

A New Angle -- Proper 13C – Pent+11C

Today we wrestle with one of the knottier problems of a thoughtful life. Time and again in our scriptures we are admonished to set aside earthly things, to refrain from storing up treasure, to live as disinterestedly as possible where physical and fiscal security are concerned. The problem is: if you count the number of otherwise admirable people who are able to literally do these things, they add up to almost nobody.

Can it be that Our Father is unaware of the unlikelihood, not to say near-impossibility of our doing what he says? Naaah. Can it be that God is aware of the unlikelihood and is morbidly establishing for us an impossible paradigm? Naaaah. Then it must be that God is being literary rather than literal through the scriptures, and just wants us to think, feel and be transformed through their study?

In the great tradition of the Anglican Church, we'll take a look and a listen today to a range of thoughts, across centuries and faith traditions and literary styles at some of the attempts to express what it is Our Father is trying to help us become.

“Set aside earthly things.” Does this mean don't make a living? I should think a loving God would want us all happy, and happily employed. There should be a – oh I don't know – tofu faux chicken at least in every pot, a cheery fire and a rose bush or two, a blue room for two room, where every day's a holiday. Let's face it, Jesus exaggerates. We're not really supposed to hate our mothers and fathers in order to follow Him; we're not really supposed to give “no thought” to our lives either. Instead, we are supposed to develop our frame of reference, to continually reprioritize and redirect our lives in favor of love. No mean feat for us.

Here, from Robert Browning's poem, *Rabbi ben Ezra*: "Let us not always say, 'In spite of this flesh to-day I strove, made headway, gained ground upon the whole!' As the bird wings and sings, let us cry, 'All good things are ours, nor soul helps flesh more now, than flesh helps soul!'"

The critic Thom Hartmann begs the question: "Is the essential nature of humans to cooperate or to dominate, to have democracy or to have kingdom? If you talk to people in aboriginal and indigenous cultures, you find that the highest societal value is cooperation. Competition is of very low value, and competition beyond certain boundaries is considered mental illness. But if you look at our culture, cooperation is considered a relatively low value and competition is considered the highest value. We celebrate the most powerful competitors."

St. Paul gets heavily into the hyperbole too, only without Jesus' empathic sense of irony. When we are confronted with Paul's lists of what not to do and how not to be, we can feel like we're being hectored by an inflexible militant instead of taught by a sublime tale-spinner. And we can't help but qualify some of Paul's rules: "He just means the bad kind of passion, right, not all passion?" or "He just left 'there is neither male nor female' out of this particular letter accidentally...right?" So what about his admonition to 'Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly?' Literally? That can't be right. I'm reminded of the Marx Brothers' *Horsefeathers* – Groucho, playing the worst college president imaginable is giving advice to Zeppo, who plays his son, an undergraduate. Zeppo asks, "Anything further, Father?" To which Groucho responds, " 'Anything further, Father?' That can't be right. Isn't it 'Anything Father, further?' The idea! I married your mother because I wanted children. Imagine my disappointment when you arrived. How can we

possibly put to death whatever is earthly within us? The flesh can help the soul as the soul can help the flesh. Move a muscle; change a thought.

Although Our Father in Heaven, so to speak, is not wholly disappointed with us, God is, as they say in those surveys, 'somewhat dissatisfied.' G.K.Chesterton was once asked to enter an essay contest wherein everyone had to answer the question, "What's wrong with the World?" His essay was two words long: "I am."

God will never be completely satisfied until our frame of reference changes from one of distracted pursuit of the fleeting and its adherent self-interest, to grateful connectedness and devotion to the nurture of Creation. Marc Barash writes: "You have to change your mind. You have to change your perceptions. If you change your perceptions, the world changes. Instead of, 'What do I get out of this?' it's 'How do I bring out the good that's in you?'"

With this transformed view, enough will be enough, and for that sufficiency we will be grateful. In the words of Thomas Merton, "To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything God has given us -- and God has given us everything. ...Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience."

Is this not what Paul has in mind when he tells us – rather precipitously -- "You have stripped off the old self with all its practices and have clothed yourselves with a new self, and are being renewed according to our creator for whom there is no longer Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free; Christ is all in all!"

Does this preclude the things that are of interest to us in this life? Far from it. God loves lots of what goes on in the World! The art music, cultural and intellectual inquiry of every kind must be pleasing indeed, because we come to them with an appetite for the godly and are both grateful for and gratified by each other's enjoyment. Looking at the world through our God-colored glasses, we find what Karl Barth called 'the purely miraculous element which adheres in seeing the invisible things of God and understanding them by the things that are made by humankind and perceived in Nature. This is not a rational, obvious, self-evident procedure; it is of the nature of revelation.'

Mozart, for instance, one of Barth's favorite subjects, starts to look like this: "The golden sounds and melodies of Mozart's music speak to me, not as Gospel, but as parables -- of the realm of God's free grace that is revealed in the Gospel -- and they do so again and again with great spontaneity and directness."

Or science itself, the greatest of all distractions for many a modern soul: "Faith in God the Creator frees us from all mythical interpretations of the world, and enables us to investigate scientifically the whole reality of nature and history that is open to our sense and reason, without falling victim to any ideology of science." Forget Creationism; God would have us experiment with, discover and employ the wonders of science for peace, compassion and sustenance.

Let's not kid ourselves, Jesus is adamant about excess wealth being a paralyzing poison to the kind of life God would have us lead. But a renewed relationship with God and our fellow living things, the refreshed point of view that Jesus exhorts us to will naturally lead away from excess. It is the distracting prioritization of this world, not the enjoyment of it, that God

would have us give up. Because God doesn't just want us to be happy and well for awhile, God wants us to be happy and well eternally.

Rule 22 of Shams Tabriz, the Sufi Dervish: "Life is a temporary loan and this world is nothing but a sketchy imitation of Reality. Only children would mistake a toy for the real thing. And yet human beings either become infatuated with their toys or disrespectfully break them and throw them aside. In this life stay away from all kinds of extremes; they will destroy your inner balance."

These thinkers all seem to be telling us to walk through our lives as if godliness were possible in all things, that no human pursuit is worthwhile outside a context of love.

Let's give old Browning the last word on this topic:

All that is, at all, lasts ever, past recall;
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure.
What entered into thee, *that* was, is, and shall be.
Time's wheel runs back or stops: the Potter and clay endure.
God fixed thee mid this dance of plastic circumstance;
This present, that thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
Machinery just meant to give thy soul its bent, to try thee and
Turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.