

“What Does God Want to Give?”

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Script: Ephesians 1:3-5, 10; 2:10; Mark 8:34-36

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Mark 8:34-36

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?’

Hope. What comes to mind when you hear that word? Gee I hope this sermon isn’t long. I hope the Vikings win this afternoon. And on a more serious note—I hope that disease is curable or that my loved one can get his life straightened out. Hope is really a matter of getting what you want...a desired outcome. Last summer I spent a week at the House of Prayer at St. John’s with Episcopal priest and spiritual writer, Cynthia Bourgeault. In one of her books she contrast hope in the usual sense where it has to do with rescues from dire circumstances and getting an outcome *we* want, with what she calls “mystical hope.” Mystical hope is not tied with getting what we want, and is rather a sense of being held by God in the present moment, loved, and sustained, no matter the external circumstances. This is not an experience reserved for those we call mystics she claims—it is immediately available to us all. It is a current or stream we can live within.

So how do we get to this deep source of hope? Well, perhaps it can only get to us. Those who have kicked around the spiritual world tell us that there is a place within our spirits—a part of our souls—that is called “the virgin point.” Picture our souls as a deep well, and at the deepest part there is a spring that seeks to flow upwards. When Jesus says beside that well in Samaria, “***The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life***” (John 4) he’s talking about this part of our souls. When we are in touch with this spring, our lives are always spiritually fed.

Thomas Merton writes of this place in our soul, “at the center of our being... untouched by sin and illusion, [is] a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God...” It is “the last irreducible, secret center of the heart where God alone penetrates.”

Cynthia says that “It is through this little point or spark of pure truth that the Mercy [of God] flows into us and through us. It is the spring at the bottom of the well of our being through which hope is continually renewed.”

Over these past weeks we’ve been thinking together about this “flow of God into us and through us” in our series...***What does God want to give through us?*** Cynthia suggests that it is God’s mercy that is at the heart of this flow. Mercy. It is God’s mercy that flows.

Yet our normal sense of what mercy means has to do with pleading, condescension—you know, just squeaking by. “You better throw yourself at the mercy of the court” we might tell someone without hope. The mercy of God, however, is something quite different.

The key to discovering how it is different is in discovering its root, in the word *merc*. It finds itself in a number of English words; mercantile, merchandise, merchant, commerce, commercial. Thus mercy, at heart, means an exchange or transaction. There is a sense of a flow.

But it is not just a cold exchange of something. It takes on a gracious warmth when we see another word connected with it—that is the French *merci*. *Merci* is a grateful response of kindness of heart— *merci*. And when we visit the word in its original Semitic we find that it actually means “*a fierce, bonding love*”— as between committed lovers. It is not pity, but passion. In other words, we find mercy flowing into our lives from God who has a fierce, bonding love for us that is unchanging. It is unconditional, not fickle. God’s mercy is the gravitational force that holds the universe together.

Lynn Bauman translates Psalm 103: “*For as the heavens reach beyond earth and time, we swim in mercy as in an endless sea.*” We swim in God’s mercy. God’s steadfast love.

So how is it that we remain open to this flow of God? How can we ensure that God’s blessings...God’s mercy, flows not just *to* us, but *through* us? The short answer is that we have to get out of the way. Jesus put it this way, “**If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life ... will save it.**” This is the core of Jesus’ teaching. Deny self, daily take up your cross and follow. Get ourselves out of the way— our agendas, likes, desires, petty hopes for things to go our way.

Those words sound good on Sunday morning, but when it comes right down to the rubber-hitting-the-road it is extremely difficult. My Spiritual mentor was sent by his Bishop to serve a small struggling Episcopal congregation in California a few years ago. It was a difficult assignment. The Bishop told him to try it for six months and see what happens. The building itself was a mess... un-kept, in need of not only cleaning but a purging. The congregation had to show some pride in the place before they could have enough energy to minister to the community and attract anyone. Inside, the building was a collection of various styles of sentimental and outdated furnishings; a section of small choir benches was still crowding the altar, though they hadn’t had a children’s choir in 60 years... that kind of thing. So they gathered to mow the tall grass, stain the siding, trim the trees. So far so good. Inside they went and began a process of ripping out the children’s pews in the chancel area when someone objected. It was dear to their heart because their children sat in those small seats many years before. So they moved on to other area to clear the clutter and spruce up spaces, then someone else objected. That room, that furnishing, that object held some tender memory for them. Pretty soon the whole process came to a screeching halt. Paralyzed, they looked at each other.

My mentor then pointed out their language in the process. “*I* love this because... that is meaningful to *me* because...” No one was asking what was meaningful to anyone else... much less what might be welcoming, inviting, meaningful to those who weren’t there— the new people they said they wanted to attract. It was all ego-driven. Jesus seems to have known that the ego is what plugs up our souls... blocks the flow...hinders the mercy in its desire for a holy exchange. So his teaching is eternally relevant and difficult; **deny self, daily take up your cross and follow.**

What Does God Want to Give? I love the beautiful translation of Ephesians that was read for us today as a picture of this holy exchange of mercy. Hear these words again (Ephesians 1:3-5, 10; 2:10 *Translation by Lynn Bauman*)

All praise to God, the Abba, Father of our Anointed Master, Yeshua, who has called down upon us every endowment of spirit from out of the transcendent realms. For, from the foundations of the cosmos, standing in the stream of love, we were chosen to be united with the Anointed One, hallowed and flawless before the divine Presence. In accordance with a deep, inner longing already existing in God, **we were pre-designed to be God’s own offspring**, mature descendants of Yeshua, the Christ.

For in the ultimate unfolding, at just the right moment, everything is being brought to full flower in the Anointed One, uniting heaven and earth.

...we are God's masterwork, **created to bring good into being** through deeds which God designed for us to accomplish before we came into time.

What Does God Want to Give? The paradoxical answer is that God wants it all... and in the end, gives it all. Prayers, Presence, Gifts, Service. We are pre-designed to bring good into being and in the process we find ourselves to be God's offspring. In this holy exchange of life within God's mercy, which flows from deep within our souls into creation, we find ourselves God's offspring!

We awaken in Christ's body
as Christ awakens our bodies,
and my poor hand is Christ. He enters
my foot, and is infinitely me.

I move my hand, and wonderfully
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all of
Him
(for God is indivisibly
whole, seamless in His Godhood).

I move my foot, and at once
he appears in a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous? —
Then
open your heart to Him

And let yourself receive the one
.

who is opening to you so deeply.
For if we genuinely love him,
we wake up inside Christ's body

where all our body, all over,
every most hidden part of it,
is realized in joy as Him,
and He makes us utterly real,

and everything that is hurt, everything
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in Him transformed

and recognized as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in His light.

We Awaken as the Beloved
in every last part of our body

—St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022)