

March 20, 2016
Palm Sunday
The Rev. Tom E. King

In the epistle reading for today we take a peek at the apostle Paul's letter to the congregation at Philippi, a city in eastern Macedonia. New Testament scholars believe Paul visited the city and helped establish the congregation there somewhere around 50 CE.

In the portion of the letter we heard this morning Paul recounts his spiritual journey thus far. He says that he began as a rule-keeper; he was proud of his Jewish heritage and his compulsive adherence to all the customs and practices of the faith.

But then something happened: he discovered God's grace as it is revealed in Jesus. He realized that faith and the spiritual life are about more than rules and ritual practices. He realized that faith is more about trusting his own spiritual experience, even when it did not line up well with what he had been taught.

We have in this brief section from Paul's letter to the Philippians an overview of the life of faith as he understood it: he had come to see faith as a journey, not a destination. He had come to see the spiritual life as a wisdom resource that grows and matures along the way.

1000 years after St. Paul wrote about the evolutionary nature of faith, we find another description of the spiritual journey. Bernard of Clairvaux was a French Cistercian monk who encouraged his monastic colleagues to deepen their spiritual life just as he was seeking to do.

Bernard wrote a remarkable treatise entitled "Stages of Love," which described the spiritual journey as he had come to know it. Although the 4 stages of love are not discreet or exclusive of each other, the characteristics of each stage have a distinct core or nucleus.

Long before modern psychology, Bernard noticed this journey:

The first stage is the love of self for self's sake: survival mode; primary narcissism. I am the center of the universe and all that matters is what I need and want. This is not a ruthless narcissism, just a total preoccupation with oneself. This initial stage is where we all begin: when a baby is hungry, the message is pretty clear.

The next stage Bernard calls the love of God for self's sake. You spot it pretty easily: God is a cosmic bellhop, a genie in a bottle. We love God because of what is in it for us. We scratch God's back and God scratches ours. Our own view of God is the only true one, and all other views are wrong.

I call this stage the God of the parking lot: it is raining, we are late, and we pray for a parking space at the front door of the store. With 30,000 people dying each day from

lack of food or clean water I have trouble bothering God for a parking space. But, I could be wrong.

This second stage is where the great majority of people in our culture are. Television preachers could not be successful promising people the moon if this were not the case. People can't get enough of this self-absorbed view of God as Santa Claus who rewards my kind of people and leaves everyone else out in the cold.

Like the apostle Paul we hope to move on, we hope to grow in our faith to something bigger than what's in it for me. The next stage, according to Bernard, is the love of God for God's sake: we are awed by God, we are touched by God's grace in ways that evoke our worship. We watch the sunset, we hear the ocean waves, we embrace those we love, we stand in awe of the stars and planets: this profound gifts of life cause us to worship God because God is worthy of our worship; no other response will do.

Bernard's final stage of love often catches people by surprise: he has gone from love of self for self's sake, to love of God for self's sake, to love of God for God's sake: what is next. The highest expression of love is the love of self for God's sake. The love of self for God's sake: the recognition that we are created in the image of God, that we are called by God to serve and share; the awareness that we are no more important than anyone else, but als the awareness that we are no less important than anyone else.

This type of love for God's sake takes us outside ourselves, it helps us see the world as others experience it; this higher level of love helps us see what the great American psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan once said: we are all more alike than otherwise.

One final word about this journey of love, this journey of seeking the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord: We never fully outgrow the earlier stages – hopefully they are overshadowed by the higher expressions of love; but when things get rough we all look for the genie in the bottle.

So, let's be patient with ourselves and with others: we are all on a journey. Some days we are wiser than others. Some days we are braver than others. Some days we are more comfortable with mystery than others.

On this journey, may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in the love and knowledge of God, and may the blessing of God: father, son, and holy spirit give us the courage to keep going.

Rev. Tom E. King, Lent 5, 2016