

Pilgrim Church

THE GIFT OF BEING
(First in a series on Creation)
August 1, 1982

Royal F. Shepard

Genesis 2:7 "...then the Lord God formed a human of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being."

Familiar expressions take on unexpected meanings when you begin to think about them. For example, think about the expression, "self-made man." Here is a case where the literal meaning seems to say more than is really intended. When we speak of a self-made man we do not mean to say a man who actually manufactured himself or who brought himself into being. What we have in mind is something much more limited. We mean a man whose success in business and whose standing in society are largely due to his own efforts. We use the familiar expression to contrast such a man from one who had special advantages of inherited wealth, education and breeding. As one of my dictionaries puts it, a self-made man is "a person who has risen from poverty and obscurity by his own exertions."

Yet even in this limited meaning of the expression, "self-made man" probably says more than it ought to say. For it is doubtful that anyone rises from poverty and obscurity purely by one's own exertions. In the first place a large measure of luck usually enters into any success. In the second place other people contribute to any person's achievements. Did our self-made man invent the wheel? He never would have got the idea had not thousands of people before him experimented with rolling stones. Did our self-made man teach himself accounting? He never would have learned without books written by others, nor could he have put his learning to use had not others been willing to employ him or to do business with him. Moreover, even the most independent of self-made men is likely to have drawn emotional support from other individuals. The truth is that no human success, no human achievement is ever solely the product of one person's effort. The truth is that no human being can take exclusive credit for anything.

That statement goes even for those highly personal products of what we call our "creative expression." Last week I wrote a poem called "Crows." It grew out of an experience of walking down a path and having a sentry crow sound the alarm, of my annoyance and hurt at being taken for a dangerous intruder, at my absurd effort to imitate the crows' screams so as to be mistaken for one of them, of their silent laughter.

Certainly anything as peculiar as that is an individual creation. It arose from my own experience and no one else's. It reflects my own kooky reaction to my universe. I probably would challenge to a duel anyone who claimed I got the idea from someone else. "Be original" was the creed on which I was reared, on which I reared myself.

But for all that I know that the poem is not purely my creation. It would not have happened had not my second grade teacher taken special pains to teach me to read even though I cried out in despair that I never could learn. It would not have happened had I not read other people's poems, even though I did not consciously copy any of them. It would not have happened, indeed, had not my mother read poems aloud to me before I was able to read and so sowed in me the compulsion to make up poems myself. Nor would it have happened without crows, not only those particular crows, but thousands of others with whom I have carried on conversations as far back as I can remember.

Nothing we do is ever wholly our own creation.

Therefore, the expression, "self-made man", even in its common sense meaning,

has something exaggerated about it. It serves a practical purpose. It distinguishes people who began with relatively little from those who began with relatively more. But one senses that in practice the expression often suggests a good deal more than that. It asserts a claim that is excessive, a taking credit that goes too far. People who tell us proudly that they are self-made often show a special vulnerability to the sin of pride. And I might add, they often reveal as well an insensitivity to the needs of others.

"Self-made man." "Self-made woman." If we took those sayings literally about ourselves, we would have the clearest possible statement of the meaning of original sin.

All this is not to say that we have no part in creating ourselves. I think we do. I think it is important to say that we do for two reasons. First, to recognize that we help create ourselves reminds us that creation is not just something that happened at one place and one time in an old story about Adam and Eve. Creation happens at all places and all times. God is always creating and so in a secondary way are we.

Secondly, it is important to say that we help create ourselves because that points to the freedom that goes along with being a creature. If we were just a piece of God, as much religion teaches, we as individuals would not be creative. If we were just automatons as some materialists think of us, we would not have anything to do with our own creation. But as creatures distinct from God we have freedom to help create ourselves. God does not do it all for us. Rather, as John Cobb writes: "God is the one who calls us beyond all that we have become to what we might be."

So we share in our own creation. But that we are at all, that we have life at all, is something quite beyond our own self-creative capacity. Our being is pure gift.

But that admittedly is a religious affirmation. A gift. It is not something that common sense is likely to say about us. That we did not originate ourselves is obvious to anyone who knows about the birds and the bees.

It is fairly obvious, too, that we are not very original. Most contemporary world views teach us that what we call our selves are largely made up of relationships, relationships with other selves and other things. The Marxists teach us this and so do the process philosophers and so do the systems theorists. Even though we did not learn it from any such sources in a formal way, the whole point of view seeps down to us. Everything's interconnected, including you and me. Nobody lives in a vacuum.

So much worldly wisdom can tell us. It agrees with the Bible that we are not literally self-made men and women. But such wisdom does not sing--MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE TO YAHWEH. IT IS GOD THAT MADE US AND NOT WE OURSELVES.

To speak of our being as a gift goes further than common sense, or science, or possibly even philosophy can go. For all of them, we are here and that's that. To speak of gifts--this is faith talking.

Nevertheless, right here we have a point where ordinary human experience and the message of the Bible make contact. Here is a starting point where they join hands for the journey, at this point of "in the beginning." For ordinary experience brings us the sober truth that our beginning comes from beyond ourselves. And the Bible brings us the wondrous news that our beginning doesn't just come, but that it comes as a gift.

Now this double message has implications for us--practical implications. If we listen to the message it can make a difference deep inside of us. First, it brings a lesson in humility. It underscores our common sense awareness that we don't accomplish anything on our own, that we can't even take credit for being here. It reminds us that everything about us is but-for-the-grace.

All people of profound faith have this but-for-the-grace outlook, I think. They have a feeling for what some theologians call, their ontological poverty. They know that without the creator they are not living.

No doubt this outlook is the deeper truth behind such vows of poverty as that taken by the rash young man, Francis Bernardone. You may recall that when he was dying he insisted on lying naked on the bare ground. He recalled the saying of Job: "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." That was St. Francis' last testimony about humility. It was also a testimony about the gift of being.

The next thing that the message of creation may do deep within us is to prompt the spirit of thanksgiving. For however much we may think we open up our own opportunities, the big opportunity, the opportunity of life itself, comes gratis. And thanksgiving is the only spirit in which that opportunity may be graciously received.

And last for now, but most wide-ranging perhaps, the message of our creation stirs us to wonder.

"...then the Lord God formed a human of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; the human became a living being." Genesis 2: 7

What for? Why this human? Why any human? Why me?

What got into God to undertake this venture? What sort of giver is it who offers this gift of being to the world? To me?

As soon as we discover how silly it is to think of ourselves as self-made men and women we can begin to spend the rest of our lives looking for the answers.

* * * * *