

Paul: A Larger God and a Grander Vision

From the series: Varieties of Religious Experience

Text: Ephesians 2:14-16; 4:4-6

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In the sermon this morning, I am going to return to Paul and try to redeem him somewhat. The last time that we thought about Paul, a few weeks ago, I said that he was simply wrong about history, and he was. I won't take anything back from that. Paul had a religious experience in which he not only experienced the presence and the glory of God, but also was drawn into a kind of apocalyptic understanding of history whereby he expected the end to occur very soon. And he was wrong about that. But, what he experienced in that encounter with God, what he came to understand, gave him a sense of a larger God and a grander vision, and that is still a tremendously important understanding for us to gain from St. Paul.

We have recognized that Paul is probably one of the great formative, shaping persons of mind and spirit in the whole of the Western tradition. Paul impacted St. Augustine, who probably would rank right there with Paul, and, on the basis of that experience, Martin Luther's 16th century experience of the grace of God has put another filter through which we see Paul. And even in our own century, Karl Barth gives us a certain perspective of Paul that creates a lens by which we read him. But I came across a rather interesting source that gives me some fresh eyes with which to read Paul.

A young Jewish scholar, Alan Segal, in a book, *Paul, The Convert*, returns to the first century and reads our New Testament as a source of information about first century Judaism, which, of course, was not only Paul's context, but also Jesus' context, and Alan Segal sees him, not through that Protestant experience of justification by grace through faith which Luther made to stick and to which Augustine had pointed; but, rather, Alan Segal as a Jewish interpreter of Paul, sees Paul's struggle to create one new community or one new humanity out of the Jewish community and the Gentile community who Paul saw united in Jesus Christ. Segal would make the point, along with some others, that justification by grace through faith, which is so very Lutheran and very Protestant, was not really the center of Paul's passion at all. He was saying that salvation is to be received by faith or by trusting God because God is gracious, and that means that the

respective religious communities, trusting that grace and receiving it, not through any ceremony or any particular religious ritual, but rather, that grace received by faith could be that common entrée to God for this diverse community of people in the first century.

I think that there is some fresh insight that Segal brings us in a perspective on Paul. It's understandable that the Jewish community for centuries has not fussed with Jesus and has not fussed with Paul because Jesus and Paul have been a source of the Church's anti-Semitism and triumphalism and, therefore, there was a block. But, Alan Segal says if you read Paul in the New Testament, it's the best source we have of information about first century Judaism which is so critical to understand if we want to understand both the message of Jesus and the ministry of Paul. So he begins by pointing to Paul's authentic religious experience, and I want to begin there, too, this morning.

There is such a thing as an authentic religious experience, and this spring I've been using William James' classic text, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in order to say to all of us just that: that there is a variety of religious experience. Alan Segal says Paul had an authentic religious experience. He can say that 2000 years later as a Jewish commentator. There was reality, there was honesty, there was integrity, there was authenticity in Paul's religious experience.

We had here two or three weeks ago Marcus Borg and if you were here that Sunday morning and you stayed for the Perspectives hour afterwards, you heard Marcus Borg share on request a recent spiritual experience that he had which was a kind of mystical sense of the sacred, of the holy at the presence of God, and I could see that some of you were saying, "Oh, I feel like such a deadhead," that I reminded you that I'm a deadhead, too, when I told you, as I say many times, my little pinky's never even tingled. Well, Marcus Borg wrote a note commending all of you as a community and speaking of the good time he had here, and he added this:

P.S. And I like your theology. You say that you've never had so much as a tingle in your pinky finger, but you know about the sacred. We both know that religions are imaginative human constructions. [You've been hearing me say that, and one time he wrote me a note about where did that come from, and I said Gordon Kaufman was the author of that idea that religions are human imaginative constructions.] We both know that religions are imaginative human constructions, to sound like Kaufman/Rhem, and I sense that you know there is the sacred behind all those constructions. Not all, perhaps not very many "liberal" theologians know that, but I sense that you do, and I'm happy to be called a liberal theologian myself.

Now, the nice thing about Marcus is that he not only shared his own experience in a very gentle way, in a way that really didn't make anyone who didn't have that

particular experience feel that they were sort of outside the tent. He has a very fine way of communicating that authentic religious experience that he has had. The nice thing about this little note is that he acknowledged that I can be in the tent with him, even though my pinky doesn't tingle.

