

Paul: Civil War; The Human Dilemma

From the series: Varieties of Religious Experience

Text: Acts 8:1, 8:3, 9:14; Romans 7:19, 24-25

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In 1902, William James, considered by many to be America's foremost philosopher who had moved into the field of psychology, delivered the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh, Scotland, one of the most prestigious lecture series still in the world today, and he entitled his lectures, "The Varieties of Religious Experience." His lectures have become a classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a very fine read if you ever see it on the book shelf. I read those this week, because in Eastertide I want to be thinking about some of the different responses to Jesus Christ, to his death and resurrection and the expectation of his coming. People are different, and our religious response varies from individual to individual, and I was somewhat interested in what William James had to say about Paul, for example.

Paul's story is familiar to us. I didn't read the account in Acts, but we know that he was a Pharisee, the strictest sort of observant Jew, who were very fine people, but who get bad press in the New Testament because of the antagonism. Paul was also so committed to the Jewish faith and its propagation that he saw the Jesus Jewish movement as a threat, so he was on his way to stamp it out, on the way to Damascus, for example. He was knocked off his horse with a bright light and a voice said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Going into Damascus, received with fear and trembling by the little community of Jewish Jesus people there, he receives baptism and he becomes the great Apostle, St. Paul.

St. Paul is one of the significant figures in the whole of our western history and has had a tremendous shaping affect on our understanding of the Christian gospel. Paul *did* see something. Paul was a radical in that he went to the root and he had a vision, an understanding of the gospel of God in Jesus Christ which has shaped the whole Christian tradition, subsequently. There are those who say Jesus was not the founder of Christianity, but Paul was, and one can make a case for that, actually.

Paul saw something and he spent the rest of his life telling the story of Jesus, proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ, establishing churches, and so forth, and we

talk about that Damascus Road experience as Paul's conversion. But, that really isn't right, for Paul wasn't converted. Paul never thought of himself as anything but a Jew. Paul never served or worshiped any God but the God of Israel. What happened to Paul in that Damascus Road experience was not so much a conversion as a calling, and it was in that experience that he felt called to take the news of Jesus to the Gentile world, because what Paul believed, what he saw, what so startled him was the fact that Jesus Christ was the means by which God was overcoming that ancient separation of the Jew and all the rest of the people.

Jew - Gentile. If you weren't a Jew, you were a Gentile. In his Letter to the Ephesians, he uses the term, "That middle wall of partition" that separated the Jew from all the rest. In Jesus Christ, Paul was convinced that that wall was taken down and the grand vision that Paul had was this sense that, in Jesus Christ, what God was doing was creating one new humanity. That great gulf was being bridged, and Paul had as his passion to be the instrument by which that Gentile world would come to God through Jesus Christ and, in that, be united with Israel, with the Jew, and there would no longer be that great separation, but one community of the people of God. He began to see that he was the instrument of the bringing in of the Gentile, and the bringing in of the Gentile was literally bringing into the covenant of grace, bringing into the aegis of the God of Israel.

That's really what was happening. There were congregations that he founded all over the place and they were composed of Gentile converts and Jewish Christians, or we can say Jesus Jews. And in any community where he went, that was the makeup and in such a makeup there was the beginning of the realization of his great hope and his vision, but also there was great tension. Paul had no argument, really, with the Jew. Paul remained a Jew. Paul was an observant Jew when he was with Jews, according to his own word.

Let's just say, for example, that this half of the house are Jewish Christians, Jews who have come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. This half of the house, Gentiles. Any kind of a mix of religious experience was pagan, whatever you want to call it. Now, Paul, when he's with this crowd, is kosher. When he's with the other crowd, he has ham on buns. And he does that with good conscience, because he realizes that all of those religious rituals and ordinances and regulations are finally inconsequential. He has had an experience of God in Jesus Christ that transcends all of his religious observance. But, he doesn't derogate it; he's not negative about it, and he continues, in order to win the Jew, to be a Jew when he's with Jews, and to win the Gentiles, to be a Gentile when he's with the Gentiles.

Problem: As long as you stay on your side of the house and you stay on your side of the house, no problem. But, what happens when we have a banquet, a potluck, and the Gentile Christians say, "Ach, we'll cook this time?" Menu? Ham. What are you going to do? You're observant Jews, even though you believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Now there's a little kink in the community, and we can laugh about it,

but it was a serious problem. We know that it was so serious that Peter and Paul had a confrontation in Galatia, and those good Jewish people who came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah continued to think of themselves as Jewish, they continued to follow Torah, they observed Sabbath, they observed the dietary laws, they practiced circumcision. Nothing really changed so much, except that they saw in Jesus God's onward movement, Jesus the Messiah who eventually will come and finish it all. But, over here, there is no knowledge of that background, no sensitivity to that background, and now you're trying to forge one new community, a people with that kind of diversity, and there was tension.

