and have become with him, the children of God. To be led by the Spirit meant to be filled with his life and energy. And so Paul also said, without any sense of contradiction, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2: 13, 14). On the one hand, we have not received a Spirit of bondage, but rather a Spirit of adoption, and therefore we need not fear a slavish relation to God. We are not mere slaves to an arbitrary and capricious divinity. On the other hand, the Spirit - who is God himself - is at work in us to do his will and pleasure, and so with this awesome reality moving our minds and hearts, we must be careful to follow his good pleasure.

What is true spirituality? It is the will and work of God within. It is ours to work out with fear and trembling, for to be an adopted child of God means that God himself is now our Father.

Where then do we find true spirituality? We find it in the motions of everyday life. The extraordinary is already in the ordinary. The infinite is in the finite. We need look no further than the circumstances of today. Classes and workshops and retreats and Bible Studies and prayer groups and talk radio and internet blogs, these all have some value, how much is finally up to God. But the working out of true spirituality takes place in the small and seemingly insignificant moments of life, husband to wife and wife to husband, parent to child and child to parent, employer to employee and employee to employer, and so on.

Spirituality is not the dilettante's hobby, a book read every once in a while, an occasional religious discussion. Nor is it the high and lofty vantage point of the prideful soul which presumes to peer into the windows of men's souls and to judge all. Nor is spirituality the attitude of the church worker who thinks that his long service to God in the church gives him the right to chop and dice his fellow churchmen with pernicious gossip. The work of the Spirit is the very moment when the Spirit convicts the "thoughts of our hearts" and offers grace to repent. The Spirit works to inspire truth and amendment of life, healing and love.

The great Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it best when he said that because Jesus Christ is the one Mediator between God and man, he is also the one mediator between us. The energy of the Spirit brings the work of Jesus into our midst, and he is there with us at every moment, ready to offer forgiveness and reconciliation and peace.

But we must be ready also. The kind word, the helpful deed, unpretentious and without judgment, seeking to pour soothing balms on our wounds, that is the work of the Spirit in the moment where true spirituality is to be found. It is as simple as the handshake of humble fellowship, and as powerful as the absolute forgiveness of adultery. It is conscious of Jesus loving us and of our loving him in return.

There is one final thing to say, and I am conscious that this has not been said well enough. True spirituality is all gathered up when we come to church on Sunday. Church offers us the place to lay all our burdens before God and to have him take them. It is where in the

midst of noble hymns and powerful prayers, we let our children see us on our knees, listening to the Word of God, participating in the Sacraments, and leaving church with the happiness of real hope. We gather up the small and insignificant moments of the week, as well as the big crises, all of our lessons in the Spirit, for the sake of spiritual rest. This resting is our practice, and the pattern of our lives, to prepare us for heaven, to rest in the vision of God, where the motions of the Spirit flow unimpeded and full of joy. What does spirituality have to do with attending church? The Church is our Father's home, where he takes all that we ought not to have done, and all that we have left undone, and gives us his good pleasure instead.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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