The point is this, and I think it's so important that you hear this, that there is a variety of religious experience, because what we've done, particularly in Protestantism, is we have taken this unusual experience of Paul and we've made it normative so that anybody who didn't get it like Paul got it might suspect whether or not they really have it, and that's just not the point. Authentic religious experience comes in lots of different forms through a lot of different experience, and I think that none of us ought to lust after the experience of another, but perhaps just breathe deeply and relax and trust that we are embraced by the grace of God. Sometimes there is a Paul who has a vision and it is so compelling and wedded to such a passionate personality, that that vision grows legs and begins to walk across the earth, and of course, this is what happened with Paul. He had an authentic religious experience; he had a vision of the holy and of the sacred; he saw the glory of God and the glory of God took the shape of Jesus, and in that experience, he felt himself called, particularly to the nations or the Gentiles or anyone who was a non-Jew.

Now, the interesting thing is that Paul was a Pharisee, and we've gotten such bad press on the Pharisees from the New Testament which comes out of a conflict situation, but the Pharisees were the most sincere, the most serious, the most engaged of Jewish observers. They were careful, observant Jews who were deadly serious about observance of the ritual, of the ceremony, of the law, and Paul was one of those. In the wake of Paul's encounter with this glory of God in the face of Jesus, he went off for a while simply to assimilate all of this and to put it all together, and then, sensing himself to be called particularly to the non-Jew, to the Gentiles, he began to hang out with them, and, as he hung out with them, he found that here were non-Jewish people who heard the story of Jesus Christ and the grace of God in Christ who came to the same kind of insight, understanding, and experience that he, Paul, the former Pharisee, had. I don't even want to say "former Pharisee." I want to say Paul, the Jew, who continued to have high regard for Torah.

In fact, Paul, in his letters, which Alan Segal tells us from a Jewish perspective are very Jewish in his argumentation and his reasoning – not systematic like John Calvin made him, but very Jewish in the concrete situation to which he was addressing Jewish Rabbinic kind of reasoning and so forth – begins to indicate that God's intention is for one new humanity, that in Jesus Christ that middle wall of partition was torn down, that wall of hostility, and I think there is some basis at least in the Letter to the Ephesians that was read a while ago. But, even in the other writings of Paul, his biggest concern was to find out how to get people like him, with all that Jewish background, into community with people from all of the respective paganisms of the nations, all the non-Jewish religious observances,

how to get those people together, because the Jewish system had certain ways of preparing food and of eating at table and, of course, there was that sign of the covenant community, circumcision. How could you get those two groups into a unity?

In the Letter to the Ephesians, he says this is the purpose of God hidden through the ages, this mystery of God hidden through all the ages, now coming to expression through me, through the gospel, through the church. There was an incipient universalism in the institution of the covenant of grace with Abraham. In Abraham the word was, the understanding of that calling of Israel, was that in Abraham, all peoples of the earth would be blessed. The particularity of the call of the Jew was on behalf of the universality of God's claim on all. And Paul, now, begins to hang out with these Gentile Christians, and he sees they have the same kind of authentic experience that he has. It seems to be the same God, the same grace, it seems to be the same kind of response in life, and this is what Paul saw: God is bigger than ever I thought, and all of the religious observances, structures, forms, all of that is relative and relatively unimportant.

Let's just take the case of circumcision. A few weeks ago we looked at Acts 15, which is the Jerusalem Council where this dilemma of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians was to be resolved, how they could live together. One of the people at the Jerusalem Council whom Paul and Barnabas brought along was Titus, and Titus was a Gentile, and Paul makes a point of the fact that they didn't require that Titus be circumcised in order to sit at the table of the Council of Jerusalem in deciding these matters. But, if you would go to the 16th chapter of Acts, you would find Paul meeting Timothy and wanting Timothy to go with him and finding out that Timothy's mother was a Jew and Timothy had never been circumcised and so, Paul has Timothy circumcised in order to make him properly marked as a Jew who now is a believer in Jesus. Now, if you're thoroughly confused on all that, let me say what it means. It means that Titus was never circumcised and it didn't matter. It didn't take away anything. And Timothy was circumcised later on as an adult, and it didn't add anything. It was purely a pragmatic matter of sensitivity to the social, religious context in which Titus and Timothy, respectively, were to minister. And this is what Paul saw. This stuff doesn't matter. It doesn't matter.

