

Love and its Disciplines

Reflection #2

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me...” This declaration, made in the second chapter of the Letter to the Galatians, derives from the question that lies at the heart of this and other letters of Paul: What can make us righteous before God?

Both the Hebrew and Greek terms for righteousness mean “conforming to the demands of a relationship” – with another, others, or God. Before his encounter with the risen Christ – on the road to Damascus, according to Acts – Paul found the key to righteousness in the Jewish law, of which he was a scholar and a zealous and obedient servant. Afterwards, he embraced the crucified and risen Christ as the negation (Galatians) or fulfillment (Romans) of the Law, that is, the key to righteousness. Through Christ, he was (in the coinage of E.P. Sanders) “righteoused”, i.e. taken up into God’s own righteousness..

Many mainline Christians hesitate to use “righteousness” and related words, primarily because of its association with self-righteousness and fundamentalist sensibilities. But Paul’s concern with what can make us righteous before God, though phrased in different ways, has lost none of its urgency.

In fact, it may have gained some. The modern Western world emphasizes the primacy of the “I”, the “self.” This emphasis has secured manifold blessings, chief among them the individual liberties so many of us enjoy. But it has brought new challenges. In the world of the Bible, of Hebrew and Christian scriptures alike, individual relationships existed primarily as components of the collective: the household, the community, the people. Isaiah decried the “sinful nation, laden with iniquity” more than anything that might have been

amiss in personal relationships. With notable exceptions, other prophets of Israel couched their oracles in similar terms. An individual's decision to embrace the gospel meant the conversion of the person's entire household, including relatives, servants and slaves; the individual consent of each household member was not necessary.

We see things in exactly contrary fashion. The burden of seeking righteousness brings its entire weight to bear on each of us individually and cannot, at least not with integrity, be deflected to the collective. We have found this burden hard to bear, and stories of attempts to escape it pervade Western history, including its art and literature.

No story better portrays the individual wrestling with the demands of righteousness than Shakespeare's tale of Hamlet. The simple code of the medieval world dictated that he avenge his father's murder at the hands of his uncle. But the medieval world and its code were dying, and no longer speak authoritatively to the uncertain young Prince of Denmark. The Shakespeare scholar Tony Tanner writes that "...Hamlet finds it very difficult to know, to decide, how to act. Or whether to act. Indeed, what, exactly, 'acting' is." (XVI) Hamlet's struggle echoes Paul's: how to be righteous, how to meet the demands of relationships.

But it's also different. Hamlet evinces no sense of being part of a larger whole. It's all on him, and about him. The full burden of "doing right by" his murdered father, and others, falls on his shoulders. In the end, he cannot bear it; it overwhelms him, and he rids himself of its weight in an orgy of violence.

What Hamlet does repels us, but we know how he feels. We might even wonder, when we hear of horrific orgies of violence in our own time, whether the perpetrators haven't felt overwhelmed by the burden of

“doing right by” their relationships, and resorted to violence in a wrongheaded attempt to free themselves from it.

All of us, like Hamlet, are enmeshed in webs of relationships, find it difficult to navigate their various demands, and sometimes feel like the whole burden of doing so falls on us. Caroline Walker Bynum, in a masterful study, shows that early Christians feared the prospects of the body’s dismemberment, and of its being swallowed up. Both were real threats, realized in persecution (lions released in the Coliseum tore Christians limb from limb and consumed their flesh) and after death, in burial and decay. The doctrine of bodily resurrection spoke to both fears, offering courage and consolation through hope for the re-assembly of bodies and their emergence from the bellies of beasts, and from the earth. .

We think less than the early Christians about the dismemberment or consumption of the physical body. In modern Western society we’re mostly protected from the assaults of wild beasts if we want to be, and many have accepted cremation, which accomplishes in minutes what burial does over centuries, as an acceptable treatment of a corpse. But if we remember that for the early Christians, “body” and “person” were synonymous, we recognize some of their fears in our own hearts.

