

LETTING GOD OUT

--I'm probably taking a huge risk this morning, proposing to address a subject that, under even the best of circumstances, may be a difficult notion to get our heads around. I must be a little mad attempting it on a hazy, lazy day at the end of July, when our brains, weeks ago, shifted into vacation-mode.

Nevertheless, the weeks are flying by! If not now, when? So, here goes, beginning with a notion deriving from the earliest strata of our Scriptures. It is the most fabulous assertion that we are created as a personal reflection of our Creator.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’ . . . . So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them . . . .” (Gen 1.27).

Perhaps, over our lifespan, we have heard these lines frequently enough that we have fallen asleep to their radical bite. There is an electrifying core idea here, though, one that should startle us awake and exhilarate us: Humankind is created in the image of God; you and I are fashioned with the very leaven of God pressed into our basic nature. There simply is no such thing as a human being who lacks this Divine ingredient.

It is a stirring thought which, a few hundred years after that Genesis passage is penned, motivates the Psalmist to ask an all-important question of God: “. . . What are human beings that You are mindful of them, (what are mortals that You care for them?)” The writer answers his own question, saying, “. . . You have made them a little lower than divine beings [themselves], and crowned them with glory and honor . . . .” (8.4-5).

These are the same weighty matters to which, some three centuries after the composition of that Psalm, the apostle Paul returns. There, in his rather wordy letter to the Romans, he does his best to impress that thought upon his hearers and readers. His argument starts with essentially his restating of the point with which we began this morning: “The Spirit of God,” he writes, “dwells in you” (8.9).

In case you've drifted off already, listen up! Our base human nature is co-mingled with some bit of God's elevated nature. What Paul is calling “the Spirit” is roughly equivalent to that “likeness” in which the Genesis account declares we are crafted; to that reality which qualifies humans for the “glory and honor” of which the Psalmist speaks; and to that spark of the Divine understood as being buried within the human personality, to which the mystics down through the centuries attest in unison. (Don't make me get out my Meister Eckhart!)

--There is something within human nature which is akin to God. Wow! Why, this is enough to give a person a swelled head!

But not so fast. You see, such remarkable references as these direct a finger at the Divine potential that is resident within human beings. “Potential” is the operative word. The funny thing about potential is that, if it is to amount to anything, it requires being expressed. As Paul declares, “. . . Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit” (8.5). But of course they do--and it is that which changes everything.

You see, while this godlike something (call it what you will) is a constituent element within our inner nature, it is not intended that it should forever be locked away in there. It's not just for personal, private savoring; it's not designed simply to be a sweet and illuminating end in itself--as tempting as that is. That would be the very definition of self-indulgence, which would represent an extraordinary waste of potential. That wasting of potential, of course, happens all the time, which explains in large part why our world is frequently experienced

to be such a harsh, mean, and unforgiving mess. To invest human beings with the seeds for all manner of higher possibilities, and to have them deliberately settle for something less--that must sadden God to no end.

Without conscious expression--and the developing strength that results from it--this favorable speck of God remains forever just potential, utterly unable to accomplish any of that which it is originally designed to accomplish. Though it is primed and ready to burst upon the human scene with astonishing results, without purposefully actualizing it, it will, unfortunately, just lay there, inert--which represents a defeating of God's motive from the beginning for implanting that godly facet in us.

The whole purpose of the spiritual path, in other words, is to discover, to arouse, and to encourage this spark of God into flame. That represents the emerging maturity of humankind--having persons grow beyond being just fleshly-identified creatures driven by selfish desire, and by having them, as it were, "let God out."

We are crafted in the image of God, imbued with the Spirit of God, in the interest of our releasing God into the world, made possible through that God-related agent in the soul. Through aware and responsive human beings, an intangible God gains direct and immediate access to the world in a broad range of tangible manners. That is our purpose as individual believers, that is our purpose as a congregation, that is our purpose as human beings--to be an open, willing, intentional conduit for God, for this "letting out" of God--expressing God with our words and with our ways.

In short, the Divine spark within aims to result in a Divine blaze without--nothing less than the transformation of the world into a place of compassion and justice, generosity and peace. The entire aim of having been created in God's image is related to the achievable possibility that God's dream for the world gets incarnated and acted out by us.

In case you've drifted off again, listen up! The "kingdom of God," the "kingdom of heaven," it seems, is not something intended to occur to humanity, but something intended to occur through humanity.

--Beginning in the Book of Genesis, therefore, and continuing down through the Psalms, the writings of Paul, and the greatest mystical personalities of the centuries, the spiritual tradition is pretty insistent: We are a speck, a splinter, a fleck of God with flesh wrapped around it. The raw material of the human being is filled with exciting God-given, God-driven possibilities, the full realization of its promise dependent upon whether or not we shall actually do something with it.

Says Paul: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (8.14).

But of course they are!

Is that us? Is that you?

Well, just how much of God are we letting out?