We have a baptismal shell there; we put water in it and we baptize infants; we cross their forehead with the water. We could really drip their big toe in paint thinner and, pointing to the same reality, it would be as effective.

We have in the 8:30 service the Eucharist, the bread and the cup. We use grape juice. I'd rather use Gallo. But, it doesn't matter. All religious observances and structures, according to Paul's insight, do not matter. What matters is that the forms and the words and the structures are freighted with meaning, and are engaged in with authenticity, and then a community can be shaped in a wide variety of ways. Jews with Pharisaic background can come to the table of the

Lord, joining with Gentiles with no religious background or some Greek mystery religious background, coming to the table of the Lord and they can break the bread and pour the cup and know that they are one humanity because throughout all ages, God had no other intention, according to the insight of Paul, than to create one new humanity. And I think to Paul it was a larger God and a grander vision.

Isn't it strange how our respective religions crimp God and try to package God? It's like having a pail at the seashore. We take our pails to the water and dip our pails in and the pail is a container for the water, but the pail, the container, cannot contain the ocean. God is so much more than our respective visions, our respective manners of worship, our mode of organization, our doctrinal systems. Paul saw that and, in seeing that, he became this passionate person. Now, if you read his Letter to the Galatians, an early letter, he got rather testy; he got rather nasty, because the thing he saw was that all of the things we do that are all relative are not the things that bring us into the experience of God. His own experience was that God is given to us by grace, and we simply trust that; we simply accept that, or we have faith that that is the case. We don't *do* anything to earn or gain or secure that experience. We simply open our lives to whatever spirit, whatever rift in the sky, whatever manner in which God might come to us.

There is a variety of religious experience, and we ought not to pigeon-hole anybody or have the sure set of dies by which a Christian can be cast, but the important thing is that, whatever that immediate experience, we see it as that which brings us into the community under the one God Who would create one new humanity, one human community. Paul prays for them powerfully in this Letter. And then in this third chapter, particularly, he prays in the name of the God for whom every family on earth is named. You get it? The God for whom every family on earth is named - this God will give to you an experience of God's love that you've come to know its breadth and its length and its height and its depth. To know the love of God which is beyond knowing, you see? That what God wants is for people to have the experience of an ultimate, absolute love that is the Mystery of all things.

Paul says, "Now, to God who is able to do exceedingly, abundantly above anything I can ask or think, to God be glory in the church ..." and then he goes on to a practical application of it all in that fourth chapter, "with all humility and gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace" for, he says, "there is one body and one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all, through all, in you all"

Almost sounds like Stoicism, almost sounds like Pantheism, or maybe better the Panentheism of a more contemporary expression, God who is not "out there" stirring the world with a stick now and then, but a God who is permeating the whole of reality, that dwells within us and binds us together and makes us one,

because there is no division in the whole of reality, be it cosmic, physical or human. That's what Paul saw. That authentic religious experience saw him, enabled him to transcend the respective religions. The secret, folks, is to be serious about the religion you pursue without absolutizing it and without fear, somehow or other, of being threatened that if you don't dot the i or cross the t, you're out of luck, to be able to see the variety of religious experience and the diversity of religious expression. One must be passionate, following one's own experience, knowing the love of God in all of its dimensions, with humility, gentleness, patience.

We see the critical nature of things in the Balkans right now, as was alluded to in the prayers. It's the old human story - the wounded Russian pride that will make its statement. So, shall we in NATO stand up to it and make it back down? Shall we put the barrel of the gun to the temple of that wounded giant? If we would do that, we would only be acting out what has been acted out in the respective religions, Orthodoxy, Roman Catholic, and Muslim, which fuels that ethnic division that nurses hurts and grudges and wounds over centuries.

You see, Paul's vision was not about religion. Paul saw religion, finally by the grace of God, as simply a means, relatively important, legitimate in diversity, but just a means to come to the experience of God Who is every dimension of love, Who calls us to peace. It's a larger God; it's a grander vision.

References:

Alan Segal. *Paul, the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. Yale University Press, 1992.