First, we fear that competing expectations will cause our sense of personhood, of self, to disintegrate. “I’m pulled in a thousand directions”, we say. “I can’t be all things to all people. I can’t keep everybody happy.” All true, and we learn to set limits. Still, we have questions about our own integrity. “In the midst of what others see in me or demand of me, who am I, really?”

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* fears the centrifugal forces that threaten disintegration. Seen always as a blank screen on which others project

their anxieties and aspirations, the unnamed young Negro (Ellison's term) at the heart of the story finds himself unable to grasp and hold a sense of his own identity. The novel ends with him hunkered down in a windowless basement apartment, illuminated 24 hours a day and 7 days a week by electric lighting, the "juice" stolen from a nearby Con Ed power line. Walled off, spotlighted, he's looking, probably fruitlessly, to find a self that's not defined by what others want or need him to be.

Second, we fear that a voracious world will swallow our sense of self. . There are voids out there: people whose needs metastasize even as we try to help meet them; organizations, causes, movements almost defined by their insatiable hunger for people's time and energy (church?), and / or by their disregard for boundaries. We work hard not to fall into any of these black holes, but we don't always succeed. We feel like our sense of self lies hidden, even invisible, submerged in the needs and demands of another, or others.

Modern stories of escape and flight respond to this fear of being swallowed. Sometimes they evoke the suffocating embrace of a small town or a provincial outpost. In Joyce's *Ulysses* Leopold Bloom, wandering through Dublin, seeks to flee his Jewish particularity and its stifling demands. He fears they will swallow him up. About half-way through the story, Bloom has a vision of his deceased son Rudy, wearing a yarmulke and reading a book from right to left, as Hebrew is written. Bloom had set off on his journey through Dublin's precincts to persuade himself that he was cosmopolitan, a man of the world, able to handle a wide array of situations, untethered from the narrow way of Jewish tradition. Rudy represents the failure of this effort. Small, fragile, clinging to the ancient customs and practices of his tribe, he is the real Bloom.

On Cornice VI of Purgatory, the souls of the gluttonous cluster around an inverted tree. They cannot pluck or eat its fruit, because the longer, fruit-bearing branches are too high. Accustomed to thoughtlessly dismembering and consuming the fruits of the earth, they now learn to govern their appetites and honor the integrity of creation.

We see plenty of gluttony in our own day. Its various expressions have contributed to the depredation of our shared environment, and to the epidemic of obesity. Unshackled consumerism, a kind of gluttony, helped fuel the credit and housing bubbles whose consequences continue as this reflection is written. “American consumerism” is, in many ways, too easy of a target; U.S. buying power has lifted millions, maybe billions, out of poverty in the “developing” world. Still, the image of emaciated spirits looking up at a tree whose fruits they cannot eat captures the reality of many Americans’ lives today, with almost unbearable poignancy.

Gluttony makes itself known, too, in the voracity that threatens our personhood with dismemberment and consumption. “Everybody wants a piece of me;” anxiety is “eating me up.” And in a kind of vicious circle, we defend ourselves by the practice of gluttony, grabbing and swallowing pieces of others. The various means of manipulation have this characteristic; we use another person’s capacities to promote our own agenda. This dynamic is evident in the public realm too, especially sports and entertainment. Promoters and advertisers take pieces of, say, the blues, jazz or country traditions and package them for general public consumption. Sports teams take images of American Indians and make them team logos.

The emaciated spirits of Cornice VI know that living creatures have to eat, and eating entails dismemberment and swallowing. But they have

engaged in this necessary activity without measure or restraint, and are learning to see themselves primarily as stewards rather than consumers. Their penance speaks directly to the fears of being pulled apart or swallowed up that haunted the earliest Christians, and in a different form, haunts the modern West too..

