

The Root of Good Religion

Text: Psalm 116:17

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I suppose you can tell by the title of this message, “The Root of Good Religion,” that there must also be bad religion in the world, and when I determined to speak on the root of good religion and selected this wonderful Psalm 116, I wasn’t really thinking about the bad religion, but in my more specific preparations, *The Grand Rapids Press* came with the Religion Section in the Saturday Press, and the lead story was about a free thinkers group, a big colored picture accompanying it. This group, the Free Thinkers Association, has been meeting in Grand Rapids for about three years, and I found it a very interesting story. The Free Thought Association is affiliated with a group out of Madison, Wisconsin, from which all kinds of liberal diatribe arises. They say they are a community of agnostics, atheists, humanists, rationalists, and they discuss topics which interest them, intellectual questions, burning social issues, and so on. They meet a couple of times a month.

That which binds them together in community, ironically, is their mutual flight from religion, and the thing that has marked them, has made them have something so important in common that they would become a community is the fact that they’ve all been wounded by religion in its institutional form, in its establishment forms. There are a number of people cited in this article, devout Catholic people in their background, a former Fundamentalist Baptist, a very devout Christian Reformed young man, a lapsed Episcopalian, and a Methodist, and so on. It’s a conglomeration and it pretty much covers the spectrum of established religion and they have come together because, in one way or another, all of them at some point in their life began to have questions for which their particular tradition had no answers. They began to receive some of the teaching of their respective traditions and it didn’t make sense to them and they determined that they didn’t believe it. Then, contrary to most of us, they had the audacity to verbalize their doubts and their questions and doing so, they found themselves really shunned, excluded, cut out, isolated because they had become a thorn in the flesh of their respective communities. They had become a threat, and they were not appreciated at all, and so there was alienation between them and their families and their faith communities.

Well, that's not so hard to figure out, and if you think about it for a moment, you can understand it because religion which is as universal as humankind arose very, very early in the dawning of human consciousness; for what is religion, after all, but that intuitive sense that there is something more, something that grounds our lives, that there is a source and a ground and a guide and goal of all that is.

We live in the face of mystery and that mystery must have appeared very, very early in the human story. One becomes aware of one's self, thereby one becomes human. One becomes aware of the other, of the human relationship. One experiences the miracle of birth and the mystery of death, and one simply, naturally begins to ask those ultimate questions - why is there something rather than nothing? From whence has it all come? Whither is it all tending? And what is the meaning and the purpose of it all? Those questions are as fundamental as human existence itself.

And then someone has an epiphany experience. Someone sees something. Someone tells a story, a story of a revelation and around it grows the ritual and the cult and the sacred stories and the tradition. Very early in primitive stages there were tribal religions, that which was the tribe's solution to the mystery, that which gave a sense of coherency to life, a statement of its purpose and its meaning, that to which one could cling for enlightenment, for security. And then, someone had another idea or someone's experience didn't connect with that explanation. That one becomes a threat to the tribal unity and sense of meaning, because that religious story and practice was rooted frequently, most often, in fear, not illegitimate fear, genuine fear, because life is perilous.

We are vulnerable. We do live in the face of mystery and most of the major issues that impinge upon us are beyond our control and so one of the functions of religion has been to create that sense of security and community, giving meaning and purpose and cohesion to placate whatever gods may be, to put one in the right, to curry the favor of the mystery, whatever the mystery may be. And then, when one questions that solution, one becomes very threatening and the tribe or the tight knit community will bind together and will exclude, will condemn, will reject that one who has become a source of irritation, opening up those things that had long been settled.

As I read the stories of some of these people, I could identify with that. But, when I read their definitions of reality - "only that which can be perceived with the natural senses or indirectly through the proper use of reason" - denying the possibility of revelation or faith, I knew that was too narrow - simple reductionism. I went to the computer and to their Website and read a recent lecture on quantum physics which was fascinating, but didn't have a lot to say about the wonder of birth, of the mystery of death, or the existential reality of getting through every day. I didn't look up an earlier lecture on the voucher question, but what I sensed about these people is they are serious and they have inquiring minds and they want to know and understand, but they have been

wounded deeply by the whole enterprise of religion and so they have fled religion, becoming skeptics, rationalists.

Of course, reading that in the wake of a Huston Smith visit where he was so eloquent about the necessity of getting beyond that adversarial relationship of those two great enterprises, science and religion, I thought to myself, "How sad that these people, having been so wounded, have now such a thinned gruel, a 2% milk kind of thing, almost water, a diet that cannot really satisfy the deepest instincts, nor do justice to those most profound intuitions of the human spirit." I should invite them here, I think, because they could pursue their questions with no quarter asked, but we could share with them something more, for there is good religion.

Good religion is rooted in the experience of grace and it issues in gratitude. I don't know just what the Psalmist's experience was, but he was in some kind of crisis and he says to the Lord, "You saved my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from falling. I will take the cup of salvations." In the Hebrew, the word is plural - the cup of salvations. I will take hold of the whole of life, as it were, the whole of life in which I have experienced the salving, the mending of my life in the midst of it all. I will take the cup of salvation and name the name of the Lord. I will embrace life, which certainly is not just one bowl of cherries, not one rainbow after another, life in all of its complexity.

The Psalmist spoke of a deep crisis in his life and certainly, if we are honest with it, it is like the Apostle Paul in the eighth chapter of Romans who speaks of famine and nakedness and peril and sword, an ancient listing, but we could list our own, the vulnerabilities, the perils that jeopardize our existence every moment - all of that to which we are vulnerable. The diseases that stalk our steps and the sudden crisis that can wipe us out - all of that is part of life. If we were to deny any of that, then we would simply have our heads stuck in the sand. That's an unrealistic kind of idea that will only be shattered on the rocks of human experience eventually because, finally, we all live fully life with all of its light and all of its shadow. But, somehow or other, the Psalmist had come in a concrete experience to feel that just intuitively now, I suppose, that that mystery that surrounds life is the mystery of grace, that it is a healing mystery.

I love the illustration of Huston Smith of light and darkness. If you had two cubes divided by a wall, in one there was light, the other pitch dark, if you took the wall down, the light would invade the darkness. The darkness would not overcome the light. It is only an image, it is a symbol, it is a story, but it makes a beautiful point. The Psalmist somehow or other believed it; Paul believed it, and Paul said, "Since God is for us, who can be against us? Nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." The Psalmist said, "I will take the cup of salvation and praise the name of the Lord. I will offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving in the presence of all God's people."

Good religion comes out of an experience of grace and it issues in gratitude. It goes way beyond that initial fear that might hold us prisoner for a while, it comes to a point of sensing, as Scott Peck said in *The Road Less Traveled*, that there is a grace beyond us that continues to come to us, and out of the experience of grace there is that within us deep down that will out, that will come to expression, that simply must be spoken or sung or the heart will burst.

The Psalm begins so marvelously, “I love the Lord because ...” Let me suggest at the head of Thanksgiving week that you go home and in some moments of quiet, write those words, “I love the Lord because ...,” and then simply reflect on your life. The old hymn says “Count your many blessings, name them one by one and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.” If you would take a moment to do that, I think you would also begin to say, “This, yes, this is what is really central to my life. This is what is important to me. I love the Lord because ...” And out of that experience of grace, the issue is thanksgiving that simply must come to expression, because love needs a song, love needs an anthem, love needs to dance, or the soul would explode.

The root of good religion is the taste of grace issuing in praise irrepressible.