

Rejoicing in the Gifts: A Sermon at the Intersection of Shavuot, Pentecost, and Baccalaureate

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The Jewish festival of *Shavuot*, or Weeks, and the Christian festival of Pentecost both fall at the same time of the year. *Shavuot* celebrates the giving of the law, or Torah, on Mt. Sinai; and Pentecost celebrates the giving of the Holy Spirit at the birth of the church. In addition, *Shavuot* and Pentecost come during the season of school commencements and baccalaureates, and all three—*Shavuot*, Pentecost, and baccalaureate—are indeed festivals for rejoicing in the gifts in and by which we live. They are moments for ecstasy, for standing outside our individual lives and private problems, for rising above the stress, the pain and the gratification of *id* and *ego*, and for gaining a perspective on what it's all about.

In the passages read from Deuteronomy concerning this joyous occasion we are enjoined to rejoice before the Lord our God; you, the text says, your son, your daughter, your servants, the Levite in your gates, the stranger, the orphan and the widow who live in your midst. The whole community, no matter the status of any individual in it, is enjoined to rejoice. No matter how low one might be, or how high one might be on some *ego* trip, this is the occasion of the year to stop and get a perspective on the Integrity of Reality, the Oneness of God, to let it all hang out for God, to drop all the burdens and limited perspectives of *id* and *ego* and get off on God.

Each of us has been given one life and one death, and they both belong to God, that is, are a part of the Integrity of Reality. As Reinhold Niebuhr often noted, we humans live in the ambiguity of reality. But even within all the multivalencies of life we are given the greatest gift of all, the faith vision, or perspective, that God is One, that Reality itself has an integrity which is beyond human comprehension, but, thank God, not beyond faith's apprehension. Torah acclaims that God is the God of death as well as of life. It all belongs to God, that is, is a part of that integrity. I know some Presbyterians who think they own something in this brief journey from cradle to grave. Everything we are and have, on this pilgrimage from womb to tomb, belongs to God; we are but stewards of whatever we have been given charge of—life, death, body, mind, spirit, family, friends, community, and whatever of the wealth of planet earth's crust entrusted to us. Idolatry is not something only the ancient Canaanites practiced; we engage in it whenever we forget that everything we are and have is a gift. Stewardship is a heavy burden until we realize that God has also given us law and spirit with which to execute the responsibility.

The Oneness of God is both ontological and ethical. Reality has integrity

both in mercy and in justice. Each of us by being born is charged with responsibility for that which is entrusted to us. I firmly believe that there is moral fibre, or Wisdom, to the universe, despite our inabilities to measure it, mine it, or contain it. Self-realization can be a worthy goal only if it is part of the larger perspective of humility and responsibility to the Integrity of Reality. To focus on realizing the potentials of the self can be sheer falsehood unless it is seen as an act of responsibility to the Integrity of Reality.

What does it mean that God is the God of death as well as of life? To begin with it means that there is no distinct reality or god of death, such as the old Canaanite god, Mot. Since the so-called Enlightenment Mot has enjoyed a revival of adherents. Many Jews and Christians are more afraid of death than of God. One of the felicitous results of the feminist movement is exposure of the tendency to make God into an avuncular sugar-daddy because of dislike of the biblical emphasis on fearing God. We permit ourselves to fear most anything that comes along: the bomb, AIDS, earthquakes, wars, air crashes; but we do not want to fear God. Fear of God is the beginning of Wisdom, say these texts. They also say that if we have proper fear of God we won't need to fear anything else, even and especially death. You may recall that the character in *Moonstruck* played by Olympia Dukakis, pondering the fact that her aging husband had a mistress, asks why men chase women. The answer she arrives at is that men fear death. And yet, the Bible, in all its realism is quite clear that the only reason men and women need fear death, or any other idol we might think up to worship, is in our doubt that God is God *and* that God is One.

Our second text begins with the observation that "fear came upon every soul" at Pentecost and that many signs and wonders were done by God through the apostles. They even agreed to lay down their burden of stewardship by selling all their possessions and goods and sharing according as each had need. The greatest challenge to the vulgar self-enrichment and other excesses of capitalism we have been witnessing in the past decades is not Marxism, and certainly not communism, but the Bible. The Bible can be the challenging prophetic voice which the church, synagogue, and world need to hear if we can learn to read it on its own terms, that is, theocentric monotheism.

A theocentric reading of the Enlightenment would begin by recognition that the Enlightenment was a gift of God in due season, in the fullness of time. The Protestant Reformation, Reform Judaism, Conservative Judaism, Vatican II, and, if David Hartman is right, the State of Israel, may be seen as responses by Judaism and Christianity to the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment may indeed be seen as a continuing gift of God's Holy Spirit which continues to evolve and needs to be constantly worked out. In the spirit of typical biblical narrative we might go on to suggest that in the Enlightenment God had decided, along about the fifteenth century, that God would be pleased if her special creation, humans, loved her a little more.

So God gifted some earthlings, largely Europeans, with the conceptuality and means of investigating and examining minutiae, details, nooks and crannies, as well as the astronomy of God's creation so that they might perhaps appreciate a bit more the care with which God had made it all in the first place. Those earthlings, being human however, soon thereafter started to call

this new gift of God inductive reasoning, positivism, humanism, even “hard science”—a new type of human hybris. All God had wanted was just a bit more intimacy, a smidgen more appreciation of God’s wonders of creation, a bit more love. What God got on the part of some earthlings was the opposite: less love and more human self-aggrandizement, and hence the revival of the Canaanite fear of death or Mot. We found our ways of making more idols of our achievements and of our abilities and lost humility and hence the faith perspective.