Paul had been a happy Jew. Sometimes we think of Paul as having this bad conscience and burden of sin, but that's not Paul. If you read Paul through Martin Luther and St. Augustine, then you get the bad conscience and the heavy burden of sin and heavy guilt and all that. Augustine with his profligate life, never got over it, and screwed us up in the West in our understanding of sexuality ever since. And Luther with his tormented soul, learning from Augustine. Tormented soul: "How can I find a gracious God?" Both of them went back to Paul, and we read Paul through Luther, through Augustine. But, that wasn't Paul.

You read in Philippians, the third chapter, Paul's autobiographical notes, he says in regard to the law, "I was blameless," and as Krister Stendahl says in his discussion of Paul, Paul had a robust conscience. Paul didn't go mealy-mouthing around, groveling in the dust. Paul had a very good sense of who he was and what he had been as a Jew, and he is not really responsible for what has been done to him and the interpretation through Augustine and Luther and into Protestantism, especially Reformed Protestantism. Paul, himself, Krister Stendahl says, according to his character and his academic achievements, was a very happy Jew. But, he had seen something more, and what he had seen is that it was possible to transcend his highly respected Judaism into a more spiritual, transforming relationship with God, and his concern was to get these two groups together. He knew that in order to get them together, that this group could not go over here and become Jewish. He fought that to the death. And he knew that these people couldn't simply come over here and give up their Judaism, but he knew both of them could find a meeting place in the grace of God in Jesus Christ by faith, not by religious observance.

Now, you may ask, "If Paul wasn't one of these guys groveling in the dust, what about chapter seven of Romans that you read?"

Well, let me tell you about chapter seven of Romans. You have to read it in the context. To whom is Paul speaking? Paul is speaking to Jewish Christians. If you read the beginning of the chapter, he's speaking to those who know about Torah and all that stuff. And so, he wants to show them that the Torah way won't finally get the job done. He's come to see that, and he wants them to see that so that they can let go of it, so that they can move here. And so, he gives them a little commentary on Genesis, chapter three, verses 7-12 of the seventh of Romans. He

says, "You remember the story - in the beginning when God formed a garden, created Adam and Eve and said to them, 'Now look, there is orchard after orchard after orchard. You can eat any of the fruit. But, there's one tree in the middle. Don't touch it.'" Paul says, "What happened? They touched it."

I mean, what happens to you when I say, "No?" You say, "Yes." Or, when I say, "Yes," you say, "No."

Paul said, "I've discovered there is something in the human being that is contrary and you say you can't have it, covetousness begins to generate, and I want it." And so, Paul says there is nothing wrong with the command, nothing wrong with the Law. But the Law exacerbated the human situation.

The old serpent, the liar, comes and says to Eve, "What did God say?"

Eve says, "Well, God said we could have a lot of stuff."

"Oh, but not that one, eh? You know why? Because God knows that the moment you eat that fruit, the moment you go against the command, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, and you will have the knowledge of good and evil."

For once, the old liar wasn't lying, because that's just what happened. She took the fruit, she shared it with Adam, and their eyes were opened, and they looked at each other and knew that they were naked, which is not a statement about having no clothes on, but is a statement about their real condition. They took the fruit and awareness dawned on them. They took the fruit and they became like God, knowing the difference between good and evil, they gained a moral sense. They came to consciousness and awareness and their mind blew.

That is a parable. It is a profound parable, and Paul says, "That's what the Law does. It exacerbates that in the human person which is contrary and it excites the opposite response."

Well, we call that the Fall. I think it's Milton in his *Paradise Lost* who speaks about the paradox about the fortunate Fall. Now, tell me, if you were Eve and you had it to do all over again, what would you do, knowing what you know? Would you live in blissful ignorance, unconscious, unaware, like the rest of the animals that Adam named? Or, would you also, knowing the consequence, take the fruit and have your eyes opened and come to awareness and find in the wake of that all of the hell on earth, from Kosovo to the Holocaust to broken promises and the tragedy that stalks our steps? What would you do?

Garden of Eden? Garden of Eden in Paradise? Unaware so that, well, excuse my language, like a dog you could urinate, defecate or copulate at ease, any time, any place, with total unawareness. Do you ever look at a dog and envy the dog? That

beautiful innocence, unaware. Or, would you, too, bite the apple and pay the price of human being?

