

Fleshing Out the Spiritual Life

We have before us today an appeal from the Apostle Paul based on the mercies of God. Perhaps **A**appeal@ is too gentle a word. Maybe **A**directive,@ or **A**orders,@ or that old-fashioned religious term **A**exhortation@ might be more in order. But Paul the Apostle, in a somewhat rare attempt to be gentle, has set before us an **A**appeal,@ an appeal that is based only and entirely upon the mercies of God. Now, the power of basing this appeal upon the mercies of God cannot be overstated.

By the mercies of God we live and breathe and have our being. By the mercies of God we find meaning and purpose in life. By the mercies of God we discover gifts to develop and share. By the mercies of God we love and are loved. By the mercies of God we enjoy beauty. By the mercies of God we exercise justice. By the mercies of God we are immersed in peace, even and especially in those moments when we are in the direst need for peace.

To make any appeal by the mercies of God suggests that we would do well to give this appeal our utmost attention, to try to orient our very lives, our whole lives around this appeal. To do any less would be to scorn the very mercies of God!

But we cannot blame ourselves or any other for not taking this appeal with the seriousness it deserves. The very appeal itself holds together the tension between the importance of the appeal, and the difficulty of adhering to the appeal. One part of the appeal that holds that tension is found in the phrase: do not be conformed to this world! Do NOT be conformed to this world! Well, I admit, I have never done too well with this part of this very important appeal. How >bout y=all?

Indeed, I learned early in life that non-conformity is something I am more comfortable with than conformity. In fact, these days, I like to think of myself as a gentle non-conformist, admitting, of course, that some of you may not agree with the **A**gentle@ part! But the truth is that conformity and non-conformity are just two sides of the same coin. One who admires, and respects, and appropriates the ways and the values and the priorities of the world is, of course, a conformist. And the one who disdains, and disrespects, and openly flaunts the ways and values and priorities of the world is, of course, a non-conformist. Yet the binding force which leads to both outcomes is simply the world, with all its ways, and values and priorities. The conformist and the non-conformist alike are driven by the same force. And here we have the Apostle Paul appealing to us not to be conformed to the world; by which the Apostle means do not let the world drive us into some rigid conformity, on the one hand, or into some hard-headed non-conformity on the other! What the Apostle seems to be telling us here is not to let this world, with all its ways and values and priorities be the binding force for our decisions, whatever they may be; not to let the world be the guiding force for our lives, however we may live them out.

And just in case any of us thinks that we have outgrown this part of the appeal, or have gotten beyond this part of the appeal, or were simply born exempt from this part of the appeal, well, we need to think again! This appeal is unequivocally addressed to everyone. In this appeal the Apostle says, **A**I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.@ This, my friends, is one of those verses which is pretty easy to read and yet assume that it applies to everyone else but me! Who is not included in **A**everyone?@ Who is

exempt from **Aeveryone?** What is it about **Aeveryone** that we do not understand?

In living out the spiritual life, no one, not a single one of us is to strive for prominence within the community of faith. Not elders, not deacons, and least of all preachers! But also, not the wealthy, not the educated, not the fashionable, not the biggest or the strongest, not the most beautiful or most handsome, not the family with the deepest roots, or the one with the most toys! Prominence is not the operative notion in this appeal; sacrifice is.

Paul appeals to each and every one of us, by the mercies of God, to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, which, Paul says, is at the very heart of the spiritual life. Now, it sounds altogether incongruous to speak of a living sacrifice, does it not? Sacrifices left on the altar at the temple in Jerusalem were always totally consumed. Therefore, to speak of a living sacrifice requires a little imagination and no little amount of courage. Sacrifice always implies some loss.

However, the losses inherent in this unique sacrifice are actually understood as losses only by the standards and expectations of the world, not the Spirit. Still, such a living sacrifice certainly implies some letting go, some giving up or giving away, some change in the direction of one's life. As a living sacrifice, one no longer takes part in prejudice, greed, tyranny, violence, oppression. Jesus said it this way: take up your cross, and follow me! So powerful and so pervasive is this notion of sacrifice in the Christian life that there can be no such thing as **AChristian** arrogance for example, or **AChristian** force. And make no mistake, my friends, to be a living sacrifice is sooner or later to find oneself at a disadvantage in this world, sometimes a great disadvantage. And yet what is called for is not cleverness, or wits or even guts, but discernment.

Discernment means, at least, to become acutely and accurately self-aware, even self-critical; while at the same time, becoming wide open to leading of the Spirit of God. Discernment implies a patient sort of expectancy; discernment puts one on a path of hopeful discovery, not anticipating solutions to problems or even directions from God; not assuming anything, but expecting the Spirit to take care of you. Discernment assumes some relationship to the Word of God. Discernment implies a life of prayer. And discernment is always about repentance. Discernment means we admit we are not gods. Discernment orients us to the One True God, and when that happens, we find in ourselves the very mind of Christ, showing us the way, and setting us on the right path. And running parallel with discernment, sometimes being caused by it, and sometimes bringing it about, is transformation.

ABe transformed, the Apostle appeals, be transformed spiritually! Here is spirituality at its human best. Paul carefully phrases this appeal in the passive voice. But this is no ordinary passive, it is what is called the Divine Passive. The first implication of this passive voice is that this is not really anything you or I can make happen! We cannot transform ourselves, regardless of our diet, our exercise program, or the drugs we take. The other implication is: God does it. God does it in us! God does it to us! We are the objects of God's actions to transform us. And yet, we are participants! We take part in this transformation by offering up our sensitive, self-centered egos to God!

It is my experience that this is always a very disconcerting experience. It precipitates first fear then remorse. The process of offering up our egos to God is usually a prolonged process plagued with doubts and second thoughts, an unnerving time during which we are very susceptible to temptation. We want to rush right back into the protective arms of the powerful

ego, and right back into the fantasy world created by it to inflate our self-image, an image which some have said is the false self. But rest assured that the Spirit does not leave us unaided even here! Where else does the incredible courage and unending hope come from which I continue to observe in all sorts of persons who manage to push through to the end of this process, and come out transformed?

Accompanied by such courage and such hope, sooner or later the evidence of such transformation begins to appear when, for example, some awareness is raised, a voice gets raised, a stand gets taken concerning, say, human trafficking, or some abuse of children or the mentally ill, or the slaughter of innocents in some far away country. Evidence of transformation appears when, for example, persons stop caring much at all about what society expects of them and homes-in instead on what God might find acceptable. Evidence of such transformation appears when, for example, people=s priorities change and the pursuit of power and wealth is traded for the pursuit of peace, or of compassion, or of justice, or of just general human dignity. But one thing is for sure, the evidence of such transformation also appears wherever two or three or more are found living in some kind of supportive, nurturing and safe community. This is, of course, what we call the faith community, and we think we know it as the church. Well, it might have been the church, or maybe it is supposed to be church, or it might be the church but not just the church, and we would be wise to keep our eyes open for evidence of this faith community wherever it is to be found.

But wherever it is found, it turns out to be a treasure trove of gifts. Each member of the beloved community is a gifted member. And inasmuch as each member knows and develops his/her own gift, and respects and appreciates the gift of each other member, a dynamic energy with a wonderful focus materializes that empowers the faith community in ways no individual could ever be empowered. This is the **A**one body in Christ,@ of which the Apostle spoke, itself a distinct and invaluable gift bestowed by the Spirit. And so the spiritual life closes the loop, as it were, healing our pathological individualism, tearing down the walls of harsh separation we have erected, and building us into a body **B** not just any body, but the body of Christ. So wonderful and marvelous are the mercies of God.