

The Divine Dilemma: The Human Paradox

Text: Matthew 1:23; II Corinthians 12:9-10

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Søren Kierkegaard was an interesting Danish thinker, Christian, philosopher, theologian. He thought a lot about the divine-human relationship and he told a story one time about a king who had the misfortune of falling in love. He fell in love with a peasant woman, and for a king to fall in love with a peasant woman is to create a great problem. It is a royal dilemma, for kings ought to know better than to fall in love. When one falls in love, one loses control. When one falls in love, one is tempted to do foolish things. When one falls in love, one no longer operates rationally, using one's head. One leads from the heart and it creates all kinds of difficulties. Anyone who wants a smooth ride, a well-managed life, free of pain, would be well advised never to fall in love. But, especially if you're a king, because if you're a king, there is an added dimension to the dilemma. You see, the king knew that he had the power to command the woman's presence. But, when you're in love, the only thing that will satisfy you is love in return. We know that, don't we? The only thing that satisfies the deep yearning of love is to be loved by the beloved, freely and spontaneously in return.

The king understood his problem. He called all his wise advisers around him that they might strategize with him as to how he could win the love of this peasant woman so that it would really be her love. Well, they came up with all kinds of schemes, as you can imagine. That's what they were paid for; that's what they were kept in the king's care for, in order to help him out in difficult situations. And so, they devised one strategy after another. Arrive at her door in a golden coach, dazzle her with diamonds. They say that diamonds will do anything. But, the king was in love. His advisers were not. They were using their head, and he knew that what he really wanted was her heart, and he knew that not even a king can command love.

Being frustrated by their ill counsel, it finally dawned on him. One evening he slipped out the back door of the palace, evaded the Secret Service agents and made his way, dressed as a peasant, to the door of the cottage of the woman he loved. And he knocked on the door and offered his heart and asked if he might come and dwell with her.

Well, if you want to know how it came out, come next week. But, you can see the analogy to the divine dilemma that God dealt with at Christmas. Because if it doesn't help to be a king when you're in love, it helps even less to be God, because if God is the incurable lover that the biblical story tells us of, then God has a problem, for the one thing that God cannot command is the freely offered and spontaneous love of the other. And so, of course, at Christmas time, we speak of incarnation, we speak of how God came to dwell in one of our kind, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone in order that the eternal and infinite One might be localized in the person of Jesus; in order that the Eternal God, the Infinite One might have a face, a face with which we might fall in love. God becoming one with us, identifying with us, making God's love known to us in the deep passionate hope that we might love God in return, because it doesn't help to be God when you're in love because Love is a thing that is not even at God's disposal. When one is in love then, as the king knew, the only love that can satisfy the deep ache in the heart is the freely offered love of the one beloved.

Well, the king was foolish, of course, to fall in love. He might better have been, as that famous king of Persia, Ahasuerus, whose wife was Vashti. Ahasuerus, the king of the great Persian empire, called on all of his generals and all of his officials from across the empire and threw a great party. They knew how to do it better than we. They partied for seven days. And Vashti, the queen, was quite willing to go along with this. She even entertained the spouses of the officials. But, on the seventh day when the food had been plenty and the wine had flowed liberally and the king was feeling no pain, he wanted one last time to impress all of the company gathered around his table. He wanted his queen Vashti, known for her striking beauty, to come on and be on display. Well Vashti said, "It's a pretty good deal here, but enough is enough," and she said no. The king was enraged to be turned down by his queen. And so, he called his counselors and he said to them, "What should I do? What has she done?" They said, "What she has done is very serious, for she has not only disobeyed you and offended you. She has set a precedent in not obeying her husband and, if it should leak out of the palace, the whole of society should go down the tubes. There would be no more family values if women are not subservient to their husbands." (Oh, come on now. That's funny!)

Well, in the case of Ahasuerus and Vashti, they had a royal connection and a royal arrangement. Vashti had a role to play and, as long as she played her role, she got her baubles. And when she didn't play her role anymore, the king simply dumped her. No problem, because he didn't love her. He simply held a beauty contest, the first Miss America contest held in the ancient world, and of course, you know the story. Esther, the beautiful Esther, the Jewish young lady was chosen as the queen for her beauty. She comes into the court and eventually - I'll tell you the ending - she saved her people and is celebrated for that fact.

The point is this: between a king and a queen there cannot afford to be love because arrangements, relationships get fouled up when love is involved, because

love makes one vulnerable and love puts one out of control, and, therefore, a wise sovereign will put love on the back burner.

The story of Christmas is the story of God Who is a hopeless and incurable lover, who was willing to yield sovereignty in order so radically to identify with the other, the creature, that the creature might be put on a level playing ground with the Creator. Well, now, that's a radical statement, but I want you to think about it with me this morning. This was the divine dilemma. If it is true that God is a God of passionate love, Whose yearning for the other knows no limits, then God has a problem, because there is no way that a king, human or divine, can be certain of the freely offered love of the other unless there comes to be a kind of equality, an even playing ground, where the love of the lover is displayed with a human face to which the other may love in return or say no.