In 1989, we are in the forty-fourth Year of the Bomb. While it is certainly not proof, it is nonetheless Exhibit A of the grace of God that this little planet earth is still here and that we continue our common lives on it. Is it too much to ask Why? Are we reduced to bowing at the altars of either luck or Determinism? Is it too much to ask why God seems to continue to love us, why God has not walked off and abandoned us as a bad experiment? Instead of fear, awe, and wonder coming upon every soul, we are impressed with ourselves.

Indeed, is it too much to ask, in this forty-fourth Year of the Bomb, why God even wants our love? Have we really probed for our day the depths of the *Shema*, that wondrous affirmation of the Oneness of Reality and of God’s desire for our love? God is not only One but wants us to love God with all our heart, all our self, and all our might.

What would loving God with all the heart, or mind, be like? In biblical Hebrew and Greek the heart was the seat of thinking while the bowels, or womb, was the seat of emotion. Will Moran at Harvard has shown convincingly that love in Deuteronomy means covenantal commitment. What would committing our minds to God mean? First and foremost it could mean freedom of all idolatry because if God is One and God is our fear and our dread, as Isaiah wisely counseled, then nothing else in all God’s creation can be! We would then be truly free of every false fear. We Christians sing of God’s amazing grace: “‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved. . . .” The fears that grace relieves are false fears; the fear that grace teaches is of God and God alone; and that is indeed the beginning of Wisdom.

Nothing in all creation could hold power over us if we obeyed the first of these three biddings, to love God with all our thinking. Here would be true freedom to investigate any and everything openly and unafraid, knowing that we share in God’s dominion over God’s creation to the extent that it is all ours to probe if our commitment is to its Creator and not to some imagined configuration or theory or dogma or proposition about it.

What would loving God with all the self, or *nefesh*, be like? *Nefesh* is often translated “soul”; but that is misleading. Its original denotation in Hebrew was gullet, or appetite. It means the self. Here is God’s desire for the very *eros*, or passion, God instilled in us at creation (Genesis 1:28) which we in our great wisdom have come to call the *id*. What would affirming the Integrity of Reality with our *eros* mean? A rereading of the Song of Songs in a monotheizing hermeneutic is most revealing. There would be no need to allegorize The Song if we could overcome sinful prudishness and marshal our appetites in quest of the Oneness or Integrity of Reality.

What would loving God with all the might be like? Each of us has charge

of some portion of God's creation even if it is nothing more than our bodies. Most of us have much more than that over which we are stewards, and the more we have the more we tend to love the gifts, instead of the God who made them and gave us charge of them. And because we tend to be committed to what we have charge of, instead of to God, we are enslaved once more and again, this time not to Egypt's Pharaoh, but to the false impression of our being master of our so-called possessions. Wisdom comes when we realize that it is we who are possessed by our possessions when we refuse to fear and love God, the Integrity of Reality.

The text with which we began exhorts us to rejoice in the gifts, ever remembering that they are gifts and God the giver. The greatest gifts are law and Holy Spirit, that spirit which keeps Torah or law ever alive and lively, ever new, making it a new song and a new dance. God's giving the law was and is a grace in that obedience is a free response to commandments and not determined at creation. Torah was summarized in antiquity, by at least two Jewish sages, to be love of God and love of neighbor. The text goes on to bid us remember, not only that we were slaves in Egypt, but also to keep the law. It is precisely God's Torah which can keep us from reenslavement to anything less than God, if indeed we are committed to the Integrity of Reality with all our thinking, with all our *nefesh*, and with all of that bit of the earth's wealth over which we are charged with responsibility.

The seventies and eighties have witnessed what has been called a morass of ethics: vulgar self-enrichment by both legal and illegal means, blatant self-indulgence, renewed license for bigotry and prejudice, an almost total disregard for the earth's resources; cronyism far beyond anything Harry Truman ever imagined, flatulent lying, propagation of disinformation, placing of policy above law, making heroes even of those in government who lie, cheat, steal, and destroy evidence; putting ideology above diplomacy so idolizing Jewish first or Christian second messianism that we dehumanize any (including Palestinians) who seem to get in the way; making selective anticommunism, selective antiabortionism, selective antiterrorism, and prayer in public schools, substitutes for true morality and statesmanship.

I call upon the class of 1989 to put us to shame, and to set us right. I do not call you "back to the Bible"; I urge you to run hard enough and fast enough to catch up with the Bible, if it is read on its own monotheizing terms. God is not contained or boxed into the ark of the covenant or into our denominationalist ideas of the God's Incarnation in Christ. God only is above law, free to judge us all as well as free to forgive poor sinners, and express a divine bias for the weak, the powerless, and the dispossessed. Blaze a new path of commitment to that Integrity which is beyond the self and which alone can give you integrity and true self-realization.

Morning by morning learn anew what it means that God is not Christian, or Jewish, or Buddhist, or communist; God is God. Engage in spiritual disciplines that can make of your lives true gifts of God and that can remind you, morning by morning, that you are stewards of lives that you did not create, and of precious gifts which you did not make. Redeem God's planet earth and the human community from the near garbage heap it has almost become. Bring

some splendor once more to the human experiment; put integrity once more into human relations; respect those with whom you disagree and never abandoning your own Jewish or Christian or Muslim vision of the Integrity of Reality, learn something from others of God's children on this pitifully shrinking globe. A true monotheizer respects the humanity of all people, does not assume good guys and bad guys, but makes every effort to love the enemy no matter how painful, or confusing, it may be.

The best way to begin, indeed the best way to make a real commencement on your journey to human responsibility, is to rejoice in the gifts. Redeem the Enlightenment by continuing its development in your generation. And the best way to do that is to give God back a bit of the love God has poured into you, indeed a bit of the commitment in love God has made to you. That is true freedom. And again I say, rejoice!