Frustratingly, Paul seems to share none of these fears with us. The expectations and projections of others pull him in a thousand directions; he ends the catalogue of his sufferings for the gospel, in 2 Corinthians 11, with these words: “...(A)part from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches.” Unlike the invisible man, though, he has no trouble finding his own voice amid the uproar, and forcefully correcting misperceptions. He’s cosmopolitan in the extreme, a Roman citizen who moves confidently between the Hellenistic and Hebrew worlds, but unlike Bloom, he never falls prey to the temptation either to forsake or forget his Jewishness. In fact, he begins chapter 9 of the Letter to the Romans with this startling declaration: “I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race.” Yet his Jewish tradition does not limit or swallow him. If anything, it prepares him to rejoice in the extension of God’s covenant of promise to all the nations of the earth in Christ. Finally, he embraces his responsibility for the churches he has founded, and for others. He does not distance himself from their needs, or their neediness: “Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?” Again, though, he does not allow himself to be swallowed up. He stays focused on the integrity of the gospel and on making plans for its proclamation to the ends of the known world. Under many of the same pressures we experience, Paul honors the demands of righteousness, of his relationships with God, his

churches and the broader mission field, with complete confidence and competence.

How does he do this? And why do we find it so difficult? What does Paul know that we have forgotten?

Paul knows that the “self”, one’s “identity”, derives from “call”, and not vice-versa. We often believe we’re called to do things that fit well with who we are. There’s wisdom in this approach. We do best when we find relationships, jobs, and undertakings that match up well with our talents, gifts, predilections, goals and aspirations.

In the Biblical world, though, God often calls people to do things that don’t match up at all with who they are. Moses does not speak well, but God summons him to take the message of liberation to his people. Jeremiah is a mere boy, but God selects him to call Israel to account for its iniquity, a job requiring manly courage and resolve. Mary is a pious peasant girl, but God’s angel tells her she’s to bear the Holy Child out of wedlock, an undertaking sure to cause scandal in her village. Perhaps most poignantly, the supremely eloquent Paul must forego his eloquence in order to preach the gospel with grace and power (I Corinthians 1:17), and Job, the paragon of integrity, must surrender his overriding concern with personal righteousness in order to be reconciled with God (Job 40:8).

God’s persistent mismatching of person and call tells us something about the meaning of “call”. God’s call is a summons, usually by name, of an individual or a people into the presence of God as The Other. In its purest, most uncompromising form, God’s call is, by definition, not a good fit. The God who summons stands at a vast distance from the one who is summoned. Our thoughts, hopes, fears, aspirations, preferences,

gifts, and predilections sometimes seem not to register with this Other, and maybe they don't.

Paul's own call, as recounted by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, brings the Otherness of God into high relief. The risen Christ does not persuade or invite Paul to take on a new ministry. He does not point out the ways in which Paul's own personality, history and training make him a suitable candidate for preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. Rather, he blinds Paul, casts him to the ground, and overwhelms him, rendering him incapable of taking care of himself.

Elijah's encounter with God in the Sinai desert both anticipates and illuminates the later story of Paul's call. Elijah has fled to the desert because the Israelite queen, Jezebel, seeks him in order to kill him; her pagan sensibilities cannot tolerate his fierce devotion to the one God. When he arrives at the mountain, Elijah is weary, discouraged, and ready to die. The Lord addresses him there, in a "still, small voice" but there's no mention of Elijah's emotional or spiritual state, only a list of tasks for him to accomplish. Yet this list provides the balm that Elijah's spirit needs. He arises and sets his face toward his nation and the work that awaits him there.

Note, here, how God's Otherness, the chasm that separates the priorities of the Almighty from Elijah's concerns, lifts Elijah's spirits and clears his mind. An overt expression of empathy would not and could not have done this. In a similar way, Paul would not have responded to or even acknowledged any kind of affirmation from God. He didn't need or seek such. But a negation, a shattering visit from the Other, set him on the path that would comprise his life's work and, in so doing, made him who he was.

The summons of the Other makes us who we are, too. It lifts us out of ourselves and into the service of something that lies beyond our choice or control. It confers on us a new identity, that of servant, even slave, of a purpose beyond our intentions and goals.

As such, it lifts the burden of the self. We considered, above, the struggles of the self in the modern world: righteousness, right relationships, remains our goal, but our solitary struggles to attain it leave us anxious and perplexed. We're all Hamlet, even if we don't see a bloodbath as the solution to our dilemma. But if we understand, with Paul, that God's call defines the self, and not vice-versa, we also understand that the self's goal of righteousness lies in God's hands, not ours. God's purposes will be realized, for God is sovereign, and we – in spite of ourselves more often than by virtue of our own intention and effort – will be the instruments of their realization.