Matthew's Gospel, the birth story of Jesus, picks up that name *Emmanuel*. *Emmanuel* is reflective of the old tradition of Israel that knew God as a lover, as One yearning for God's people. Emmanuel - God with us, a sign back in ancient Israel, a child so named in order that the king might constantly be reminded in the presence of the child that God is with us, God is with us, God is with us, even when the king was not interested in having God with them. He would rather have had Egypt with them. Emmanuel - God with us - the Gospel writers said, was the reality of Christmas, that now the eternal One dwelt in the human form and we beheld grace and glory in a human face, because the whole biblical story is the story of a divine dilemma, of a God Who loves and will be satisfied with nothing less than the love of the other.

The Gospels say it. And then I think of the first letter of John, the 4th chapter. John is the one who writes, "God is love," and he says no one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us. God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them. This is the John of "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us so," that we might translate it, "Love became flesh and dwelt among us," so that those who look into the face of Jesus and fall in love, are falling in love with God, but on an equal playing ground, because only love freely offered, only love spontaneously given will really satisfy the heart of one who is in love.

This was God's problem. Of course, that created a second facet of the divine dilemma, because then God had to create another over against God's self to whom God could give love and from whom God could receive love. But, to create one like that was to create an awesome creature. That's why that biblical phrase that the human person was created in the image of God says something very profound. It says that the human creature is the mirror image of God. God created one over against God's self to be in relationship with, and the only other that would be worthy of the love of God would be an other who had the dignity to say, "Yes," freely and spontaneously, but to be able to say "Yes" freely and spontaneously, genuinely to love God would also be to have the possibility of

saying "No" to God. It is part of the human dignity of the human person that we can say no to God. This, of course, was the risk of the whole creative venture of God, the whole impulse to create, the calling into being that which was not, the out flowing of the love of God, God's breath, God's spirit lacing the other with life, sustaining the other in life - that whole episode was fraught with the possibility of disaster, because if you create another that is another worthy enough to love, a worthy lover, then you have created the possibility of one who can say no. In fact, you have created the possibility of one who just might play God.

I think that's what the Apostle Paul understood. Paul, I think, from what I read and sense in the New Testament, was one that would not have minded a day or two running the universe. Paul always wanted to fix everything. First of all, he wanted to make the whole world Jewish. And then he wanted to make the whole world Christian. He was an accident going about to happen; he was feverishly fanatical, not always right, but always certain. And I suppose it came from the fact that he had had such an experience of the wonder and glory of God. When he's in trouble in the Corinthian congregation and he must defend his apostleship and his ministry, he tells them something he says that happened fourteen years before. "I've never spoken of it," he says, "I don't even know if I was in the body or out of the body. It was totally ecstatic. It was a vision. It was a kind of experience about which one simply cannot speak. But," he said, "I had that." And then he says with, I think, some real insight, knowing his own tendency to like to run the universe, to play God, "In order to keep my feet on the ground, I was given a thorn in the flesh." We don't know what it was, but it must have been something with which the Apostle Paul agonized, creating great pain, creating embarrassment, great humiliation, who knows? And he said, "It was so bad that I urgently prayed to God to remove that thorn, until I came to understand. I heard the voice of Jesus say, 'My grace is sufficient for you; my strength is made perfect in weakness.'" Or, I like the New English translation: "My grace is enough." You can take that with you for 1997 - "My grace is enough."

Paul says, "You know, I came to understand that it was in my very brokenness that I experienced the love and grace of God that enabled me to be whole, to be strong, to love, to be gracious."

The human paradox is that, having been created, this awesome creature that can stand over against God and say "Yes" to God or to say "No" to God, this human creature who can seek to usurp the place of God, try his hand at playing God, this human creature is resistant to the very thing that God would give, in that haughty posture, in that God-like frame of mind. And so, Paul says, "The very thing I dreaded, the very thing I sought to have removed was the thing that was the minister to me of a grace that enabled me to see God's love for me such as I had never known it before."

That's the human paradox. The very thing that we are inclined to do to secure ourselves, to build walls against the world, to make certain that we are in control

and that we can manage and on a good day, try our hand at running the universe, that very posture is what keeps us from the deep experience of God's love and grace.

It's really quite fascinating that the divine dilemma issued not only in God's identification with us in the flesh of Jesus, but that identification was so complete that when the human rebellion rose up to reject that offer in the face of Jesus, the lover God withheld His hand and allowed the word made flesh to be rejected, even to the point of crucifixion, so that we can speak of the crucified God. Such a lover that God would suffer rather than crush and strike out and cut off the possibility that ultimately the lovers will find each other. I suppose that simply is another instance of the fact that love always involves suffering, because it will not control, coerce, overpower or abandon.

Ah, if only we could play God for a day. If only we could realize the impetus of our hearts to secure ourselves, to guarantee ourselves against suffering and hurt. If only we could keep our hearts, not lose our heads, and manage our lives. But, you see, the story of Christmas is the story of a crucified God, identifying with us, dying in order to show us that there is only one thing that will satisfy the divine yearning. It is when at the cottage door of our hearts there comes the knock of a God veiled in flesh who says, "I would come in and dwell with you." And we say, "Come in. Dwell with us." That is Christmas.