

The Pleasure of God

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Lent 2A

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1. Not long after the day of Pentecost, early in the history of the church, the apostles would pray for new converts to receive the *pentecostal* gift of the Holy Spirit. The result was miracles and explosions of faith: the blind could see, the deaf hear, and dead people were raised to life. This made one fellow – Simon, a new convert – envious. He was a magician, and made his living doing tricks and telling fortunes. When he observed the Holy Spirit being unleashed with tricks, Simon offered Peter and John money. They spat back at Simon – *the Holy Spirit isn't for sale* – and yet, many times over the course of its history, the church has tried to sell spirit. Think of the medieval practices of indulgences, or selling church offices. But *the Holy Spirit isn't for sale*.

2. In our world, we treat almost everything as a commodity. Look on e-Bay – every item you own, vacation you take, activity, even your connection to others – *even love itself is bought and sold on Valentine's Day*. Your kids can't play baseball without purchasing the uniform, or at least the shoes and cap. Larry Ellison purchased a Hawaiian island last year – as though a person can actually *own* an island. Simon wanted to own spirit - to control, possess and manipulate it.

3. Nicodemus came from a higher class than Simon – he was a learned man, a Pharisee, respected and respectful – but he likewise wanted to possess *spirit*. Nicodemus *could see Jesus* had something the rest of them did not – Was it a deeper intellectual understanding of faith? An authority? A power? He wasn't sure, but there *was* something. Something he wanted. You must be born again, Jesus answered Nicodemus, before he even asked. You must be born of water and spirit. Twice – you must be born twice, the second time of spirit.

4. We speak of *spirituality* as though it were a commodity. She possesses a deep *spirituality* about her, we might say, or, he doesn't have a *spiritual* bone in his body. During Lent, it is asked, how can I become more *spiritual*? As though spirituality were like sleep - if only I could get more sleep I'd feel rested. If only I could meditate long enough, I'd feel more *spiritual*. But spirituality is not a thing. It is not a commodity. You can't *get* more of it. I'm not even sure it is a process or a journey. I'm not sure it is a state of being at all. I am Nicodemus, befuddled at it all. Can one enter a womb the second time? Perhaps hyperbole, and a laughable concept. What is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born spirit is spirit, ... only ... who knows what it means to be born of spirit?

Evangelicals claim being born again means that you, at a precise moment in time, converted to God, and God imbued your soul at that moment in a way that had never happened before. The problem with that definition is this – even a precise *moment in time* is the **result of the culmination** of a lifetime of straying. It took you years to get to the point where you could be born again – And - *for many Christians*, faith is slow-cooked – these Christians grow into believing. Is slow faith any less vital? Or more so? Is faith - spirituality? I'm not so sure. Faith feels like something **tangible**, something you can hold in your hands, and something that possesses you. But *spirituality* – **seems intangible**. It is **not** something you tuck into bed next to you, or place under your pillow at night.

5. I've been reading a little volume Ed Thomson gave me week before last – The Life of God in the Soul of Man, by Henry Scougal, from the mid-1800's. Scougal first notes that the soul of man is attached to the human body as naturally as sinew and muscle is attached to bone. At least during this life, the two are inseparable, soul from the body. The relationship, he says, **between the spirit of God and the human being** is the same. God's life, or soul, or existence, is inseparable from and exists as part of the life of the human being. God lives in and through you. You are the vessel containing God's soul, if you will. Paul

calls this phenomenon ***the Body of Christ*** – you – the collective you - are the arms and ears and eyes of Christ – or of God, if you will. If this is true, then ***spirituality*** is not a ***commodity***, is not something you can buy. Not something you can increase or deplete. ***It merely exists.*** It is your attachment to God. Or perhaps the other way around – God’s attachment to you. Like Dorothy wearing her ruby slippers, the way home was there all along, ***she just didn’t know it.*** And the only question is – the only question – *do you maximize that inextricable relationship? Do you allow God to live through you?*

6. ***Sometimes I pray because I’m supposed to.*** It is what a priest does, *they tell me* – pray. So I pray. In those cases, obligation begets discipline. But most often, I pray because ***I choose to.*** *Because of this deep, deep desire I have. I pray as an expression of thankfulness, or joy.* I pray because I sincerely care for someone – and want that person touched, or healed. Recently, for example, I have been ***praying for Jon*** – my son’s roommate – the one I told you has leukemia. I’ve only met Jon once, so I can’t say I pray for Jon because I am close to him. Rather, I pray for Jon ***because*** his health means something to my son. And I care deeply for my son, and he cares for Jon. ***Translate that concept*** – caring deeply – to God, and you.

What do you think God cares about? If indeed the life of God exists in the soul of man – then - like Alice Walker said – ***God cares about what you care about*** – And that confirms it: ***your relationship is organic. Yours with God.*** It is ***not a commodity.*** Your spirituality – the fact that God imbues you - is not a commodity. You can’t buy Spirit. You can’t commoditize spirituality. It won’t tuck into bed at night next to you. ***All you can do is own it.*** You can only live it. Abraham lived it – That’s why they called him, ***the friend of God.*** ***Are you the friend of God?***