God as Other; God's call, summoning us to the service of purposes not our own, as constitutive of the self: I've argued that this Pauline conception of God frees us from the overwhelming burden of the self which haunts the modern West. Most of us, though, this writer included, probably don't feel all that comforted by this freedom. If we're loved by God, then we're loved at a distance, as instruments, even pawns, in the realization of purposes working themselves out far above our heads.

We Americans have, among our leaders, a sort of guide to this austere freedom and its admittedly elusive comforts. With only a few exceptions (his children, possibly a few fellow lawyers), Abraham Lincoln loved at a distance. From the time he entered public life, he had an agenda for just about every conversation and every encounter. He

saw clearly where people fit into a larger picture, and deployed them, with or without their knowledge and consent, to achieve his goals.

Lincoln's father uprooted the family frequently during Abraham's childhood and youth. And Abraham (following in the footsteps of his Biblical namesake?) uprooted himself from his family as soon as he could. He put lots of time and space between himself and what he thought of as his father's brutish insistence on the primacy of backbreaking manual labor. (Lincoln's allies used the "railsplitter" myth to his advantage, but Lincoln himself had long since found better ways to make a living.) Lincoln made himself a master of self-distancing in the bosom of the family.

Despite all of this, though, we don't remember Lincoln as a master manipulator, or as cold or remote in the manner of other leaders. We think of him as "Father Abraham", kind, tender-hearted, staying up late at night to find reasons to pardon deserters. "With malice toward none, with charity for all" captures his legacy.

We can attribute this to three components of Lincoln's character that came into high relief during the blood and fire of the Civil War. First: his wit. Used earlier in his career to flay his opponents mercilessly, it became almost exclusively self-deprecatory during the nation's great trial. Second: his patience. No one left Lincoln's presence thinking that his mind had been elsewhere during their conversation. He listened with great care, sometimes at great length, when the pressures of time and the demands of schedule must have felt overwhelming. He used almost everything he heard for his own purposes, of course, but if colleagues grumbled about this, few of them bore him any lasting ill will as a result. Third: his flexibility. Within the boundaries of his core principles, Lincoln had no trouble ceding points he regarded as secondary – and he

regarded a very broad range of issues as "secondary". He allowed no "litmus tests" to find their way into his small repertory of primary concerns and principles.

Wit, patience, flexibility: these softened Lincoln's shrewdness, his calculating nature, and bequeathed us the image of a compassionate father we now cherish.

A favorite professor of mine used to say, "If the end doesn't justify the means, what does?" We cut some people a lot of slack in this regard, because we believe their hearts are in the right place. Even if they use us, we don't doubt their love for us. We might even be glad to play a part in a performance they're orchestrating. I've heard musicians of great talent say they think of themselves as empty vessels, through which the genius of a Bach or an Ellington can flow unimpeded. Lincoln's colleagues, looking back, felt like this about him. Being loved at a distance by Lincoln, seen as means to his ends, seemed superior to just about any other human love they had known.

In the last four or five years of his life, I believe, Lincoln came to regard God in the way many regarded Lincoln himself. He always used impersonal terms to speak of God: "the Almighty," "Providence," "Divine Being." I don't recall ever reading of an instance in which the term "Father", or any more intimate invocation, crossed his lips. "The Almighty has His own purposes," he wrote in the Second Inaugural Address. In Lincoln's mind the Almighty loved him and the nation he served from a distance, using both as instruments for the realization of purposes higher than either could fully grasp. He worked hard on his speeches, but also evinced belief in Jesus' words to his apostles: "And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious

beforehand what you are to say...for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.” (*Mark 13:11*)

Seen in this way, by an age that craves intimacy with God and isn't sure how to get it, Lincoln's religion seems unsatisfying. Still, we face a vast and baffling universe, and even the currents of economic life, let alone the larger forces of history, seem to have eluded our understanding and careened out of our control. Surely some part of us hopes God is not just with us, but far beyond us; that the Almighty has his own purposes, higher than ours. Love from a distance does not fill the void we all sense in our midst, but it offers its own satisfactions. Lincoln's melancholy may have come from the unfulfilled yearning for an intimacy that neither his father nor God, as he understood God, could offer. But his undoubted serenity surely derived from his conviction that human aspiration could not contain or control the Almighty.

