"FOR THINE OWNSELF"

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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I must ask your indulgence once again. I am going to take a Muslim text. But worse than that I am going to try to make good on my call again. As you know the prophets of old, people like Isaiah and Jeremiah, were called by the Lord not just to proclaim the word in general but to carry out some rather particular assignment. The same sometimes happens to preachers today. I found that I was driven into the ministry to unload a special concern, and while I have done my best to forget it through the years, every so often I go into a panic, fearing I may experience some eternal unpleasantness if I don't get the word out.

Now for the Muslim text. I found it a year ago in a special feature in our church magazine, AD. The author, James Gittings, was trying to shed a little light on the spirituality of Islam to bewildered people like myself who have never bothered to become informed about that religion. Mr. Gittings quoted from a prayer attributed to an eighth century slave girl:

O My God,
If I worship Thee from hope of heaven
Deny me that gift;
If I worship Thee from fear of hell
Cast me thence;
But if I worship Thee for Thine Own Self
Withhold not from me Thy Terrible Beauty.

A few days after reading that I set off on my junket to Cuba. I brought that prayer by the Muslim girl along. I don't mean that I cut it out of the magazine or even that I memorized it. I just set the gist of it in the back of my mind. I took it with me to Havana as my most valuable piece of luggage. I felt that it gave me balance, or perhaps one could say that it was like the needle of a compass always pointing in the same direction no matter which way the rest of me might be going. Through all my discussions, whether with church people or people who represented the point of view of the Cuban state, that little prayer was on the threshold of my thoughts. Most important it was there when I spoke with my fellow American UCC colleagues. I remember especially one night when I suggested that there might be some need for God too. They wanted me to explain that. I did not quote the Muslim girl's prayer; it was very much behind what I did say.

"But if I worship Thee for Thine Own Self
Withhold not from me Thy Terrible Beauty."

The thought here is not unique to a Muslim slave girl. Christians have been known to speak in much the same way. Indeed, I found it again in a hymn in our hymnbook attributed to Francis Xavier, the Jesuit missionary. You see, first Muslims and then Jesuits, right in Pilgrim Church! We didn't know the tune of the hymn, but that doesn't matter. When you don't know the tune you have to think about the words:

My God, I love Thee: Not because I hope for Heaven thereby,
Nor yet because who love Thee not are lost eternally,
Not with hope of gaining ought; not seeking a reward;
But as thyself has loved me, O Ever Loving Lord.

Same idea. The aim is to love God for God's sake, which as Bernard of Clairvaux taught, is the highest form of love. This is the Alpha and the Omega of the spiritual life.

Of course, we barely, if ever, achieve such disinterested devotion. "Purity of Heart," Kierkegaard taught, "is to will one thing," but most of us are double-minded. When we approach the altar we always have ulterior motives. It is very obvious that when The Prodigal decided to return home, he was not thinking much about his love for his father. He was thinking about how nice it would be to have some meat in his belly. Our prospects would be very dim, indeed, if God's mercy were only extended to those who looked up to heaven in pure adoration!

Still that should be the aim shouldn't it? Even with people, we know that we should try to love them for themselves and not just for what we can get out of them.

Not to try to love God for Godself is to turn God into a means rather than the end. And when we do that, of course, we commit what the prophets called "idolatry."

That is what we do with religion all the time. All those special tangents we run off on have this idolatrous quality in common. God becomes something that we use to get into heaven, or to keep out of hell, or to obtain healing, or to communicate with the dead, or to achieve peace of mind, or perchance, even to bring justice and peace to the world.

Now don't mistake me---this is the point where everyone is bound to mistake me---some of these enterprises are very good in themselves. Perhaps all of them are. But true devotion, whether Muslim or Christian, Jesuit or Congregationalist, always aims at loving the Lord for the Lordsake.

Two weeks ago when I spoke at the Unitarian Church, I gave them one of my Jonah dialogues. The Book of Jonah is a story which scores a breakthrough in telling us that the compassion of God is not confined to one nation, but extends to all nations, even to the most feared and hated ones. I anticipated that at the Unitarian Church somebody might ask me a question like this: "Do you think that it is necessary to believe in God in order to believe that all peoples are worthy of compassion?"

Nobody asked me such a question, but it occurred to me that were Jonah to answer it, he would say as he has often said to me, "You have the question the wrong way around, for a prophet the question is whether it is necessary to believe in compassion for all peoples in order to believe in the Lord."

You think the two questions are the same? They are as different as night and day, as different as faith and idolatry.

But let me not speak in puzzles. The point is that God always must be the end; never the means. And paradoxically that is the only way we do get anything out of God. As Jesus said, seek first the Kingdom, and then all the rest will be added to you.

"For thine own self." Even in human relationships it only works that way. How much more in our relationship with God.

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Now there is another insight that comes out of this prayer---one that has to do with human need.

"Withhold not from me Thy Terrible Beauty."

Ah then, you see, that slave girl was trying to get something out of God after all. But it was a great thing she sought. Do her credit, she set her sights high. No little thing like heaven. Only the greatest thing, the very self of God, that Terrible Beauty.

Again the quest is not unique to a Muslim girl. A classic Christian saying goes "The end of man is the vision of God." This is the gift that comes to the pure in heart, said Jesus. And all the God-intoxicated souls of history have seen in this vision of the Divine Glory, the one thing needful.

But maybe we don't need it. I find that more and more people seem to be puzzled by the very thought. Church people especially. People have so many needs: need for food, needs for clothing, needs for shelter, needs for safety, need for self-respect, need for the love of other people. And we trust that it is our calling in the church to do something about all these needs and more. We trust that this is a divine calling.

But could it be that going beyond all these needs there is a need for God, not just as one who helps us meet the other needs aright, but for God in and of Godself? Could that be possible?

I do not find a very affirmative answer in much of our contemporary devotional literature. Most of it looks to me like so much warmed over psycho-therapy with a few religious words spread around on top of it. God is getting used again, used to give us "wholeness" or to"put us in touch with our feelings" or to help us relax.

But the Muslim slave girl knew of another need, the need for that Terrible Beauty. What is it? Only God could say. But there are times when it seems to graze the earth just a little. Yesterday I drove to Duluth from Madison, Wisconsin, a beautiful drive on any day, but especially yesterday. I made a mistake coming back. Instead of taking Interstate 90 to EauClaire, I went off on 94 toward La Crosse. That meant I had to go about forty miles out of my way, taking old 53 back toward Eau Claire again. But I didn't mind even though I had no sermon prepared. I got to see fishing shacks on the Mississippi, a splendid country church, and all those funny little pointed hills. It was one of those days when what Teilhard De Chardin called, "The Mass of the World" takes place, a day luminous with divinity.

Not that the earth is to be the aim of our worship. The Lord may walk upon the hills, but the hills are not the Lord. Beyond all things the Lord is to be adored. Only as we do that do we discover the Lord within all things.

O My God,
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