Now, Paul paints that picture in order to say to Jewish Christians who are following Torah, "Look where following religious observances finally leads. Legalism, moralism, obligation, dotting the i, crossing the t, can keep you hedged in, but it will never transform you inwardly so you are sprung free to soar with the Spirit." He was trying to say to the Jewish Christian community there is another way than Torah. He says, "Look, Torah? It is good and righteous and holy. It is of God. With my mind, I affirm it. Everything that it entails, I affirm with my mind. But, this mental, spiritual part of us," Paul says, "is housed in a body and because it's housed in a body with all of the drives and all of the coercions and all of the temptations and all of the seductions, there's a civil war going on within the human being. With the law of my mind, I serve God. With the law of my flesh, I serve sin." Paul says flesh battles against spirit and the spirit battles against flesh, and I don't understand my own actions. The good that I would, I don't do, and the evil I would not do, I do, oh wretch that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Can any of you identify with that? Don't tell me. Don't raise your hands. I wouldn't want your spouse to know. Can you identify with that? Is that not the human dilemma? Are we not the battleground? Are we not caught up in a civil war between that which we affirm in our spiritual selves and that which we actually live out in this body of death?

Paul was trying to say to the Jewish Christian community which was still observing Torah that that's not the answer, and we could get you all together if you could see what I see, if you could see that there is the possibility for a freedom in the spirit of Jesus Christ. The eighth chapter of Romans is that marvelous chapter on life in the Spirit and it is Paul's answer to that civil war that he finds within himself.

I read William James and found him fascinating. Paul is Paul. Augustine was Augustine; Luther was Luther; John Bunyan of *Pilgrim's Progress*, with the load on his back, was John Bunyan - we all respond differently. We all come with a different set of hormones and genes and backgrounds, environments, but William James did say there were two distinct kinds of people: there were the healthy-minded and the sick soul. The healthy-minded, the sunny personality, like a Walt Whitman who revels in this life, revels in the world, revels in the grass and the flowers and the trees, who never seems to have a cloud in the sky. And then there are the Augustines and the Luthers, such like, that seem tormented always with this sense of failure, of condemnation, the burden of guilt they never seem to get rid of. There are different people and religions can exacerbate it or reinforce one or the other.

But, William James says, in regard to the healthy-minded like a Whitman, there is finally a superficiality there because, he says, it won't do for one to just whistle a happy tune. It will not do for one to whistle in the dark, to deny the darkness. We are not isolated individuals. We cannot be cognizant of what's going on in Kosovo without our being caught up with it, and if we think long enough and deeply enough into our own hearts and look around us, we know that there is a certain tragedy that is a part of the human scene. There is suffering; there is misery; and finally we die, and anybody who thinks long and hard about that, knows that it is not enough simply to whistle under a sunny, blue sky as though that's all there is.

There's more to it than that, and Paul knew that that "more to it" was the very kind of nature that we have, this human nature that can affirm the law of God with the mind and get all caught up in selfishness and greed and hostility and hatred and anger and create a Kosovo or a Holocaust and the impossible darkness that is a part of our human scene. So, William James, very sensitively dealing with these things, says, "Healthy-mindedness has its limits." And while he would not advocate that we all become examples of the sick soul person, nonetheless, we do recognize that also within us there is raging a civil war which sometimes we win and sometimes we lose, and I suspect that Paul, who had this vision of one grand humanity, and the possibility of it by seeing this salvation by faith in the grace of God, may have overplayed his hand.

If you read the eighth chapter of Romans, it will give you goose bumps. There are marvelous passages there, but I'm not sure that one moves chronologically from Romans seven to Romans eight and ever gets rid of Romans seven. I think to our dying day we will live as divided personalities. I think to our dying day we will struggle with this body of death which will not cooperate with the nobility and the magnificence that this mind can envision, and our soaring with the Spirit of God in the heights will never pull us free fully from our anchorage in the mud and the physicality of this body that is the house and the ground of the Spirit.

Paul may have promised more than any of us will ever realize, but he did see that it is not in religious observance, it is not in the fulfillment of heavy obligation, it is not in prescribing to legalism or moralism, but it is in catching a glimpse of grace that there lies the possibility for some freedom from the struggle. He did understand that what we all need to hear is that we are accepted.

This is the point at which traditionally and still too often in the Church the minister takes the occasion to exacerbate the load of guilt and the sense of failure of the people. This is the point in this message when this preacher would like to say to you, "Drop your guilt. Let it go. It doesn't help. There's nothing positive about it. It will do you no good, except keep you bound at a point at which you will not know the freedom of grace."

We'll never shed this shell as long as we live. We're never going to get beyond the human dilemma. But, it's a human dilemma. It's a human possibility, and it's a humanity embraced by God, Who, after all, as the Psalmist says, "Knows our frame and remembers that we are dust," making us thus. Maybe the finest statement of what I am trying to say was written by Paul Tillich:

It strikes us when our disgust of our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us, as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes, at that moment, a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying, "You are accepted. You are accepted." Accepted by that which is greater than you and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now. Perhaps you'll find it later. Do not try to do anything now. Perhaps you will do much later. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted and, if that happens, you have experienced grace.