The proud walk their cornice (the first one in Purgatory since Dante, in accordance with catholic teaching and tradition, makes Pride the principal root of sin) stooped over under the weight of a heavy, cold stone strapped to their backs: “The heads that were held high are now bowed in a necessary humility...and the eyes that looked down upon their neighbours are now unable to look up,” writes Dorothy Sayers (*Purgatory*, page 154). Some years ago I heard a conversation between two immigrant ironworkers, both part of a labor advocacy coalition I belonged to. They were Christian, and often talked about religious matters as we waited for meetings to begin. One said to the other that he often asked God to give him strength to resist temptation. The second worker chided him: “We ask not to be led into temptation at all, not for strength to resist it.” This second worker, better-educated than his fellows, had the air of pride about him. As a result, the humility of his response surprised me a little. Perhaps he'd carried a cold and heavy

stone on his back for awhile, and learned to pray not so much for strength as for the mercy that would spare him from having his strength put to the test. Lincoln, and anyone who has borne the pain of war, knows the wisdom of this prayer. The proud spirits on the first cornice give it expression, in an expanded version of the prayer Christ taught us:

“Put not our strength, too easily ensnared

And overcome, to proof with the old foe;
But save us from him, for he tries it hard.”

The purposes of the Almighty, higher than ours, sometimes deny us the strength and wisdom we seek, and instead teach us the limits of both. Heads lifted high, imitating the Almighty and looking down on others, are bowed and shamed. The nation would go forward “with firmness in the right,” Lincoln wrote, “as God gives us to see the right.” With the proud penitents, we come see the order of things as it is, not as we wish it to be. Bearing the yoke of the God whose ways and thoughts are higher than ours, we seek, and will find, rest for our souls.

When Peter came to visit Paul in Antioch he was prepared to break bread with Gentiles. After a time, though, a group of conservative Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem and warned Peter not to do so. Peter heeded their warning and decided to eat only with fellow Jews. Paul, representing and defending God’s “new creation”, the mixed Jewish / Gentile community of Antioch, “rebuked (Peter) to his face” for having betrayed the gospel.

Peter, in the new and unfamiliar territory of the Antioch community, is anxious about himself and about his proud claim to righteousness (the proud are often anxious, on guard against anything that might topple them from their high position; Gunther Bornkamm, writing of the unredeemed self, calls it “presumptuous and despairing alike”), to being in a right relationship with God and others. His anxiety gets the better of him, and he turns away from one group of disciples in order to please another.

Paul feels anxiety, too – a “daily burden” of concern “for all the churches”, as we’ve noted. Their needs and demands pull him in many directions. Yet he never wavers in his commitment to the universal community he believes Christ called him to serve; no group of disciples gets short shrift for the sake of attending to, or pleasing, another. Further, Paul strikes a balance among all the strategies in his repertoire, deploying argument and emotion, compassion and authority, as circumstances warrant.

Paul does not share Peter’s anxiety about his personal claim to righteousness. For Paul, the only such claim that matters is Christ’s, and it was established and vindicated once for all in his crucifixion and resurrection. He tells the Corinthians, “With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself.” (I Cor 4:3) He minimizes his own agency, and that of others, in bringing the gospel to Corinth: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God...” (I Corinthians 3:6-7). Paul sees himself as a servant, a slave, an instrument of a righteousness whose work no human failing can impede, and no human virtue can enhance: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” He has no righteousness of his own, and in this sense, no self; Christ has assumed the self that was into

His sovereignty. If this seems far from the personal intimacy and empathy we seek from God, so be it, but it's enough for Paul. In the midst of besetting anxieties, he is at peace.